But Do You *Feel* Jewish?

Developing a Jewish Identity in Jews by Choice

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Digest

Forming a religious identity is a long, involved process, one which usually begins in childhood. For Jews by Choice however, who change their religion later in life, identity formation cannot follow the usual pattern. Jews by Choice quickly learn that Judaism is more than a religion, and that to feel truly authentic in their Judaism, they must learn to live Jewishly; they must develop a Jewish identity.

Jewish identity is a concept on which there is much research and little consensus; it includes the hard-to-define aspects of religious rituals, ethnicity, culture, and peoplehood. The development of a Jewish identity in Jews by Choice includes four parts: the course of study for conversion, the conversion ceremony itself, the welcome given (or not given) by the congregation, and any follow-up after conversion. Prior to 1978, the Reform movement gave conversion very little attention, and therefore Jewish identity development was a long and difficult process for Jews by Choice. In that year, Rabbi Schindler, then president of the UAHC, gave an address calling for increased attention, energy, and resources for conversion, and programs began to change.

In the years since Rabbi Schindler's address, there has been much progress in defining Jewish identity and learning how to develop it, and there have been many changes in the conversion process, leading to greater facilitation of developing Jewish identities in Jews by Choice.

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Table of Contents

Introduction

To feel authentically Jewish will require patience, courage, a sense of humor, a desire to learn and a willingness to ask some hard questions.

(Einstein and Kukoff, Introduction to Judaism, 144)

When people convert to Judaism, Jewish law and tradition teach that they are to be treated as equals, and there is to be no distinction between one who is born Jewish and one who converts later in life. Mekhilta d'Rabbi Ishmael states, "You shall not say to [a convert] 'yesterday you worshipped idols, and until now there was pig's flesh between your teeth, and now you stand up and speak against me?!'"[1] However, regardless of how ready one may be for conversion, there is a major difference between one who converts and one who is born Jewish: one who is born Jewish may have a lifetime of Jewish memories and a Jewish identity that has existed since birth. For those who convert, a Jewish identity is something brand new, based entirely on adult learning and experiences and not on a lifetime of memories. Jews by Choice often admit that they are not sure whether they truly feel Jewish for a period of time leading up to and even following conversion; the Jewish feeling, the acculturation, the Jewish identity only comes later. "We can master all of the technical things, learning about the holidays and all that stuff, but this feeling piece

[1] Mekhilta d'Rabbi Ishmael, Nezikin 18, Author's translation.

is the much harder one. Taking Ruth,[2] 'your God is my God' is the religious piece, and 'your people my people' is the amcha piece, and it's much harder."[3]

In Reform Judaism, this issue of imparting Jewish identity to converts was ignored for a long time. For generations, if one sought to convert under a Reform rabbi, basic instruction was given, and then a conversion was carried out, quietly, without fanfare, and the new Jew was set free to live a Jewish life—or not. There was no concern for nurturing a feeling of being Jewish or integrating a convert into Jewish culture, only initiating them into the Jewish religion. "Conversion was not a topic that anybody talked about. I had no idea about how you actually converted. It was a subject that as never brought up; it was never mentioned."[4]

All of that history was swept aside on December 2, 1978, when the President of the then Union of American Hebrew Congregations (UAHC), Rabbi Alexander Schindler, addressed the Board of Trustees of the UAHC regarding outreach. "The whole thing was deeply closeted. If people converted, it wasn't talked about, nobody had heard of or been to a conversion ceremony. It was all done hush-hush, as if it were some kind of illicit ceremony. When Rabbi Schindler gave his speech about outreach, it was dramatic. It was news that we would open the door and welcome people to join us. We are saying to the world that Judaism welcomes people coming in, and we'd love to have you."[5] In the months prior to the speech, Lydia Kukoff had already been working on improving pre-conversion education in California, and

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[2] Ruth 1:16-17.
[3] S. Einstein, Interview.
[4] Kukoff, Interview.
[5] S. Einstein, Interview.

Rabbi Daniel Syme set up a meeting between Kukoff and Rabbi Schindler in the weeks leading up to his speech, to discuss ideas for the future of Outreach.

Rabbi Schindler proposed a massive outreach effort, reaching out to those who were intermarried to include the non-Jewish spouse and, if possible, gently encourage that spouse to consider conversion to Judaism. He also proposed reaching out to the "unchurched," a goal which drew much attention to the speech regarding Judaism's relationship to proselytism. The headline in the *New York Times* the next day was "Reform Leader Urges a Program to Convert 'Seekers'; Missionary Faith for 4,000 years."[6] Even within the Reform movement, it was clear that this speech could be understood incorrectly. "Rabbi Schindler really kind of dropped this on people without warning. The last part of the four points he mentioned was reaching out to the unchurched, so it became 'Reform rabbi starting missionary work.' It was a very tough sort of introduction, and people were very suspicious about the real agenda."[7] The primary goal of his proposal, however, was integrating the non-Jewish spouse of intermarried couples. "The non-Jewish partner-to-be is clearly the first desideratum and we make a reasonable effort to attain it."[8] Rabbi Schindler recognized that conversion was an ongoing process, requiring greater attention of the Reform movement. "Those who choose to become Jews quickly learn that they have adopted something far more than a religion; they have adopted a people with its own history, its way of life . . . Newcomers to Judaism must embark,

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[6] Briggs, "Reform Leader Urges Program."
[7] Kukoff, Interview.
[8] Schindler, "Outreach."

in effect, on a long term naturalization process and they require knowledgeable and sympathetic guides to hel[p] them along the way."[9]

In the weeks and months following Rabbi Schindler's groundbreaking speech, the UAHC organized the first Task Force on Outreach, which in later years became the Outreach Commission. This Task Force, composed of clergy and laypeople, born Jews and Jews by Choice, was charged with studying conversion courses and congregational programs, figuring out what was successful, and giving recommendations for the future. Initially, the task force focused on classroom instruction. "[The goal is] strengthening and improvement of Introduction to Judaism classes and overall conversion programs."[10]

The Task Force and other UAHC studies in the years immediately following Rabbi Schindler's speech found that there was much work to be done, and it was not immediately clear how it should be begun. "Usually [Jews by Choice] have no Jewish past, no Jewish memories . . . for them to feel like 'authentic' Jews takes time. Learning the folkways, linguistic expressions, and other cultural nuances are often difficult to grasp."[11] Steven Huberman published a study within the year after Rabbi Schindler's address, of possible improvements to conversion programs suggested by recent Jews by Choice. Their comments began to shape the direction Outreach would take. "Our respondents believe that a conversion course which is strictly an

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[9] Ibid.
[10] UAHC-CCAR Task Force, "Summary Report," 13, #3.
[11] Mizrahi, "Outstretched Hand," 24.

academic introduction to Judaism is inadequate. Converts believe it is vital that such courses also deal with the emotional aspects of the conversion process."[12]

Jews by Choice also shared that a major barrier to a full Jewish identity was Jewish acceptance; born Jews were often uneducated about the status of converts and did not treat them as equal, "real" Jews. "The final recommendation advanced by our respondents is that an educational program on intermarriage and conversion be established by the Jewish community. A large proportion of Jews are unaware of the status of the convert in Judaism and the difficulties converts face."[13]

In addition to congregational education, this study also revealed the shortcomings of existing programs' follow-up. "The overwhelming majority of the respondents have not engaged in any formal Jewish studies program/classes since their conversion."[14] It offers preliminary suggestions for integrating Jews by Choice. "The 'new Jew' should become involved in Jewish activities – social, cultural, or religious – to feel a sense of belonging and attachment to Judaism . . . We believe that referring rabbis should make every effort to have converts join synagogues. A convert should be given a free membership during the year following his conversion and pay only a nominal sum during the first years."[15]

Huberman's study was among the first to recommend follow-up programs after conversion. "Another recommendation of our respondents concerns follow-up. Numerous converts report that they developed a strong bond with their referring rabbi, but once the conversion ceremony was over there was no longer any contact. .

[12] Huberman, *New Jews*, 48.
[13] Ibid., 49.
[14] Ibid., 19.
[15] Ibid., 50.

. . The impression which we derive from the data is that there is rarely a 'follow-up' of the convert by the rabbinate."[16]

The UAHC also published a program guide in the years immediately following Rabbi Schindler's speech. Editor Lydia Kukoff made several suggestions for congregations to implement, not for the education of the convert, but from the time of conversion forward, such as public conversion ceremonies, a year of free temple membership, an adoptive family or mentorship program for after conversion, and one-year post-conversion chavurot.[17]

A few years later, in an issue of *Reform Judaism* celebrating ten years of Outreach, Nina Mizrahi made a number of suggestions for further integrating Jews by Choice. "Congregants can serve as host families to Jews by Choice, encouraging a personalized Jewish experience. Congregants can be encouraged to attend conversion ceremonies. Congregational in-depth Shabbat programs for people choosing Judaism combine worship, learning, and support. Ongoing discussion programs and hands-on holiday workshops can be sponsored by the Outreach committee."[18] Many of her suggestions would be attempted in the coming years, but they were clearly not among the first changes to be made to conversion programs. In the years following of Rabbi Schindler's address, the Task Force and others made many recommendations for helping Jews by Choice develop a Jewish identity and feel like authentic Jews. However, their ideas were implemented in synagogues only gradually, over many years.

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[16] Ibid., 49.
[17] Kukoff, "Reform Jewish Outreach," 19-20.
[18] Mizrahi, "Outstretched Hand," 24.

The Task Force on Outreach found that most Reform conversion programs were short on Jewish experiences outside the classroom. An Outreach Program guide dating to this period attempts to address these shortcomings. "Is [your Introduction to Judaism class] purely cognitive, consisting of lectures and talking *about* Judaism rather than a combination of cognitive and affective, providing a model for actively *doing* Judaism? . . . If not, it is time to begin restructuring the course to meet the very real needs of the people in it."[19] However, there was little progress. The UAHC, continuing Rabbi Schindler's push for conversion, published a pamphlet of frequently asked questions for anyone curious about conversion. The description of the process makes no mention of any experiential learning: "Persons considering conversion are expected to undergo a period of formal instruction encompassing the history, theology, rituals, philosophy and customs of Judaism as well as the differences and similarities between Judaism and other religions."[20] Although the pamphlet may have been describing the process as it existed, there was a missed opportunity to mention supplementing the classroom learning with various experiences.

Similarly, a Reform responsum from this period fails to mention the changing nature of conversion, implying that in spite of the push for change, experiential learning was not yet widespread. "The American Reform discussions of conversion from 1890 onward make it quite clear that the principal requirements were

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[19] Kukoff, "Reform Jewish Outreach," 19 #4.
[20] Seltzer, "Becoming a Jew."

intellectual; we have been more concerned with understanding than ritual."[21] Even a few years later, celebrating ten years of Outreach, most congregations had not embraced radical change. "A majority [of Reform rabbis] emphasize study over ritual, utilizing UAHC-sponsored 'Introduction to Judaism' courses."[22]

From at least one angle, however, rabbis were encouraged to add experiential learning to conversion programs. The 1980 edition of "Divre Gerut," the Reform rabbinic guidelines on conversion, stated that the course of study should include:

> Fundamentals of Judaism: ritual observances of Shabbat, holy days, festivals, and life cycle mitzvoth in the home and the synagogue; theology and values; Jewish history; liturgy and the Hebrew language, Rabbinic involvement with regular tutorials and meetings, advice, counseling and encouragement. The ger/gioret should be encouraged to experience Jewish life by attending Sabbath services regularly . . . and other Jewish communal activities. Opportunities for exposure to Jewish home observance . . . should be made available . . . Synagogue affiliation and Jewish communal responsibility should be discussed. (Committee on Gerut of the CCAR, "Divre Gerut")

These first years after Rabbi Schindler's address saw the advancement of a number of ideas for improving conversion programs, but real, significant change was not immediate; it would be some years before the

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[21] Jacob and Zemer, *Conversion in Jewish Law*, 135.
[22] Kaplan, "Comparative Conversion," 23.

recommendations of the Task Force began to be implemented in any large-scale way.

Conversion is not a minor issue. Although there is no perfect count of the number of Jews by Choice, there are estimates. "There are close to 200,000 people in the United States who have converted to Judaism, about 90 percent in the context of a romantic relationship, such as a pending or current marriage to someone born Jewish."[23] Similarly, some have approximated the rate of conversion. "At least four thousand North Americans convert to Judaism annually—more than any point in the past two thousand years. Indeed, one out of every thirty-seven American Jews is a Jew by Choice."[24] Regardless of the precise accuracy of these numbers, it is clear that this issue touches many people and families in the Reform movement.

Since 1978, the process of helping Jews by Choice to develop Jewish identities and feel authentically Jewish has made major strides. Much progress has been made in the areas of course of study, the ceremony itself, the congregational response, and follow-up. "After a year of preparation, I felt Jewish in my head but not in my heart. It was then that I first understood the enormous effort it takes to become a Jew and to make Judaism a big part of your life . . . I decided then that the only way for me to feel like a Jew was to live like one."[25] There is, of course, still much work to be done, but converts to Judaism under the auspices of the Reform movement are finding their Jewish identities more easily than they did in the past, with the help, support, and guidance of rabbis, synagogues, and organizations. At the

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[23] Epstein, *Readings on Conversion*, xi.
[24] Diamant, *Choosing a Jewish Life*, 4.
[25] Gray, "New Beginning," 27.

2005 Union for Reform Judaism (URJ) Biennial, URJ President Rabbi Eric Yoffie said, "In a little more than a quarter of a century, our Reform movement took the radical idea of Outreach and made it a central pillar of North American Jewish life . . . We shared with others the beauty of Judaism, deepened our love of God, and strengthened our destiny as a holy people . . . As Alex Schindler would undoubtedly tell us, our Outreach work has just begun."[26]

[26] Yoffie, "Sermon at Houston Biennial."

Chapter 1: Jewish Identity

Judaism defies definition as a religion pure and simple. Unlike other religions, Judaism is also a discrete civilization and culture. The Jews have been called a nation, a tribe, a race, a folk, an ethnic group, and the "people of the book." (Diamant, Choosing a Jewish Life, 17)

Converts to Judaism almost universally observe that the conversion itself, including the study, the ceremony, and the congregational participation, are a labor of love, but that it can take a long time before they truly feel Jewish. The Outreach programs can help, providing activities and opportunities for further learning in a safe space, educating the congregation about the value and authenticity of conversion and those who choose Judaism. However, ultimately, it is up to each individual Jew by Choice to develop a Jewish identity and to navigate Jewish culture—if she can figure out how.

Jewish identity and culture are notoriously hard to define, but scholars and laypeople alike tend to agree that Judaism is not only a religion, but also an entire way of life, and acquisition of Jewish identity is complicated. "Jewish identity is an issue that has never been finally resolved, but rears its head in every generation in different forms. Its complexity stems from the fact that identity is determined by the interface of religion, ethnicity, psychology, politics, and nationality in the context of

social change."[1] Long before Rabbi Schindler began the Reform movement's Outreach efforts, Leo Baeck wrote, "Judaism is not something to be written in books, something known and forgotten, learnt anew and forgotten again, but the whole of life."[2] Jews who are less entrenched with teaching and studying Judaism on a daily basis have also tried to define Jewish identity, with each definition exposing the complexity of the concept. Kenneth Cole focuses on Jewish values: "I do believe strongly in many fundamental Jewish principles: the importance of tzedakah, for instance, which we are taught is an obligation and a responsibility, and learn later is actually a blessing and a privilege. And tikkun olam, which means that our job on this planet is to finish the process of creation; God gave us what's here and our job is to finish it in a morally just way. But I don't necessarily believe that one has to do it with a yarmulke on."[3] Leon Botstein examines the big picture of Judaism's mission. "Being Jewish represents an inspiration to assert genuine individuality, to resist reductive group labels, and to transform one's life from the ordinary to the extraordinary . . . In Judaism, learning is prayer, for it celebrates the human capacity for language and thought. Perhaps being Jewish in one's own way carries the danger of loneliness, but the traditions of Judaism and patterns of Jewish identity provide the unique chance to use the solitude of thought and study to reconfigure loneliness into the struggle for truth and justice."[4] Kitty Dukakis, like many others, turns first to food to describe Jewish identity. "Being Jewish for me is more than matzo balls, chopped liver, and chicken soup, though food and the generosity that go with it are

[1] Linzer, "Changing Nature of Identity," 142.
[2] Leo Baeck in "The Mission of Judaism," 1949. Cited in Epstein, *Readings on Conversion*.
[3] Kenneth Cole, in Pogrebin, *Stars of David*, 43.
[4] Leon Botstein, in Pearl and Pearl, *I Am Jewish*, 42.

very much a part of who I am. I love the Jewish traditions and was brought up to believe that fairness with all people was sacred."[5]

Many have noted that the concept of Jewish identity has changed over time, especially as assimilation became an option and traditional observance became one of multiple ways to express a Jewish identity. "The meaning of Jewish identity has undergone a major transformation within the past two hundred years. The key historical development was emancipation . . . a process which began in the later decades of the eighteenth century and continued through the nineteenth century. Prior to emancipation, Jews lived in virtual cultural and social isolation from their Gentile neighbors . . . One might say that almost all of the life-space of the pre-emancipation Jew was occupied by Jewish regulations and rationale."[6] After emancipation, Jews had choices for being Jewish, and there were three types of responses to emancipation: "Assimilation, an intensified Jewish definition ('what is new is prohibited by Torah'), [or] reform," taking the form of religious reform, secularism, or Zionism.[7] Each one of these distinct responses led to variants in Jewish identity.

> The [post-emancipation] Jew was not only confronted by new ideas, but by choices. In his tradition-based society, the mode of belief and life was unitary; adherence was fixed by a tightly organized Jewish community. With emancipation, the Jew was confronted with the opportunity—as well as the burden—of choosing from among many

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[5] Kitty Dukakis, in Pearl and Pearl, *I Am Jewish*, 37.
[6] Reisman, *Jewish Experiential Book*, 5.
[7] Ibid., 7-10.

> alternatives. Herein is the crux of the dilemma of Jewish identity in the modern period: individual freedom with broad ideological and cultural options, at the expense of the certitude of a traditional belief system plus the security afforded by being part of a compatible community. (Reisman, *Jewish Experiential Book*, 7)

In the United States, Jews have always been emancipated, but large numbers of immigrants in waves insured similar patterns; those just off the boat were essentially newly emancipated and faced with new choices. "For my parents' generation—children of immigrants or first-generation Americans—the framework for being Jewish was heavily influenced by their parents' experience of poverty, bigotry, and the Holocaust. They absorbed a sense of peril, the need to prove themselves, to stay connected to the Jewish community and hold fast to rituals that were ingrained since childhood."[8] In modern-day America, assimilation is a given for most Jews; there are even more choices than there were in the past, and traditional affiliation and definition can no longer be assumed. "If the conventional approach to examining Jewish identity can be likened to ordering off a prix fixe menu, the new way of looking at Jewishness is analogous to visiting a salad bar . . . Each person puts a unique set of ingredients on his/her plate, and this image represents the content of a person's Jewish identity or sense of Jewishness."[9] Similarly, Abigail Pogrebin writes of a similar conflict between choices and tradition. "My generation . . . has been given cafeteria-style Judaism: we can pick and choose. Nothing is required.

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[8] Pogrebin, *Stars of David*, 2-3.
[9] Charmé et al., "Jewish Identities in Action," 137.

There's no sense of urgency or menace, of having to boost up or protect our people . . . Many [of my friends] are sending their kids to Hebrew School, but few could say exactly why. Because they think they should, or because they went, or because they want their children to have more Jewish education than they did. My sense is the decision is often more reflexive than considered."[10]

In a more concrete illustration of the change in Jewish identity over time, Bernard Reisman published *The Jewish Experiential Book* in 1979. It contained a questionnaire regarding "a Good Jew," including measures of "Jewish particularism, Jewish secular and cultural behaviors, Israel, Jewish religious behaviors, Humanism/liberalism."[11] The prompt asks participants to rate a series of items on whether it was "essential, desirable, makes no difference, or is essential not to do" them in order to be a "good Jew."[12] It was assumed that a good Jew could be defined by a distinct list of behaviors and ideals. When this book was edited and republished in 2002, the "a good Jew" exercise vanished. The closest approximation is entitled "The Three Children," designed to "address what defines a 'good Jew.'"[13] The exercise describes three siblings, each of whom expresses Judaism in a different way. The prompt explains that their mother's will states that her estate goes to the one of them who is the best Jew, and it is up to the group to discuss who should receive it—or whether it should instead go to none of them, which is also an option. The vast difference between these two exercises illustrates how definitions of Jewish identity—and good Jews—have changed even within the last generation.

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[10] Pogrebin, *Stars of David*, 3.
[11] Reisman, *Jewish Experiential Book*, 163-164.
[12] See Appendix for this activity as well as the 2002 replacement.
[13] Reisman and Reisman, *New Jewish Experiential Book*, 389.

There have been numerous studies of Jewish identity, how it is acquired, and what it means. The proliferation of such studies is attributed to Judaism's place as a way of life, worries about the future of the Jewish people, rising intermarriage rates, and perceived declining levels of traditional practice. These studies are generally carried out with born Jews, often teenagers or young adults, but the lessons learned from them can be used to help Jews by Choice to develop their own Jewish identities, and to help those in positions to do so to design programs and ideas that will encourage these efforts.

Simply picking out the components of Jewish identity is difficult, which exposes the difficulty of acquiring such an identity, especially in adulthood. Regarding the mystery of Jewish identity, "There is little consensus as to what 'it' really constitutes or how 'it' develops. The conviction that seems to be held in common, however, is that there is, indeed, an 'it.'"[14]

Around the time Outreach began, Bernard Reisman identified five components of Jewish identity: "religion, ethnicity, nationalism, association, and anti-Semitism."[15] Religion refers the traditional elements of religious practice. Ethnicity encompasses foods, Yiddish, customs, holidays, newspapers, and neighborhood, what others might term "culture." Nationalism refers to a relationship with or connection to Israel. Association is the membership in Jewish organizations and having Jewish friends. Anti-Semitism includes a "sense of common destiny." Two decades later, he defines Jewish identity again:

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[14] Charmé et al., "Jewish Identities in Action," 116.
[15] Reisman, *Jewish Experiential Book*, 11-16.

> Today's Jews have extracted four separate elements, from which they choose—singly or in combination—their Jewish identity. These elements are: (a) Judaism: the religious element, involving God, prayer, rituals, faith, spirituality, and synagogue membership; (b) Israel: the national element, options are available ranging from a classical Zionist conviction with the expectation of aliyah, to generating funds and political support for Israel, frequent visits/missions, and a vicarious identification with Israel's achievements and struggles; (c) Yiddishkeit: the ethnic element, including Jewish foods, holidays, and customs (observed in a secular sense), language (Yiddish or Hebrew, or phrases therefrom), jokes, friends, and "feeling Jewish;" (d) A Shared Destiny: the historic element, providing a sense of rootedness and pride in almost four millennia of history with great achievements and much travail. An important component of this historic legacy is the Jews' consciousness of a shared destiny for the ever present threat of the next pogrom or Holocaust. (Reisman, "On Jewish Identity," 3)

While he restates most of his elements of Jewish identity, missing from this newer definition is the "association" component, with no explanation.

Michael Rosenak also defined Jewish identity around the time Outreach began. "The *facts* of Jewishness may be divided into three categories: (a) the ideational facts, the basic conceptual data which invite ideological or theological interpretation (such as God, Torah, etc.); (b) the historical facts, like King David,

Hebrew, and the State of Israel, and (c) sociological facts, those pertaining to community, antisemitism, 'belonging' and 'being different.' These clusters of facts may be understood to refer to conceptions of *Judaism*, the data of *Jewishness*, and the situation of *Jewry*, respectively."[16] He reported not only the components of his definition of Jewish identity, but also how they work together. "The various ways in which Jews relate themselves to the ideational, historical, and sociological facts of Jewishness, the way in which they 'make sense' of each cluster of facts, and the diverse ways in which these clusters are intertwined in their self-understanding and in their lives, tell us what their choices are, how they have 'Jewish values.'"[17]

In her study of Philadelphia Jews, Sybil Montgomery wrote, "although each theorist used different definitions, there was common agreement that Jewish identity consists of adherence to an ethical system, a sense of belonging to the peoplehood, and distinct cultural behavioral patterns; or, more abstractly, Jewish identity consists of emotional, cognitive and behavioral components."[18] The difficult part of understanding this definition is that it requires defining each of the parts: knowing what is involved in the Jewish ethical system, what makes it a peoplehood, and what constitutes distinct cultural behavioral patterns.

Other scholars prefer a more concrete definition. In a study of Jewish teenagers, Chana Tannenbaum wrote, "there are five components that make up Jewish identity: 1) kinship and connection, i.e., the ways in which people feel connected with, or related to, other Jewish people, 2) awareness of being different

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[16] Rosenak, "Education for Jewish Identification," 122.
[17] Ibid., 127.
[18] Montgomery, "Integration of Jews by Choice," 29-30.

than the majority (being part of a minority) and recognizing its ramifications, 3) attachment to Israel as a national homeland, 4) religious dimension of personal faith and observance, and 5) a commitment to study of religious doctrine and personal development."[19] However, she adds, "it is not necessary to have all components." It is not clear from this definition whether one needs a certain number of components to truly be Jewish or have a strong Jewish identity, nor whether any of the components are more important than any other components. There are many born Jews who are neither attached to Israel nor traditionally religious, but they still feel strongly Jewish. At the same time, Jews by Choice report feeling as if they must support Israel,[20] and that religious standards are higher for them than for born Jews, a view supported by Jewish Outreach Institute Executive Director Rabbi Kerry Olitzky. "We make demands on converts and potential converts that we're not making on our born Jews; if we have standards for conversion, they should be consistent with standards for born Jews, if not, then it should be vice versa."[21]

In one of the most recent works on Jewish identity, Erica Brown and Misha Galperin define Jewish identity similarly to Montgomery's definition. "Identity is composed of three component parts: the cognitive, which represents the way we think; the behavioral, which reflects what we do; and the emotional, which signifies what we feel. In Jewish terms, we might break this down loosely into our relationship with texts or the cerebral parts of our tradition (the cognitive), the rituals we observe or do not observe (the behavioral), and our sense of belonging or

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[19] Tannenbaum, "Influences on Religious Identity," 21.
[20] Romanoff, *Your People, My People*, 167-176.
[21] Olitzky, Interview.

alienation (the emotional). For Jewish identity to be a force within our lives, these three parts must be well nurtured independently and brought together in some organic fashion."[22]

From her congregational work, Rabbi Judy Schindler of Temple Beth El in Charlotte, North Carolina, and daughter of Outreach pioneer Rabbi Alexander Schindler, gives her own definition of what composes a Jewish identity. "You can't be Jewish without four components. The first is knowledge. The second is being a part of the community and a part of the people. The third is bringing mitzvot into your life. The fourth is soul, having a Jewish soul. You can't predict how long it will take for that fourth piece."[23] Schindler's definition, based on her work with Jews by Choice, also restates the problem: it is impossible to either define Jewish identity (or soul, in her case) or to know how to impart it to someone new.

Still others report that for born Jews, Jewish identity is not exclusive, that one can identify as both a Jew and an American, for example. "For American Jews in Generation Y,[24] being Jewish is not their sole identity. This generation has unlimited access to American society, therefore Generation Y Jews behave much like all other Generation Y Americans . . . Today's young Jews have multiple identities shaped by many factors, including intermarriage in their families, diverse social networks, and dynamic boundaries around geography and other identity characteristics . . . Being Jewish is part of a larger identity mosaic for today's Jews."[25] Again, however, Jewish

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[22] Brown and Galperin, *Case for Jewish Peoplehood*, 61.
[23] J. Schindler, Interview.
[24] This study sampled Jews between ages 18-25, and therefore it is this age group being described, in this particular study, as Generation Y.
[25] Greenberg, "Jewish Identity and Community," 7.

identity is not defined, but described by what it is—diverse—and what it is not—exclusive.

Nonetheless, while being Jewish may be only one part of a larger identity, or one of many identities that young Jews hold, according to a study carried out by Reboot,[26] young Jewish adults have firm opinions about what it means for them to be Jewish. Their understanding includes concrete behaviors, beliefs, and knowledge—the cognitive, behavioral, and emotional aspects of identity that Montgomery and then Brown and Galperin identified in their works. Each of the following items was deemed by more than half of Reboot respondents to be either 'a lot' or 'some' of what is involved in being Jewish, in declining order of perceived importance: remembering the Holocaust, making the world a better place, leading an ethical and moral life, understanding Jewish history, learning about Jewish culture, caring about Israel, feeling part of the Jewish people, donating money to help less fortunate, believing in God, having Jewish friends, attending synagogue.[27] As Montgomery's definition of identity included the undefined terms 'peoplehood' and 'culture,' this list, too, contains many items that should be further defined. The more traditionally religious elements of Judaism, such as believing in God and attending synagogue, were far down the list, and dietary restrictions did not make the list at all—fewer than half of respondents rated it as having either a lot or some involvement in being Jewish. The respondents to this study were all young adults, but in this group, at least, it shows the tenuous religious base for Jewish identity.

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[26] Reboot is a nonprofit organization of Jewish laypeople. From the website (http://rebooters.net): "Reboot believes that every generation must grapple with the questions of Jewish identity, community and meaning on its own terms. Our goal is to facilitate that process for our generation."
[27] Greenberg, "Jewish Identity and Community," 19.

While young Jews might not see the importance of Jewish religious practice to Jewish identity, many others believe that it is still a part of the Jewish identity equation, just not its entirety. "The Jews are a people, the Jews are a nation, the Jews are a civilization—but they're all of that because they are first and foremost a religion. That's the source of the whole blessed thing. Except for our religion, we would not be a people."[28] Others recognize the importance of other parts of Jewish identity, but have found that traditional rituals enhance feelings about the other parts of Jewish identity. "The more I heard Jewishness described as a gut connection, a shared history, a value-system, a vibrant culture, but not in terms of ritual or liturgy, the more I felt pulled toward exactly those things: the scaffolding of this obstinate tradition."[29]

Although the Reboot study of young Jews shows that they may not score highly on scales of religious behavior, they nonetheless have strong Jewish identities, based at least in part in simply knowing that they are Jewish. "Being Jewish remains a complicated and often inarticulate tangle of spiritual, cultural, historical and ethnic dimensions, but their Jewish self-confidence may be an important factor in their personal development and in the communal evolution of Jewish identity."[30] Tannenbaum similarly noted that having all markers of Jewish identity is not necessary. Thus, regardless of how one ranks the importance of different aspects of Judaism, the common theme in those with strong Jewish

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[28] Leon Weiseltier, in Pogrebin, *Stars of David*, 167.
[29] Pogrebin, *Stars of David*, 381.
[30] Greenberg, "Jewish Identity and Community," 7.

identities seems to be Jewish self-confidence, simply being comfortable in one's Judaism.

Another study of young Jews, the "Next-Gen Jews," a group aged 21 to 40, found, like the Reboot study, that this group is not traditionally religiously observant, but they are confident in their Judaism. "Next-Gen Jews are shaped by: strong, positive Jewish identities; powerful connections to family; high percentages of interfaith marriages; diverse social networks; a sense of alienation from and dissatisfaction with Jewish organizations; the commitment to creating their own Jewish experiences; broad social awareness."[31] Another description of these young born Jews: "Jewish values resonate more deeply than Jewish institutions, and friends and family carry more influence than an abstract notion of the 'community.' The attitudes, while occasionally sharply articulated, expressed the overwhelming sense that people in their 20s and 30s like being Jewish, find strength in their Jewish identities, seek meaningful Jewish experiences and often build Jewish lives on their own terms."[32] Common among the various descriptions of these young Jews, in addition to their disconnectedness from the Judaism of their parents, is their Jewish self-confidence. They may not be Jewishly knowledgeable or practicing, but they are proud to be Jewish, and they are confident in knowing that Judaism is at least part of their identity.

In addition to confidence, ethnicity is often believed to be an important part of Jewish identity. This identification may be due to historically high in-marriage

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[31] Kelman and Schonberg, "Engaging the Next Generation," 9.
[32] Ibid., 13.

rates, promulgating the idea of "Jewish blood." It may be because aspects of Judaism are inherited, such as one's status as Cohen, Levi, or Israelite, and because customs and rites are passed down within a family, such as identification as Ashkenazic, Sephardic, or Mizrachi. The Nazis took the idea of inheriting Judaism through blood to an extreme. Their legacy has lessened arguments for Judaism as a race—but possibly increased the idea of Judaism as an ethnicity.[33] The modern idea of Judaism as an inherited tradition, one which therefore relegates converts to the questionable edges, is most often supported by those Jews who are uninvolved with Judaism in any institutional or religious way, but retain, and may want to protect, their Jewish identities.[34] "Genetics may be viewed as a concrete, certain, logical, and comforting answer for Jews seeking to understand what it means to be Jewish. It also allows Jews to claim a Jewish identity without having to participate in any religious rituals or practice. Furthermore, the belief that Jewish identity is inalienable reassures Jews that their Jewishness is absolute and cannot be increased or lessened by any level of practice or belief."[35]

Jewish ethnicity is an amorphous category that sometimes belies definition. Jewish identity researchers Steven Cohen and Arnold Eisen tried to define elements of Jewish ethnicity, sometimes referred to as tribalism. They found that Jewish tribalism includes "historical familism," the idea of having historical group memory and family ties, emphasizing particularism and collectivism (as opposed to universalism and individualism), "mutual responsibility" for other Jews across the

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[33] Davidman and Tenenbaum, "Biological Discourse."
[34] Ibid.
[35] Ibid., 31.

world, and the idea that previous generations of Jews "held rather unflattering images of non-Jews and correspondingly positive images of themselves."[36]

Many Jews will point to their Jewish identity or Jewish ethnicity as tied up with food, oftentimes at least partly in jest. Cohen and Eisen took these claims seriously, and they investigated the cultural ties to Jewish food. Cohen and Eisen found that Jewish food is, in fact, a definite ethnic marker and one which is very closely tied to many other parts of Jewish identity, because food is not eaten in isolation, but in conjunction with other Jews and Jewish rituals. "The survival of distinctive ethnic cuisines long after the disappearance of other markers of difference has made food a near-universal link to ethnic identity; its special prominence among Jews may have something to do with its particularly salient role in the Jewish religious calendar . . . Family affection, ethnic attachment, and religious meaning, then, are all associated with food, and their ties to each other are embodied in their connection with food."[37] Therefore there is more to Jewish food than a punch line, it is truly a tie to one's Jewish identity, memories, and the Jewish people.

More than one definition of Jewish identity above mentioned the centrality of the Jewish people or peoplehood. Peoplehood can be understood as the interconnectedness of Jews worldwide, although like other components of Jewish identity, it can be defined in many ways. In an entire book exploring the concept of Jewish peoplehood, Brown and Galperin attempt a short definition: "Peoplehood is

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[36] Cohen and Eisen, *Jew Within*, 103-104.
[37] Ibid., 50.

roughly defined as the collective aspects of Jewish identity and community that create connections among individuals, even strangers . . . Jewish peoplehood signifies kinship based on a common history, culture, values, and future."[38] Joseph Telushkin takes a more abstract perspective. "For three thousand years, peoplehood has meant that the Jewish people recognize that the God of other Jews is our God as well, that the community of other Jews is our community. Recognition of this fact means that we cry and cry out for each other when necessary."[39] While a sense of peoplehood is a part of one's personal Jewish identity, it is also opposed to it, because identity is individual, but peoplehood is the epitome of communal. "Those concerned with the Jewish Peoplehood concept do not focus on the identity of individuals, but rather on the nature of connections between Jews. The concern is with common elements and frameworks that enable Jews to connect with one another both emotionally and socially."[40] Some see these connections to other Jews as the only way to truly be Jewish. "The presence of significant others with whom one interacts in a social setting is required. Parents require interaction with the child to make the parental identity plausible. Jews require interaction with other Jews to make Jewish identity plausible."[41]

The concept of Jewish peoplehood, according to this idea, is a focus on connections—a worldwide game of Jewish geography. "The game of Jewish geography—superficial as it often feels—is played to reinforce peoplehood, the feeling that Jews the world over are part of an extended family . . . With a

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[38] Brown and Galperin, *Case for Jewish Peoplehood*, 15.
[39] Joseph Telushkin, in Brown and Galperin, *Case for Jewish Peoplehood*, xi.
[40] Kopelowitz and Engelberg, "Guide to Jewish Peoplehood," 4.
[41] Linzer, "Changing Nature of Identity," 143.

'discovered' connection, there is a small and inconsequential sense of relief. As a Jew, I am not alone in the universe. I am part of a remarkable network where the possibilities of belonging are only a few questions and answers away. I am situated among my people."[42]

Jewish culture is another aspect of Jewish identity that defies definition, is constantly changing, and is nonetheless vital to feeling authentic in one's Judaism. Jewish culture can include knowledge of Hebrew and Yiddish, food, literature and movies, summer camp, art, music, and much more, and it likely means different things depending on age, region, and type of Jewish upbringing. Scholars of Jewish culture seem to agree only that Jewish culture is constantly changing.

> Salons organized to discuss Jewish topics have sprung up from San Diego to Toronto. Record labels such as JDub Records and Modular Moods are responsible for helping Jewish artists record, distribute, and tour internationally. As of 2007, there are more than 80 independent minyanim across the United States and Canada, the majority of which attract Jews in their 20s and 30s. Publications such as *Guilt and Pleasure* and *Heeb*, films such as *The Hebrew Hammer* and *Divan*, and countless works of fiction and nonfiction now populate bookshelves and film festivals, representing perhaps the most significant outpouring of explicitly Jewish culture since Yiddish-speaking Jewish immigrants read the *Forward* and attended the theater on Second Avenue . . . The Jewishness of this generation is not

[42] Brown and Galperin, *Case for Jewish Peoplehood*, 13-14.

> congruent with that which nourished its parent's generation. (Kelman and Schonberg, "Engaging the Next Generation," 4)

Some see the cultural aspect of Jewish identity negatively, as an absence of any "real" Jewish content to one's identity. "In America now it is possible to be a Jew with a Jewish identity that one can defend and that gives one pleasure—and for that identity to have painfully little Jewish substance. The Jewish substance of Jewish identity is not necessary, or it is minimally necessary."[43]

It is clear that Jewish identity is a construct that is not easily defined or measured, as a whole or in its constituent parts, although there have been many attempts to understand how it is acquired. In some cases, the identity formation of people of various religions has been studied, and in other cases Jewish identity has been studied uniquely. Across various studies, there are certainly commonalities which can impart a better understanding of Jewish identity formation. Michael Rosenak studied Jewish identity and its formation around the time Outreach began. He points to the three types of facts regarding Jewish identity cited earlier, ideational, historical, and sociological (Judaism, Jewishness, and Jewry, respectively). "A curriculum designed to foster Jewish identity *describes* these clusters of facts as they have been variously understood by Jews and has recourse—or develops—subject matter which clarifies the contexts in which these facts take on meaning and become the focus of controversy."[44] Furthermore, he specifies that

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[43] Leon Wieseltier, in Pogrebin, *Stars of David*, 157.
[44] Rosenak, "Education for Jewish Identification," 127.

each of these aspects is vital to Jewish identity in its own way: "Education for Jewish identity . . . insists on a relationship to all of these clusters."[45]

According to some of the most basic research on generalizing religious identity formation, not specifically Jewish identity, "researchers have identified four principal agents of religious socialization: family, church, peers, and religious schooling."[46] It is not simply the presence of Jewish family that helps one to feel Jewish, nor the family celebrations and rituals in which one participates, but the combination of all of these things and doing so across generational lines. According to Cohen and Eisen, it is the way that the past, present, and future interact in a family that imparts strong identity cues. "The vertical family of three generations, spousal relations, memories of the past, hopes for the future, love, food, and ritual all interact to shape the Jewish lives of our respondents."[47]

This idea of the interaction between past, present, and future shows the importance of memories. Rituals, events, and even food seem more Jewish when they are tied to Jewish memories. Even Jews who are not ritually observant engage in certain rituals, such as Passover seder, in part because they are so connected to memories. "The Judaism practiced by adult American Jews is almost always bound up in key family relationships and rites of passage, nourished by a stock of memories which are marked by passion and ambivalence."[48]

Samuel Osherson, too, found family and childhood to be important parts of Jewish identity formation:

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[45] Ibid., 127.
[46] Tannenbaum, "Influences on Religious Identity," 22.
[47] Cohen and Eisen, *Jew Within*, 63.
[48] Ibid., 14.

> Five elements [composing Jewish identity] stand out. There are, first of all, the felt experiences of our childhood, the sensory, bodily, often nonverbal experiences encoded in our warm, treasured memories of the songs we sang around the seder table or the feel of a father's tallit in shul. Then there are the aspects of our parents and grandparents we carry forward with us into the future. Some qualities with which we have identified may shift and change as we age. A third thread in many people's lives is unexpected 'tipping' events that influence us, such as a powerful chance encounter with a rabbi or the experience of a Jewish summer camp. The fourth thread is the key adult relationships in our lives and their influence on us. And the fifth thread consists of the marker experiences in our adult lives, leading to shifts in our own attitudes and values. (Osherson, *Rekindling the Flame*, 98)

However, of his five elements contributing to Jewish identity, only two are family and memory-based; the other three can certainly occur in adulthood.

As Osherson indicated, although family and memories are central to Jewish identity formation, there are certainly other routes to feeling Jewish. Rituals are still one of the central routes to Jewish practice and identity, because they are universally identifiable as Jewish actions. One who does not engage in rituals may see oneself as Jewish, but also knows that he is not a traditionally observant Jew. The most obvious way to proclaim a Jewish identity is through rituals and observance. "Ritual practice is without doubt the most important way in which

moderately affiliated Jews express their Jewish commitments, the means through which 'the Jew within' steps outside the self, in the company of family, into times and spaces hallowed by centuries of tradition."[49] Showing up at the synagogue or travelling to Israel, both sacred places, and lighting Shabbat candles or saying kaddish, entering into sacred times, help people to feel Jewish—even if they are not active members of their communities.

Another way that rituals help people to feel Jewish, beyond hallowed time and space, is separation. One marker of Jewish identity is understanding that one is part of a minority, and different from the majority. This separation can be a difficult thing for an outsider or a child to understand, and it is the source of the so-called "December Dilemma," where Jewish children may envy Christmas trees and Santa Claus, and where Jews by Choice may most acutely feel their transition out of the majority culture with which they were raised. But these feelings of difference can also be the source of much Jewish identity growth. "The observance of ritual occasions, distinctive to Jews, has the effect of marking and heightening ethnic difference. When Jews take off from work on the High Holidays, eat matzo rather than bread during Passover, or avoid the celebration of Christmas, they are departing from the American majority in ways that are noticed by children, co-workers, spouses, and themselves."[50]

The value of informal, experiential education in identity formation cannot be underestimated. "Some of the most effective methods of enculturating adolescent

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[49] Ibid., 9.
[50] Ibid., 10.

and adult populations are those which blend aspects of formal and informal education. For these students, educational experiences which appeal both to the mind and the heart often have a profound and lasting impact on their perceptions of the world and their Jewish role in it."[51] These routes may work because they touch on so many others, including rituals and forming memories. Even reading about others' experiences, however, can serve as written role models and a study of culture and identity. "Courses in Jewish literature are often a kind of crash course in Jewish identity."[52]

Much of the work on Jewish identity formation is in the context of preserving Jewish identity in the next generation and beyond. Because of the rising intermarriage rate, Jewish scholars and authorities are worried about the future of Judaism, that young adults with strong American identities, not just Jewish identities, will not produce children with strong Jewish identities, and that children in interfaith households will not have Jewish identities at all. These researchers argue that by making Judaism relevant and connected to children's lives, their Jewish identities will necessarily develop and be strengthened. "The quest for meaning, and the necessity of instilling outer directedness in our students, must be at the centre of what we teach our children about Judaism. We need to think in larger ways about what we offer, and connect all the micro elements of our curricula, from Rashi's commentary to the vicissitudes of Jewish history to the laws of Sukkot, as part and parcel of this quest. As every corner of the Jewish world is

[51] Fishman, "Book Learning," 8.
[52] Ibid., 9.

slowly learning, 'Jewish continuity' does not produce identity, it is the outcome of such."[53]

[53] Malamet, "Reconstructing Jewish Identity," 14.

Chapter 2: Course of Study

There is education in books but education in life also; education in solitude, but education also in the crowd; education in study, but education even greater in the contagion of example. (Romanoff, *Your People, My People*, 159, citing Benjamin Nathan Cordozo)

Broadly defined, the course of study for conversion is all preparation and learning undertaken by the prospective convert before the conversion ceremony. It can include not only a classroom component, but also any independent suggested or assigned reading, required or recommended experiential programs, or other activities the sponsoring rabbi chooses to add. As one might expect, the course of study has changed drastically from rabbinic times to today, and even within the context of the Reform movement, there have been major changes since Rabbi Schindler's Outreach address regarding the contents, length, and style of the course of study.

Rabbis and converts alike turn to the story of Ruth as the paradigmatic conversion. Ruth said to her mother-in-law Naomi, "do not urge me to leave you, to turn back from you, for where you go I will go, and there I will lodge. Your people shall be my people and your God my God. Where you die, I shall die, and there I shall be buried."[1] The ancient rabbis understood this statement as Ruth's responses to Naomi's teaching her the rules of Judaism, both trying to dissuade her from

[1] Ruth 1:16-17.

conversion and to educate her about Judaism.[2] They understood it as the basis for teaching some—but not all—of the commandments to prospective converts before the formal conversion.

According to the text, the course of study in rabbinic times was incredibly brief, once it was clear that the prospective convert was serious about conversion. The rabbis taught the prospective convert a few commandments and some of the major punishments and rewards, and then he underwent conversion. After the formal conversion, the convert was considered to be "like a Jew in every way."[3] In a small, close-knit community, there would always have been someone watching to ensure that the new Jew was not violating any commandments. However, as soon as the community grew beyond the ability to watch over one another closely, this brief instruction would not be enough; by the time of conversion one would have to know the laws necessary to function as a law-abiding Jew, including laws of kashrut, Shabbat, niddah, and daily prayer, to name only a few categories necessary for daily life.

However, even in rabbinic times, the Jewish authorities questioned converts' actions. Tosefta[4] reports a discussion of a convert who lives among gentiles, and the rabbis discuss whether he is liable or exempt from punishment for violating Shabbat. The very presence of the argument reveals that converts sometimes continued living among non-Jews, and therefore separate from the community, and that they could become Jews without thorough knowledge of even the laws of

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[2] Babylonian Talmud, Yevamot 47b.
[3] Ibid.
[4] Tosefta, Shabbat 8:5.

Shabbat. The ancient rabbis did the bulk of their teaching after formal conversion, the opposite of modern practice. Similarly, in his book *The Stranger Within Your Gates*, Gary Porton reports, "The instruction takes place at the time of immersion, not as preparation for the conversion ritual occurs. This point argues against those who claim that converts had to undergo an extensive period of training before they joined the people Israel."[5] Thus prospective converts studied either at the time of conversion, as reported by Porton, or they studied after formal conversion, but unlike modern times, they did not do so in some period of time before conversion.

The Talmud also relates that Rabbi Hillel converted several individuals with virtually no preparation, and then only afterwards sent them to study.[6] The size and familiarity of the Jewish community was likely a check on the converts' continued study and lives as Jews. Nonetheless, the question of when to teach the laws and practices of Judaism to prospective converts was one which plagued the ancient rabbis.

> One needed a good deal of time to learn the Torah, but some [rabbis] held that one had to know the Torah to be accepted as a convert. This apparent contradiction might explain some of the rabbis' ambivalence toward the converts. On the one hand, it took a lifetime of study to become a fully practicing member of the Israelite community, and it was virtually impossible to expect that a convert could acquire sufficient knowledge of Israelite traditions, customs, and practices

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[5] Porton, *Stranger Within Your Gates*, 150.
[6] Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 31a.

> without participating in the full life of the community. On the other hand, there was a long-standing tradition that converts must accept the whole Torah upon their entrance into the Israelite community. But how could the converts accept both the Written and the Oral Torah if they did not know what they contained? (Porton, *Stranger Within Your Gates*, 199)

A few centuries later, the debate over conversion education continued. Maimonides wrote in his *Mishneh Torah* about the laws of conversion, and he joined the written discussion regarding teaching prospective converts, widening the scope of study. "To [Maimonides] conversion to Judaism meant not so much the acceptance of the commandments as the philosophical recognition of the unity of God."[7] Eventually, the American Reform movement, long before Outreach, changed the focus of conversion education from following commandments to knowing Judaism as a whole, its history and its people. "We have redefined what is important in conversion by including the ritual requirements, but leaving them as secondary. Learning and acquiring a practical understanding of Judaism ranks first for us and we have made this clear in our halakhic development."[8]

Before the UAHC embarked on a mission of Outreach, each individual rabbi and synagogue constructed a different conversion program. Often, this "program" was a brief course of study over only a few months; the conversion candidate read a few books and, in some cases, discussed them with the sponsoring rabbi. At Temple

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[7] Ben Zion Wacholder in Epstein, *Readings on Conversion*, 18.
[8] Jacob and Zemer, *Conversion in Jewish Law*, 128.

Israel in Dayton, converts completed an academic course of study and attended ten services; each prospective convert also met with the rabbi—once.[9] The books covered a range of topics, generally those in which the prospective convert was the most interested. In a study of Cincinnati area conversions, then rabbinical student Arnold Fertig found an emphasis on Jewish culture, but only through the books requested by the conversion students. "Converts to Judaism, almost universally, request books not on theology, but rather on history, ritual, Hebrew, Jewish cooking, and other topics. The unifying factor in these topics is the integration of the convert into the Jewish people and lifestyle rather than the Jewish faith."[10] Some rabbis suggested that conversion candidates attend a few Shabbat services, but there were not always requirements. "Many [conversion students] attend special events such as the Congregational Seder, Chanukah and Purim parties and participate in congregational life cycle activities."[11]

The course required by various Cincinnati area congregations in the late 1970s was similar. "The rabbis stress the 'basics' of Judaism . . . Jewish history, theology, customs and holidays, and Reform Judaism in the home. Also, some syllabi include texts on Modern Israel and 'how to' practical books or pamphlets on subjects as diverse as common Hebrew and Yiddish words to 'Jewish cooking' . . . While all rabbis encourage potential converts to attend services regularly while preparing for conversion, none makes this a hard and fast requirement."[12] The period of study was only a few months; the idea of experiencing the whole year of

[9] "Temple Israel Judaic Studies."
[10] Fertig, "Problems Facing the Convert," 85.
[11] Weil, "Special Welcome."
[12] Fertig, "Problems Facing the Convert," 31-32.

Jewish holidays was not yet widespread. Study was individual; there was no class of peers with whom to discuss difficult issues. A prospective convert could discuss these conflicts with the rabbi or with one's future spouse, who was, in most cases, born Jewish. "I never met anyone else who had converted; I thought there was an issue, something wrong with me."[13] Similarly, "[In Cincinnati and Dayton] three types of conversion programs are found to exist [in 1977]: (1) individual conferences / teaching sessions between the rabbi and convert; (2) a conversion class sponsored by the Temple and taught by the rabbi. Along with the class, the convert is expected to meet periodically with the rabbi on an individual basis when problems arise and (3) enrollment of the convert in an 'Introduction to Judaism' class with the (potential) spouse . . . In addition to the class, the convert is expected to meet periodically with the rabbi of his/her Temple."[14]

In these years just before Outreach, some already saw conversion as a flawed process: "Candidates who volunteer for conversion ought to be helped by hospitality committees composed of converts who can assist them with integrating into the community."[15] Similarly, Fertig suggests, "The Reform rabbi would be wise to anticipate problems converts are likely to face, and tailor the content of the program to meet these needs. For example, sections of Friday Evening [services] might be studied to facilitate entrance and comfort into the mode of Jewish worship. Other Jewish experiences might well compliment the cognitive learning which is presently occurring. The conversion program might be better viewed as a course in 'How to

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[13] Kukoff, Interview.
[14] Fertig, "Problems Facing the Convert," 31.
[15] *Keeping Posted*, P20.

Act Jewish,' and the convert could be presented with a wide range of Jewish alternatives to specific life situations."[16] Lydia Kukoff, who had only an individual period of study before her 1964 conversion, stated simply, "I didn't feel ready."[17] However, there was not yet widespread discontent or coordination for a large-scale overhaul of the conversion education process.

After Rabbi Schindler's 1978 address, perhaps the greatest accomplishment of the Task Force on Outreach was the development and distribution of the "Introduction to Judaism" curriculum and materials. This class moved the bulk of conversion education away from individual learning with the rabbi and towards formal, standard classes. Kukoff first helped systematize the "Introduction to Judaism" classes in her California community. "I looked at what people were actually being taught. It was very haphazard, and even where there were classes, there was no curriculum."[18] These classes brought together people on similar journeys, but it also became too standard and too classroom-focused. The formality and sudden rigidity of the "Introduction to Judaism" classes was not initially seen as a problem, but the lack of additional preparation became a problem. In one study, "Nearly a third of the respondents felt frustrated by the fact that preparation for conversion, in their view, was not adequate to enable them to fit comfortably into the Jewish world."[19]

Change continued, slowly, and communities began implementing some of the suggested changes to the course of study. In Denver, Colorado, in addition to the

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[16] Fertig, "Problems Facing the Convert," 112.
[17] Kukoff, *Choosing Judaism*, 16.
[18] Kukoff, Interview.
[19] Mayer and Avgar, *Conversion Among Intermarried*, 24.

academic component of study, candidates were required to have private meetings with their rabbi, regularly attend services, and attend discussion groups with other prospective Jews by Choice.[20] In addition, conversion students in Denver were provided with "ten commitments" to supplement their cognitive learning: light Shabbat and holiday candles; fast on Yom Kippur; affix a mezuzah on one's home; give tzedakah; observe some dietary laws; affiliate with a synagogue; worship regularly; continue Jewish study; support the state of Israel; raise one's children as Jews.[21] Because this community's course was published in an issue of *Reform Judaism* celebrating ten years of Outreach, it can be inferred that the program was considered to be on the front lines of change in conversion education.

In the same issue of *Reform Judaism*, a Jew by Choice wrote an article proclaiming the importance of synagogue affiliation for new converts; the benefits he lauds are those of affective and experiential learning. "As a Jew-by-Choice, I can personally state that active temple membership is a vital step in assuring lasting resolve and spiritual growth. For it is through temple activities that a convert can learn how to practice Judaism on a day-to-day basis: How to say the blessings over the Shabbat candles; how to recite the Kaddish; how to conduct a Seder; how to participate in a Shabbat service; how to read from the Torah; how to greet a fellow Jew."[22] Similarly, he wrote a reminder to all readers that Jews by Choice require patience and repetition even of basic rituals. "Many . . . simple acts of faith—all of which are frequently taken for granted by born-Jews—must be learned and

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[20] Foster, "Road to Judaism."
[21] Ibid.
[22] Tsuruoka, "No Longer a Stranger," 26.

practiced."[23] The presence of such an article in the flagship publication of the Reform movement implies that the things Tsuruoka was suggesting, all of which could be learned, as he notes, through synagogue participation, were not required or, in some cases, even suggested, by many rabbis.

Around the same time, in 1988, the Central Conference of American Rabbis (CCAR) published the latest edition of the *Rabbi's Manual*, for the first time including notes on halakhah and practice. The *Rabbi's Manual* lends support to the benefits of experiential education for all prospective converts. "It is understood that while the rituals of giyur are important, the preparatory period preceding the ceremony is even more significant and is given a high priority by Reform Judaism . . . The period of study should be reinforced by assisting the prospective convert's active participation in the various celebrations, observances, and worship services of our people. Regular attendance at the synagogue, as well as evidence of concern for Jewish values and causes in the home and community, should be required."[24]

In addition to the publications of the UAHC, some Jews by Choice published their own stories, hoping to help others, both Jews and non-Jews, to learn from their journeys. In one such memoir, Lena Romanoff offers ideas for creating a Jewish home, helping children develop a Jewish identity and learn as someone in the house goes through the conversion process, but the list can be adapted for adults as well. She advises creating a photo album of Jewish events and holidays, incorporating Shabbat customs and sharing the preparation, visiting places of Jewish interest and

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[23] Ibid., 26.
[24] Plaut, *Ma'aglei Tzedek*, 232.

collecting postcards, using Hebrew and Yiddish phrases regularly, displaying Judaica in the home, listening to, watching, and reading Jewish music, movies, and books, joining a synagogue and participating in it, sharing holidays with both Jews and non-Jews, and taking trips to Israel and eating Israeli food.[25] While she recognizes that much conversion education takes place in a classroom, Romanoff identifies the importance of also getting out of the classroom. "During the conversion program, the prospective convert should be exposed to two areas of learning, cognitive and affective. There should be a healthy balance between the cognitive—acquisition of information relating to prayer, holidays, and history—and the affective—the emotional absorption of the Jewish value and behavior system."[26] Romanoff also provides ideas for conversion students to "do Jewish," including hands-on workshops, a buddy system for attending services, discussing the roles of the rabbis and other clergy, compiling a list of recommended Jewish books, a calendar, and places in the community, setting up prospective converts with hosts in the Jewish community, and arranging visits to places of Jewish interest. These places could include, for example, museums, kosher markets, a mikveh, and a Jewish funeral home. She further suggests offering access to resource people in the community and discussing family issues. A conversion class should study and/or distribute resources on conversion, intermarriage, branches of Judaism, patrilineal and matrilineal descent, antisemitism, and culture. Conversion students could do a research project, including their Jewish partner, interact with a panel of recent

[25] Romanoff, *Your People, My People*, 124.
[26] Ibid., 158.

converts, and even be given a free period of membership after conversion.[27] Romanoff also encourages Jewish partners of prospective converts to help take Jewish learning out of the classroom. "The goal is to introduce your [non-Jewish] partner gradually and sensitively to as many sensory Jewish experiences—sights and sounds, flavors and smells—as possible."[28] Finally, she advocates learning Hebrew as part of the conversion process, to better become a part of the Jewish people, participate in prayer, and even read Torah. "I also recommend that converts take a beginner's course in Hebrew, the ancient biblical language resurrected and adopted as the official language of modern Israel. Hebrew is the language of the Jews. Learning it not only facilitates the study of Jewish prayer and Torah, but also helps create a bond with Jews in Israel and throughout the world . . . That is what Jewish peoplehood is all about."[29] The fact that Romanoff wrote these ideas does not mean any community was implementing them, or that no community was, but her comprehensive list of ideas means that new ideas were spreading, but there was still much room for improvement in conversion education.

Rabbi Stephen Einstein, an Outreach pioneer and rabbi of Congregation B'nai Tzedek in Fountain Valley, California agrees that prospective converts need to be a part of synagogue life, noting that it can be difficult and even discouraging for prospective converts to participate in the life of the congregation at first. However, "that doesn't mean we shouldn't encourage them to get as involved as we can,

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[27] Ibid., 161-162.
[28] Ibid., 61.
[29] Ibid., 171.

because that's what does it. When you're reading about it, you're just reading about it. When you're rolling up your sleeves and doing it, it's totally different."[30]

Ideas similar to those offered by Romanoff were implemented in different places, although often only as one or two additions to classroom conversion courses. In Indianapolis, experiences of Judaism were recommended for each topic studied in class, as one of the five ways of approaching each subject.[31] In Toronto, the UAHC regional office recommended offering free membership to conversion students and new Jews.[32] Rabbi Sanford Kopnick had more requirements for his conversion students, including participation in Outreach activities. Although these activities are unspecified, the specification of Outreach activities indicates that the synagogue had activities specifically for Jews by Choice and other previously overlooked groups in the congregation.[33]

A few years later, in another attempt to encourage experiences of Judaism in addition to reading and talking about it, Anita Diamant wrote, "Although Judaism has a rich intellectual tradition, you can't become a Jew in a classroom. Judaism is a way of life, full of melodies, foods, jokes, vacation destinations, retail experiences, and emotional contradictions."[34] She tells prospective converts about the typical conversion process, or her idealized version of it, and her description includes much more than classroom learning. "In addition to group discussions and classes, having

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[30] S. Einstein, Interview.
[31] Midler and Stein, "Basic Judaism Indianapolis," preface. The five ways to approach each topic are: discussion of readings, personal exploration through journaling, experiential activities, mastery of terms, and liturgy for each session. Additionally, there is some Hebrew in each class session.
[32] Caryll "Outreach Memo."
[33] Kopnick, "Becoming a Jew."
[34] Diamant, *Choosing a Jewish Life*, 82.

meetings with the rabbi, and reading, you will also be urged to practice 'doing Jewish' and being Jewish, including some, many, or all of the following: attending regular worship services, celebrating Jewish holidays, subscribing to a Jewish newspaper or magazine, buying a Jewish calendar, becoming familiar with Jewish communal organizations and charities."[35] At least from Diamant's perspective as a writer and participant in synagogue life, almost twenty years after Rabbi Schindler's call for Outreach, experiential learning, "doing Jewish," was the norm in conversion education.

Diamant follows the description of possible conversion preparation with her own suggestions for living Judaism; these are ideas, therefore, that she does not see as required by most rabbis, but which could enhance one's learning. She advises that prospective converts try to "observe one full Shabbat," attend a synagogue Shabbat retreat, try to keep kosher [style] for a month, "as a way to infuse one of the most basic human needs with Jewish content," plan holiday celebrations and host a seder, shop at a kosher grocery store and a Jewish bookstore, attend Jewish theater, choral performances, and concerts of Israeli pop stars, tour a local JCC, attend an Israeli Independence Day celebration, get involved in synagogue programs, and include Jewish tours and expeditions on family vacations.[36] In addition, "writing a religious or spiritual autobiography can clarify your thinking during a period of serious decision-making."[37]

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[35] Ibid., 83.
[36] Ibid., 83-84.
[37] Ibid., 86.

In his own memoir, Jew by Choice Julius Lester writes of his own realization after he read everything he could find about Judaism. "Judaism is not in the knowing; it is in the physicality of doing."[38] With the standardization of Introduction to Judaism courses, learning Judaism for conversion made its way into a formal classroom setting, and then it slowly began to move out again, with a new focus, gradually shifting to experiences and hands-on learning to augment reading and studying.

Temple Beth El of Sudbury, Massachusetts, was singled out for outstanding Outreach programming in 1996, implying that their program was superior to what other congregations were doing at the time. Their "Choosing Judaism" seminars included a series of guided discussions on a variety of topics. They were moderated not by clergy, but by a congregant who was both a Jew by Choice and a psychologist. The program had many forward-thinking goals: "to give Jews-by-Choice a forum for discussing and validating their experiences; to give prospective converts the opportunity to voice concerns and learn from peers; to provide born-Jews the opportunity to learn about the experience of conversion; to provide visibility in the congregation for the presence of converts among us; to encourage openness about conversion among Jewish and non-Jewish members of the community, among Jews by choice and Jews by birth alike; to welcome converts to Judaism."[39] This discussion series is similar to something Romanoff suggested; it gives prospective

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[38] Lester, *Lovesong*, 167.
[39] Beth El, Sudbury, Massachusetts, in Commission on Reform Jewish Outreach, *1997 Idea Book*, 196.

converts and Jews by Choice a chance to consider different perspectives and different issues they will face.

By 2001, just over twenty years after Rabbi Schindler's speech, the idea of taking conversion education out of the classroom or library had finally become more standard. When the CCAR Committee on Conversion rewrote the movement's conversion guidelines, experiential education was considered to be an established part of preparation for conversion. "It is essential that geirut involve more than simply graduating from an 'Introduction to Judaism' course. The process of becoming a Jew includes classroom learning, experiential learning, spiritual exploration, and rabbinic counseling. Each of these aspects plays an integral role in the process of considering geirut, as the student learns about Judaism, experiences and discusses Judaism, associates with Jews, and comes to an understanding of whether or not to become a Jew . . . Each prospective ger/gioret should be required to participate in as much of the ongoing life of both a synagogue and the general Jewish community as is possible. Regular attendance at Shabbat, festival, and holy day services should be required, with weekly attendance at Shabbat services strongly encouraged . . . Prospective gerim should experience the diversity of Jewish communal life through attendance at appropriate community gatherings."[40] Similarly, in the closest the Reform movement comes to a halakhic guide, published in the same year as the new conversion guidelines, in *Jewish Living: A Guide to Contemporary Reform Practice*, Rabbi Mark Washofsky writes a summary of the standard Reform conversion process that assumes prospective converts learn both

[40] CCAR Committee on Conversion, "Guidelines for Prospective Gerim," 3, 8-9.

inside and outside of a classroom. "Most rabbis require that the prospective Jew-by-choice complete a course of study covering Jewish beliefs, practices, and liturgy. They will also require regular attendance at synagogue services and participation in religious observances and communal events, so that the candidate can experience Jewish life at first hand."[41]

Regardless of these movement standards, not all rabbis or congregations follow these guidelines and suggestions, and conversion education can still be perfunctory or entirely classroom-based. One convert wrote that after her conversion, "I lit Shabbos candles that Friday night for the first time . . . I converted two years ago and sometimes I don't feel one hundred percent Jewish."[42] The issue of not feeling fully Jewish even two years after conversion is important, but it is probably related to the fact that this Jew by Choice did not light Shabbat candles until after conversion. Perhaps she was not encouraged—or did not take the initiative—to truly experience Judaism before conversion.

Going far outside the classroom, mentoring programs have become more common with the proliferation of Outreach, pairing a prospective convert or a new Jew with someone else in the congregation. A mentor may be encouraged to invite the mentee into her home for the holidays, to meet him at the temple for services, or just to talk periodically. "[Congregations are] giving them a mentor, so they have someone other than the rabbi to touch base with . . . Everyone undergoing

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[41] Washofsky, *Jewish Living*, 209.
[42] Weiss and Rubel, *The Choice*, 17.

conversion needs someone to ask stupid questions to. Nobody wants to ask those to the rabbi."[43]

Perhaps the synagogue with the most lauded mentoring program, recipient of multiple Belin Awards for outstanding Outreach programs, is Temple Emanu-El in Dallas, Texas. Emanu-El matches prospective converts with mentors based on shared interests, age, and preferences, and all mentors complete a training program. "We ask that the mentor stay with them for at least a year—even though they're already toward the end of the conversion process. They often come to the ceremony, answer questions, recommend books. The mentor really fills a need and invites them into their home, has them over for holidays, makes the student feel the most comfortable."[44] Temple Emanu-El understands that sometimes, prospective converts are looking for entirely unexpected qualities in their mentors. "We could assume what a student might want, but sometimes we're really surprised to get the form back. One young adult requested a Jewish grandmother-type. She never had that experience and wanted someone to invite her over and teach her to make matzah ball soup! We have to run the whole gamut of potential matches."[45]

While Emanu-El was recognized for their stellar mentoring program, they were not the first to conceive of the idea. Kukoff, who converted before the advent of Outreach, suggested that future Jews by Choice seek their own mentors. "Find a Jewish model for yourself. It's easier and more fun to learn from somebody, by

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[43] Farhi, Interview.
[44] Einstein, D., Interview.
[45] Ibid.

watching, asking, and doing—even if you feel awkward at first."[46] She also encouraged Jews by Choice to volunteer to mentor others.[47] Around the time Emanu-El first won an award for their program, Diamant also lauded mentor programs and set out what she believed their scope should be. "A Jewish mentor is a role model who invites you to his or her house for Shabbat dinner, who sits next to you during services, who gives you a great recipe for challah or honey cake, who can translate the alphabet soup of the Jewish communal world for you . . . Mentors are hosts, sounding boards, and friends."[48] By 2001, the idea was mainstream enough to be was included as a recommendation in the CCAR's conversion guidelines.

> Each prospective ger/gioret should be paired with a chaver, or mentor, for the purpose of ongoing support . . . Providing chaverim, or mentors—individuals or families—from among past gerim and other interested people, can be an extremely valuable way for prospective gerim to assimilate the knowledge they are gaining as well as to experience Jewish life in a much less threatening manner. This system can also provide the opportunity for prospective gerim to see Judaism working in a Jewish home as a model for their own homes. Becoming a chaver presents a wonderful opportunity for laypeople to participate in the education and integration of prospective gerim into the community. (CCAR Committee on Conversion, "Guidelines for Prospective Gerim," 8-9)

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[46] Kukoff, *Choosing Judaism*, 25.
[47] Ibid., 108.
[48] Diamant, *Choosing a Jewish Life*, 85-86.

Whether in the classroom or outside of it, the desired length of time for conversion preparation has long been debated as well. Before Outreach, preparation in the Reform movement was often only a few months long. However, some began to advocate for a longer period, which would give prospective converts more time to adjust to their new identity. "Lack of pressure to convert, combined with a warm welcome and the opportunity to become familiar with Judaism at a slower pace, leads to more and better committed converts."[49] Likely because intermarriage has become more accepted, people now feel less pressure to convert before marriage, and instead they can prepare at their own pace. "Anecdotal evidence suggests that we are seeing in the Reform movement a greater percentage of conversions taking place at a later point in the life cycle, after an individual has spent many years establishing a Jewish home and living a Jewish life."[50] This change, however, has led to a more formal assessment of study and course length. The responsa committee concluded that formal preparation could be as short as one day—if the individual has studied individually and lived as a Jew for a length of time already. "The life pattern of the woman in question has indicated that she is serious about conversion. She has made Judaism very much part of her existence, she participates in the synagogue and has been actively involved in the Jewish community. There is no reason to question her conversion. It is valid and must be accepted."[51] Eventually, the typical preparation time stretched out to allow prospective converts to experience the full Jewish year, and most Reform authorities were convinced that a

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[49] Romanoff, *Your People, My People*, 12.
[50] Dru Greenwood in Epstein, *Readings on Conversion*, 153.
[51] "The Course of Study for Gerut," in Jacob, *Questions and Reform Answers*, 194-196.

longer course was better for Jews by Choice. In the 2001 Guidelines for Conversion, this longer study and preparation time was formalized. "While recognizing that determination of readiness for giyur is a highly individual and subjective decision, rabbis should ensure that prospective gerim participate in a full year of Jewish life prior to completing giyur in order to demonstrate a credible commitment to Jewish living and become part of a Jewish community committed to Jewish life."[52]

With a generally adhered to preparation time of at least one year, there is more time to provide all kinds of options for conversion education. Congregations today have become wary of educating Jews by Choice only with similar others, whether inside a classroom or at hands-on programs. "I find that people are responding less to things that are specifically for non-Jews or intermarried families, things that are for beginners, Jewish literacy things. [It's better if] it's open to everybody. Non-Jewish participants don't feel singled out."[53] While the "Introduction to Judaism "curriculum has much to say about Judaism, it is not Judaism, and there is currently a strong emphasis on learning outside of the classroom and with all types of Jews. URJ Outreach Specialist Arlene Chernow recommends the hands-on approach. "Provide holiday and Shabbat skills. They need to light the candles in their own house, be able to say the prayer. Provide people with Jewish skills and credentials."[54]

While some congregations combine the classroom learning and experiential learning, others have moved the academic portion of the pursuit back to the rabbi's

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[52] CCAR Committee on Conversion, "Guidelines for Prospective Gerim," 11.
[53] Gluck, Interview.
[54] Chernow, Interview.

office, informally, focusing on the particular topics in which the conversion candidate takes an interest—much as conversion preparation was thirty years ago. However, these congregations also ensure that conversion candidates are doing more than reading books and meeting with the rabbi, involving them in services, Torah study, adult education, workshops, and the day-to-day, week-to-week life of the congregation. These rabbis and lay leaders have decided that conversion students can learn about Judaism from books, but to learn to live Jewishly, they need to participate; as a result, formal classes are, to some extent, declining. "Cultural literacy comes from experience of the culture. The only thing that I would argue that you can do to make converts feel more authentically Jewish: Provide experience. Take conversion out of the classroom and put it in situ. You can't learn prayer in a classroom; you can learn liturgy in a classroom."[55] While the emphasis moves to experiential learning, there is still a need for academic instruction about Judaism; the URJ is planning to expand the "Introduction to Judaism" class beyond the big cities and onto the internet, where those in smaller and more remote communities can have access to the formal learning they may be missing. [56] In Charlotte, North Carolina, Rabbi Judy Schindler is also moving toward, not away from classes—she switched from private meetings with prospective converts to group classes only within the last decade, but she tries to ensure that the classes are far from a generic experience. "It was individual until about eight years ago when I made a class. I

[55] Olitzky, Interview.
[56] Farhi, Interview.

always nurture those who have converted to support those who are converting. I moved from more individual to more collective."[57]

It may be, however, that whatever the required course or program, it is up to each individual to do more. "The more effort that goes into learning and involvement, the sooner the convert will feel comfortable."[58] When each prospective Jew by Choice chooses his course of study and increased involvement with the community, he is making a decision to become invested and a part of the people he will be joining. That decision may be more important than even the most stringent and comprehensive requirements. As Montgomery found in her research with Philadelphia Jews by Choice, "The role the individual plays in the development of his/her own Jewishness is clear. Those respondents who participated in the organizational life of the community and developed a Jewish social network had better Jewish social identity."[59]

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[57] Schindler, Interview.
[58] Romanoff, *Your People, My People*, 35.
[59] Montgomery, "Integration of Jews by Choice," 128.

Chapter 3: Ceremony

Since public affirmations by the ger/gioret and public acceptance by the Jewish community are important parts of this process, public ceremonies of affirmation are encouraged. (CCAR Committee on Conversion, "Guidelines for Prospective Gerim," 12-13)

In the modern Reform movement,[1] the conversion ceremony has three parts: questioning before a beit din, immersion in the mikveh and circumcision (for males), and a declaration of intent, which usually takes place in the synagogue. The Reform beit din is not always a panel of three rabbis, but of three educated Jews, at least one of whom is a rabbi.[2] The second part, immersion and circumcision, is not required in Reform ceremonies,[3] but it is included, increasingly often, either required by individual rabbis or desired by the individual converting. The third part, the declaration of intent, may be the part of the conversion ceremony that has changed the most; in ancient ceremonies, it did not exist independently from the other two parts.

In rabbinic times, conversion entailed going before a beit din, circumcision for all men, and immersion in a mikveh for all converts. Even these requirements, however, were not completely rigid. The rabbis of the Talmud debate whether

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[1] Here and throughout, "modern Reform" refers to the current state of the Reform movement in the United States.
[2] Plaut, *Ma'aglei Tzedek*.
[3] Ibid.

conversion requires circumcision, immersion, or both.[4] The discussion continues for several pages, revealing the multiplicity of opinions, and the eventual consensus is that both are required, as well as a court of three. In his *Mishneh Torah*, Maimonides reports the same requirements, circumcision and immersion, as well as accepting the yoke of the Torah.[5]

In the Reform movement, the synagogue ceremony can be seen as a development of the Rambam's requirement of explicit acceptance of Torah. In the Reform ceremony, it is a time when the convert may hold the Torah, often for the first time, say the Shema, affirm the intention to convert to Judaism, and declare that the conversion is of free will. In addition, because the Reform movement ruled that circumcision and immersion were unnecessary, this formal acceptance and declaration became the central—and often only—ceremony marking conversion. "In 1893 the CCAR declared the initiatory rites of brit milah and tevilah unnecessary and held that it was sufficient for prospective converts to declare, orally and in writing in the presence of a rabbi and no fewer than two lay leaders of the congregation and community, their acceptance of the Jewish faith and the intention to live in accordance with its mitzvot."[6]

Officially since 1893, the Reform movement has not required circumcision and immersion for conversion. "The ritual elements emphasized by modern Orthodoxy have been given a secondary role by the Reform Movement. Emphasis instead has been placed upon a thorough study of Judaism, the acceptance of Jewish

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[4] Babylonian Talmud, Yevamot 46a.
[5] *Mishneh Torah,* Issurei Biah 13:4.
[6] Plaut, *Ma'aglei Tzedek*, 232.

ideas and the Jewish way of life."[7] However, more Reform rabbis are encouraging the traditional rites of conversion, circumcision and immersion, than in the past. There is not only an understanding of greater acceptance of such conversions, because the Conservative movement recognizes Reform conversions that include immersion and circumcision, but there is also understanding of the potential for meaning in these ceremonies; they can be a source of Jewish memories, and they can impart a greater sense of belonging and authenticity. "I think mikveh is something that has a really profound impact on people. I think that the re-ownership of a lot of the rituals around conversion have been really, really important. Even for me, in that context, the mikveh is so primal, and it signifies in your body a really profound change. I can remember it very clearly, very vividly, and it just resonates in remarkable ways."[8]

Before Rabbi Schindler's speech and the overhaul of the entire conversion process, this synagogue conversion ceremony was generally a small, private affair. Often it included only the rabbi, the conversion candidate, the candidate's fiancé, and sometimes the fiancé's parents if they were supportive. "When I went for conversion [in 1964], I eventually found a rabbi and I worked with the rabbi alone and had a conversion ceremony alone, with my spouse-to-be and mother-in-law to be, and it was very quiet, and I was a Jew."[9] Few rabbis encouraged circumcision or immersion, and when candidates decided to undergo these rites, they were taken to an unfamiliar world of observant Judaism, sometimes with ceremonies witnessed by

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[7] "Bar Mitzvah of a Convert" in Jacob, *Contemporary American Reform Responsa*, 237-238.
[8] Greenwood, Interview.
[9] Kukoff, Interview.

people they had never met, and they were asked to repeat words of a blessing that they had perhaps never heard before. Former UAHC Outreach Director Dru Greenwood said, "When I converted [in 1970], I did go to the mikveh, but it was in a part of town that was not familiar to me; there were three rabbis with me, only one of whom I knew. There was certainly no liberal mikveh, and many rabbis didn't take people to the mikveh at all."[10] The whole process, including the declaration of intent, was done quietly and out of the sight—and awareness—of the rest of the congregation. "Generally, these [conversion ceremonies] take place in Temple either prior to or following a Shabbat Evening service—in private. Two rabbis have performed this ritual during the Friday evening service, but only one of these does so routinely."[11]

It is possible that conversion was done in this manner to fulfill the Talmudic dictum that one should not remind a convert of his heathen past. By extension, perhaps many thought the rest of the congregation should not even learn for sure that one was a convert by witnessing the ceremony. However, the feeling conveyed to those who converted in private was that conversion was something shameful, something that should not be talked about, and something that was meant to be hidden. Before Outreach began, there were a few who advocated for public conversion ceremonies, but there was not any widespread action or change. "Above all, all conversions—of course, with the permission of the converts—ought to be

[10] Greenwood, Interview.
[11] Fertig, "Problems Facing the Convert," 32.

public ceremonies carried out in the presence of the congregation on the Shabbat or holidays."[12]

Many Jews by Choice have mentioned the private conversion ceremony as an indication that conversion was neither embraced by the congregation nor understood as an honorable thing to do. In the time before Rabbi Schindler's Outreach address, most congregations did this secretive, private conversion ceremony. One Task Force recommendation was to move the ceremony to a more public sphere, such as during a Shabbat service. They wanted to begin to treat conversion like the life cycle event that it is, and while the ritual portions of immersion and circumcision, if they were included, were certainly private by nature, the rest of the ceremony can—and slowly, it did—include the Jewish community. "Jewish law is satisfied by Mikvah and Milah. But as powerful as these rituals may be for the individual, they provide little place for the family participation or communal support that are central to Jewish rites of passage. Conversion ceremonies fill those needs."[13]

However, a responsum from 1982 implies that contrary to most reports, public ceremonies were already common. A rabbi writes of a prospective convert who has long been living a Jewish life and wants to formally convert, but privately, without public ceremony. The responsa committee wrote, "There is nothing in our Reform tradition which demands a public conversion ceremony. Her formal reception into Judaism could take place privately, in the presence of a rabbi and two

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[12] Gilbert Kollin in *Keeping Posted*, P20.
[13] Diamant, *Choosing a Jewish Life*, 136.

witnesses."[14] Their response implies that some, at least, were already holding public conversion ceremonies. It also shows that the mission of Outreach had not yet permeated the CCAR responsa committee; they could have simultaneously affirmed the legality of the private ceremony, while encouraging the value of a public one.

Whereas conversion ceremonies began as private, rabbi's study events, they have slowly become congregational celebrations in many places, concluding with honors at a Shabbat service, often including a statement by the convert given during the service or printed in the temple's bulletin. It took until 1996 for one congregation, which is often considered to be an Outreach trendsetter, to consider this option. The synagogue's Outreach committee sent the following to the rabbis of the congregation: "[We recommend that] the new Jews by Choice be invited to the Bimah for a blessing before the open Ark at a Friday night Shabbat service. This would occur as soon as possible after conversion, perhaps individually or in a group for the month past. Consider publishing names of new Jews by Choice in the [newsletter] as we do for marriages, new babies, and new members. If it is not already being done, a personal note of welcome from one of all of our Rabbis."[15] Through this publicity, the Outreach committee wanted to proclaim that converts are welcomed and celebrated. "Normalizing conversion as a life cycle event, in the same way as B'nai mitzvah, marriage, baby naming, to get the community to witness something up on the bima, that says 'we're calling our community to witness.'"[16]

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[14] "Conversion Without Formal Instruction," in Jacob, *American Reform Responsa*, 211-215.
[15] Temple Emanu-El, Dallas, Texas, in Commission on Reform Jewish Outreach, *1997 Idea Book*, 187.
[16] Kahn, Interview.

The public conversion ceremony as community celebration can be taken a step further, to a *sedudat simcha*, a festive meal. There is no evidence of this major celebration becoming the norm, but there are aspects of it that could be implemented more widely and help further the Jewish identity of the new Jew, giving her experiences, and therefore memories, that other Jews might have had in childhood. Diamant suggests several ideas for celebrating new Jews by Choice. "Get a guest book and ask friends to record their thoughts and wishes for the new Jew; ask guests to bring a favorite Jewish recipe and create a personalized cookbook; play some lively klezmer music and lift the new Jew on a chair like a bride or groom at a wedding."[17] Similarly, Diamant suggests that if people insist on bringing gifts to a new convert, they should attempt to help fill in gaps in one's collection, bringing items that might otherwise have been collected during a Jewish past. Friends can make "the party a kind of Jewish 'shower' of material goods many born-Jews have been given or collected since childhood," such as Jewish books, subscriptions, ritual items, and cultural opportunities.[18]

In addition to the public ceremony and, if so desired, subsequent celebration, congregations can publicly honor Jews by Choice at other times during the year. "Some congregations honor all of those who converted during the past year on Shavuot, the holiday that celebrates the giving of the Torah and when the book of Ruth is studied."[19] Each of these suggestions and practices, the public ceremony, a conversion celebration, and other public recognition of Jews by Choice, bring

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[17] Diamant, *Choosing a Jewish Life*, 176.
[18] Ibid., 177-179.
[19] Ibid., 138.

conversion into the light and remind congregations and born Jews of the honor inherent in conversion, and they give the new Jew a new collection of Jewish memories.

However, some congregations take this welcoming to another extreme, including not only Jews by Choice, but congregants who have not chosen Judaism. Many congregations now hold Outreach Shabbat services, honoring all those who have converted, inviting several Jews by Choice or prospective converts to share their stories with the congregation. Some congregations include gestures of support for intermarried couples at some of these same Outreach services, inviting them to the bima to light candles or for an aliyah. Rabbi Jeff Sirkman, at Larchmont Temple in Larchmont, New York, takes this approach. "[We have an] annual Outreach Shabbat, do an aliyah honoring those who aren't Jewish but partnering with Jews and raising Jews. [We are] allowing people to share their story."[20] In some congregations, non-Jews can vote on synagogue issues and serve on synagogue boards. As early as 1991, a survey of UAHC congregations found that most were open to having non-Jewish family members participate in a variety of ways. More than ninety percent of congregations allowed non-Jewish family members to participate on the bima for a child's Bar or Bat Mitzvah or other life cycle events, and sixty percent allowed for burial in the Jewish cemetery. Sizeable minorities allowed non-Jews to have other honors, forty percent to light the Shabbat candles, thirty-two

[20] Sirkman, Interview.

percent to lead the congregation in Kiddush, and twenty-two percent allowed a non-Jew to have an aliyah.[21]

As a result of congregational diversity, and perhaps because of Outreach's success, there is a question of whether Outreach has gone too far, offering inclusion to all, regardless of Jewish status, and perhaps making the step of conversion seem unnecessary. Even before Outreach, a responsum allowed non-Jews to fully participate. Responding to the question of whether a "pre-convert" could light the congregation's Shabbat candles and recite the blessing, the responsa committee responded in the affirmative, but they cited the issue of *brachah l'vatala*, a wasted blessing, not the potential impropriety of giving a synagogue honor to a non-Jew. The committee offered two options: have the prospective convert omit the words "*Adonai Eloheinu Melech Ha-olam*" from the blessing, or compare the prospective convert's recitation of the whole blessing to a child practicing for a Bar Mitzvah, reciting the blessings and even reading from the Torah before he becomes a Bar Mitzvah.[22]

There are rabbis who question why someone would go through the trouble of converting if a non-Jewish spouse can have the same honors as a Jew. "One begins to sense an unsettling pattern, a Judaism that is being shaped and contoured to try and desperately match the precariousness of current Jewish loyalties."[23] While it is important to bring conversion into the light and give those converting the honor

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[21] Commission on Reform Jewish Outreach, *UAHC Outreach Census*, 16-17.
[22] "Preconverts Participating in T'fillot," in Freehof, *Current Reform Responsa*, 88-90.
[23] Malamet, "Reconstructing Jewish Identity," 13.

they deserve, it is also important to consider the possibility of blurring the line between honoring conversion and striving for universal participation.

Chapter 4: Congregational Education and Welcoming

No matter what anyone does, if the atmosphere, culture, surroundings are negative, [feeling Jewish] will take longer, particularly at the beginning when the convert couples their identity with how the community sees them. (Kahn, Interview)

Perhaps the most difficult part of conversion is acceptance by the congregation and entry into the community, both in reality and as perceived by the Jew by Choice. "You cannot be Jewish in isolation. Torah study is a communal enterprise, not a solitary pursuit. There are no Jewish hermits or monasteries. Community is as fundamental to Judaism as monotheism, which is why so many Jewish prayers can only be recited in the presence of a minyan."[1] The congregation can determine, even without knowing it, whether or not a new Jew feels welcomed, accepted, and a part of the Jewish community. When this welcome does not exist, often it is because the community does not know enough about the process of conversion, how much converts study and learn about Judaism, or even that it is possible to convert to Judaism and become a full, equal Jew. When congregations are well educated about conversion and welcome Jews by Choice with open arms, the transition to Judaism is made much smoother. "Congregations can make them feel welcome. That's the most important thing."[2]

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[1] Diamant, *Choosing a Jewish Life*, 225.
[2] S. Einstein, Interview.

Already in early rabbinic times, the third century Mekhilta d'Rabbi Ishmael[3] defends converts, a sign that there was not automatic and easy acceptance or welcoming in the community. "Beloved are gerim, for Abraham our father was not circumcised until he was ninety-nine years old . . . in order to not close the door to future gerim."[4] The Mishnah similarly reminds Jews to welcome converts. "One may not remind converts that their parents had not been born as Israelites. This is derived from the phrase, 'you shall not wrong a stranger or oppress him' in Exodus 22:20."[5] The Jerusalem Talmud also includes a caution to treat converts fairly, but it is paired with the warning that if they are not treated well, they may leave the Jewish people, adding a tinge of suspicion to their welcome. "Bar Qappara teaches that one should be careful to treat converts fairly, for if they perceive that they might suffer a disadvantage after their conversion, they will return to their former lives."[6]

Throughout the Babylonian Talmud, community acceptance remained a major issue for converts. Perhaps the most problematic comment regarding conversion in the Talmud is Rabbi Chelbo's repeated assertion that converts are hurtful to Israel, like a sore.[7] This comment is explained in different ways in order to make it seem less harsh. Nonetheless, it remains part of the Talmudic text that converts are difficult for Israel, "evil after evil comes upon those who receive

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[3] Strack and Stemberger, *Introduction to Talmud and Midrash*.
[4] Mekhilta d'Rabbi Ishmael, Nezikin 18.
[5] Porton, *Stranger Within Your Gates*, 26. Citing Mishnah Bava Metziah 4:10.
[6] Ibid., 151. Citing Jerusalem Talmud, Bava Metziah.
[7] e.g., Babylonian Talmud, Yevamot 109b; Niddah 13b; Yevamot 47b; Kiddushin 70b.

gerim,"[8] converts delay the coming of the messiah,[9] and converts are troubling in other ways. The Talmud also contains more equivocal statements regarding converts. "Rabbi Eleazer said, the Holy One Blessed be God did not exile Israel among the nations except to add converts to them."[10] Adding converts, is actually a good thing, the mission of exiled Israel; exile, however, is therefore due to converts, a burden indeed. The fact that rabbinic sentiment regarding converts was mixed indicates that gaining acceptance has never been easy for converts, from ancient times until today. In light of the ambivalence with which the Talmud treats converts, there was either no consensus on how to treat them, or some of the rabbis were trying to improve an unfortunate situation. "It does seem clear that the Talmud's final editors did not feel it was necessary to present one picture of the converts and conversion. From our perspective, the material in the Babylonian Talmud indicates that throughout the whole Amoraic period much remained unsettled with regard to conversion."[11]

Some centuries later, Maimonides wrote extensively regarding converts, in both his halakhic code *Mishneh Torah* and in responsa. He displays more overall favoritism towards converts than the Talmud, but he still has reservations. There are several questions regarding the level of trust one puts in a newcomer's conversion. If someone is unknown and claims to have converted, but he does not have witnesses, there is a question as to whether to accept him.[12] His acceptance

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[8] Babylonian Talmud, Yevamot 109b.
[9] Babylonian Talmud, Niddah 13b.
[10] Babylonian Talmud, Pesachim 87b.
[11] Porton, *Stranger Within Your Gates*, 93.
[12] *Mishneh Torah,* Issurei Biah 13:8-10.

would mean allowing him to become a part of the local economy, to count in a minyan, and potentially to marry one's daughter, so the question is of vital importance—but would make community acceptance for the convert in question very difficult. In an additional difficulty, one who converts and is discovered after the fact to have had ulterior motives for conversion, which would have disqualified him previously, is considered a Jew—but he is a Jew "under suspicion, until his righteousness is revealed."[13] Thus even years after a conversion, in Rambam's time, a convert could suddenly face renewed suspicion and scrutiny.

In a responsum, Maimonides also answered the question of whether converts were permitted, required, or prohibited to say the Avot prayer and other prayers referring to communal ancestors and shared history. "The heart of the matter is the status of the convert. The Mishnaic position, especially as extended by its medieval advocates, does not allow a convert to attain a position of normalcy within the Jewish community. Every time the congregation turns to prayer, every time Jews eat together and prepare to recite the Grace after Meals, the convert is reminded of his foreign extraction and anomalous status. For Maimonides this was intolerable."[14] Because these prayers connect the speaker to his ancestors, the Jewish community long questioned whether a convert, with no blood connection to these ancestors, could connect himself in this way. Maimonides answered in the affirmative. He said that these Jews by Choice were, symbolically, at Sinai with all other Jews, and Abraham is a symbolic ancestor for converts just as he is for all other Jews.

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[13] Ibid., Issurei Biah 13:17.
[14] Cohen, "Can Converts Say," 426.

> Yes, you may say all this in the prescribed order and not change it in the least. In the same way as every Jew by birth says his blessings and prayers, you, too, shall bless and pray alike, whether you are alone or pray in congregation. The reason for this is that Abraham our Father taught the people, opened their minds, and revealed to them the true faith and the unity of God . . . Ever since then, whoever converts and confesses the unity of the Divine Name, as it is prescribed in the Torah, is counted among the disciples of Abraham our Father . . . Thus, Abraham our Father, peace be with him, is the father . . . of all converts who adopt Judaism . . . Since you have come under the wings of the Divine presence and confessed the Lord, no difference exists between you and us, and all miracles done to us have been done, as it were, to us and to you . . . There is no difference whatever between you and us. (Cohen, "Can Converts Say," 424, citing Maimonides to Obadiah the Convert, trans. Shaye J.D. Cohen)

With this answer, Maimonides decisively taught the acceptance of converts. However, the fact that this question was asked to Maimonides, and that he found it important and troubling enough to answer, meant that the status of converts within the community was not assured, and that this education regarding acceptance was necessary.

Almost one thousand years later, but still before Rabbi Schindler initiated Outreach in 1978, most of those who were born Jewish knew little about conversion. Many were under the false assumption that conversion does not exist in Judaism, or

that those who convert are not equal to those who were born Jewish, and new Jews by Choice could feel the reluctant welcome. "Many converts . . . indicated that they felt somewhat inhibited and self-conscious among born Jews."[15] Either because of attempted respect for a non-Jewish past or ignorance of fully Jewish status, congregations did not do anything special to welcome new Jews into the community. "Falconer insists that 'many born Jews are ignorant of the fact that converts do not want to be singled out for special help.'"[16] Instead, echoing the Mishnah, there was an attempt to pretend that conversion simply did not exist, and that those who converted were either exactly like those who were born Jewish, or they were not Jewish at all, and therefore they were nothing like those who were born Jewish. "Mishnah describes the converts as occupying an ambiguous place in the classification of human beings: while the fact that they were once gentiles could not be forgotten, neither could it be thrown in their faces . . . In specific contexts the difference between them and the native-born would always remain."[17]

Even a decade before Rabbi Schindler's speech, there was recognition of the problem of acceptance by born Jews. "If any Jewish propaganda effort is to succeed, the Jewish community itself must be reeducated. Jews must be convinced that sincere converts are needed and desirable. We must free ourselves from the lingering feeling that a convert to Judaism must be either mad or insincere."[18] Others were also aware of a lack of congregational welcoming and the negative influence it could have on prospective converts. "Mordechai Kaplan, the father of the

[15] Huberman, *New Jews*, 25.
[16] UAHC Department of Adult Jewish Studies, "Converts and Conversion," #16.
[17] Porton, *Stranger Within Your Gates*, 30-31.
[18] Bernard Bamberger in *Keeping Posted*, P7.

Reconstructionist movement, understood that before there is believing there is belonging. People need to feel welcome and a sense of the familiar before they begin to construct a cognitive approach to their Judaism."[19] However, as with conversion education and the ceremony, a few individual voices of discontent were not enough to inspire major changes.

Kukoff's early work on outreach, immediately following Rabbi Schindler's address, focused only in part on the "Introduction to Judaism" curriculum. "At least half of our work was geared toward helping the Jewish community look inside its own communal heart and ask where were the not-welcome signs."[20] In the following years, more work was required to educate born Jews about conversion, the status of converts, and how to be welcoming, in order to combat this issue once it was widely recognized. "One of the most serious problems facing all converts: lack of acceptance by other Jews."[21]

A conversion program can attempt to teach every aspect of Judaism, from the cognitive to the affective, but without community support and welcoming, a new Jew will struggle nonetheless. "Without acceptance by the community, Jews by Choice can never fully feel a part of the Jewish people, nor can the community benefit from their energy and commitment."[22] Congregations as a whole have not always been proactive about rolling out the symbolic welcome mat. In 1989, after celebrating ten years of Outreach, a UAHC congregation wrote to the responsa committee: "A congregation has asked whether it is appropriate for a cantor, who

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[19] Brown and Galperin, *Case for Jewish Peoplehood*, 63.
[20] Kukoff, Interview.
[21] Romanoff, *Your People, My People*, 128.
[22] Ibid., xvi.

leads the congregation regularly in worship, to be married to a convert?"[23] Responsa often reveal at least as much about the community asking the question as they do about Jewish law. In this case the congregation exposed its hesitancy regarding accepting converts.[24]

Community acceptance of converts goes beyond the congregation where one has studied. Many conversion courses, including the Reform Movement's "Introduction to Judaism" program, include sections on both denominations and Israel, so Jews by Choice converting under Reform auspices learn the variety of opinions regarding Jewish status. "It is natural for recent converts to be baffled by the abundance of Jewish views, especially over the question of 'who is a Jew?'"[25] What cannot be taught, however, is how widely individuals' opinions vary from the movement's or the congregation's official position, and that individual Jews might not validate—or even recognize—the convert's new Jewish identity. "As converts struggle with their search for identity and integration, they are often unprepared for the reactions of those who try to negate their Jewishness. For the skeptics, the bottom-line question nearly always comes down to this: Is this person really Jewish?"[26]

In some communities, a convert must continue to "prove" his Jewish commitment, especially if questioned afterwards. "Some Orthodox authorities have ruled that the conduct of a Jewish way of life, even without documentation of

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[23] "A Cantor Married to a Convert," in Jacob, *Questions and Reform Answers*, 3-4.
[24] The responsa committee assured them that based on Jewish law, there was nothing wrong with a cantor married to a convert.
[25] Romanoff, *Your People, My People*, 127.
[26] Ibid., 130.

conversion, creates a valid assumption of Jewishness."[27] Similarly, in Israel, Rabbi Shlomo Goren wrote "If he conducts himself according to the Jewish religion the conversion is valid; otherwise, it is no conversion at all."[28] As a result of these rulings, a lapse in Jewish observance, however short or minor, could lead to a new question over a convert's status. There are also a variety of misconceptions and ideas circulating, implying that Jews by Choice are not fully Jewish. In his memoir *Lovesong*, Lester cites scholar Adin Steinsalz as one of these questioning sources: "Adin Steinsalz has written that it takes three generations to make a Jew."[29] The community's acceptance can essentially affirm or deny a recent convert's Jewish identity. "The role of the receiving community is crucial. The extent to which the larger Jewish community views Jews by Choice as not really Jewish and the extent to which it applies differential expectations and avenues for participation may be the extent to which Jews by Choice may continue to form a differentiated sub-group with the larger community."[30] It can take a long time before a Jew by Choice can be confident enough regarding her place within the Jewish community to let such criticisms go. "'You know, they convert, but I don't think someone can become Jewish.' . . . Thinking of this all these years later, I find I agree with him, but that's because I've realized that many in his generation equated Judaism with Yiddishkeit. One cannot become 'Yiddish.' Sadly Yiddishkeit is fading . . . Today the grandchildren

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[27] "Gerut and the Question of Belief," in Jacob, *American Reform Responsa*, 209-211.
[28] Zemer, *Evolving Halakhah*, 129. Citing Shlomo Goren, "Halakhic Ruling Concerning the Brother and Sister."
[29] Lester, *Lovesong*, 239. Lester did not cite where this statement originated, so it has not been possible to verify it or examine the context of the statement.
[30] Montgomery, "Integration of Jews by Choice," 27-28.

of Yidden are Yehudim—or they are goyim. So am I a Yid? I don't think so. But I am a Yehudi."[31]

Educating a Jewish community about conversion means teaching people not only about the validity of conversion but about its difficulties, allowing born Jews to try to understand the challenges and be ready to help. "Becoming a Jew means attaching yourself to four thousand years of history, to a complex literature, to a brand of humor, even to certain foods. Becoming an American Jew means acquiring a relationship to at least two foreign languages: Hebrew and Yiddish. Converting to Judaism means learning what to do in a synagogue, how to send and receive the verbal and nonverbal cues that signal Jewishness, getting the jokes. Being a Jew asks you to subsume a part of your individuality into the larger, corporate experience of the Jewish people."[32] Each Jew by Choice will approach this new identity differently and will want different types of help and sensitivity from the community. Sometimes the key is in simply pretending acceptance even in the face of skepticism. "I do not know, even now, whether the man . . . assumed I was a Jew, or whether asking me if I was a Cohen or Levi was his way of finding out, because a non-Jew would not know what was being asked. But I will always be grateful to him for addressing me as if I were a Jew instead of asking."[33] In other cases, reaching out will make a Jew by Choice feel welcome, even if outreach is not done intentionally. One woman reports that her first moment of feeling truly Jewish came when a born Jew asked her for help during a Shabbat service. "She had not been to synagogue in

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[31] Weiss and Rubel, *The Choice*, 50.
[32] Diamant, *Choosing a Jewish Life*, 17-18.
[33] Lester, *Lovesong*, 242.

many years, and because I had helped her she felt comfortable and at home again. Could she sit beside me again next Sabbath? Now, there is no doubt—I belong."[34]

As Outreach developed, many congregations began conversion mentoring programs so that a Jew by Choice had another Jew, aside from a rabbi or a family member, to turn to and to learn from. Teaching a congregation about mentoring, even in an informal way, can go a long way towards understanding. "To the convert, every Jew is a potential role model. The best role model—whether spouse, in-law, friend, or rabbi—is one who provides support, information, and opportunities for learning in a personal, nonthreatening, joyous environment. A positive role model in this context communicates Jewish values and practices by words and deeds, by including the convert in celebrations and involving him or her in Jewish experiences that are meaningful, interesting, and fun."[35] While it is likely that individuals or families serving as mentors will learn to be more welcoming, it will also open doors for Jews by Choice. "My first Pesach Seder was the most wonderful seder I've ever had. It took place before I was Jewish. We had been invited by our friends, and they welcomed me with open arms . . . And though I've heard more detailed explanations now as to why and how, and I understand more, there's nothing that can ever replace that first seder."[36]

The rabbi can also take a lead role in welcoming and teaching. One on one, it may be easier to welcome converts, but that attitude does not always translate to the rest of the congregation. "As long as I keep my Jewishness at home or in [the

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[34] Lamm, *Becoming a Jew*, 28-29.
[35] Romanoff, *Your People, My People*, 137.
[36] Lamm, *Becoming a Jew*, 11.

rabbi's] office, I am fine. But when I go into a synagogue my new identity is not strong enough to continue seeing myself with my eyes. I see myself with the eyes of those who have been Jews since time began who probably have grains of sand in their shoes from the forty years of wandering in the desert."[37] Speaking frankly about conversion to the whole congregation spreads the message of hospitality and makes the rabbi's attitude clear to born Jews as well as Jews by Choice. "I appreciate greatly the solidarity and support that the Jewish community offers. The first sermon I heard from our rabbi centered on the topic of conversion and the need to welcome converts as religious equals. He has been instrumental in making me a welcome member of an extended family."[38]

Led by Rabbi Jeffrey Sirkman, Larchmont Temple in Larchmont, New York, is considered an exemplar in welcoming prospective Jews by Choice. "I have been privileged to implement a covenantal vision, creating covenant at every turn with everyone connected to our congregation, including those who aren't Jewish."[39] He has created Outreach programs for all aspects of Jewish life, inviting prospective Jews by Choice and recent converts into congregational life.

> We do a lot to help people feel Jewish: "New Beginnings" class for recent converts and those considering conversion; partnering with potential converts, having them invited to Shabbat services and dinner with board members; how-to holiday workshops, to help people understand connections, how, what and why; Seeds of Faith,

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[37] Lester, *Lovesong*, 175.
[38] Jeff Wernecke, in Schulweis, *Embracing the Seeker*, 129-130.
[39] Sirkman, Interview.

> open to anyone but related to the calendar . . . taking a key question and exploring it not just on an introductory level, but also on a deeper level. It enabled potential Jews to partner with, sit with those who are already Jewish, so it affirmed their connection and created it almost organically . . . Many volunteer positions are filled by all kinds of people, not all of them Jewish. Having people connected does an awful lot. (Sirkman, Interview)

Rabbi Sirkman's philosophy is to open doors and welcome all types of Jewish families, including and especially prospective and new Jews, and he hopes that by creating this hospitable environment, they are able to foster a sense of authenticity. "The most effective way to shorten the time [for Jews by Choice to feel Jewish] is to nurture a warm, welcoming, open community that is accepting of people as they are and doesn't judge them."[40]

The congregation as a whole must help with making converts feel welcome, but those closest to the prospective convert, especially if one is married or engaged to a born Jew, must be especially sensitive and welcoming. The attitude at the start of Outreach put pressure on the born Jewish spouse of a Jew by Choice. "The born Jew has the major responsibility for the integration of the convert into Jewish living. The born Jew plays the major role in determining what kind of Jew the converted marriage partner will become."[41] The focus and pressure have changed, but it remains true that a spouse can be a major gateway to Jewish community acceptance.

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[40] Ibid.
[41] Huberman, *New Jews*, 42.

"The people most able to help or hinder a convert's successful absorption into the Jewish community directly are the Jewish spouse, if there is one; the new Jewish family or Jewish friends, and the converting rabbi."[42] These loved ones can validate and nurture a new Jewish identity, but they can also offer unique learning opportunities. "One woman says that her conversion took place not only in the *mikvah* but also in the kitchen, where her Jewish mother-in-law and grandmother-in-law taught her how to make favorite family meals and welcomed her into the world of Jewish women."[43] When a significant other converts, the couple can work together to forge a new Jewish identity, but it helps if one of them already has one. "A convert whose spouse is knowledgeable about and committed to Jewish life will often find the transition to Judaism much easier than one whose spouse is indifferent and removed from things Jewish."[44] Loved ones can remain the strongest connection for a Jew by Choice, even years after conversion. The hardest time for a Jew by Choice is often a crisis, because Jewish rituals are unfamiliar, and the family must remember the importance of their support, even years later. "In times of crisis, the Jewish family and the community must provide the support necessary to show the convert that he or she still matters as a Jew."[45]

In Gilroy, California, Congregation Emeth has a program called "Partners on the Path," a program for "Jews whose partners are exploring conversion." The class convenes during every other meeting of the "New Beginnings" class; during opposite classes, Jewish partners are encouraged to attend class with their exploring

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[42] Romanoff, *Your People, My People*, 133.
[43] Diamant, *Choosing a Jewish Life*, 52.
[44] Romanoff, *Your People, My People*, 134.
[45] Ibid., 233.

significant others. The congregation explains several reasons this class is important. "Why? Because conversion to Judaism involves the whole family. Because it's so easy to be focused on our partner's challenges that sometimes we forget that we are going through a process too."[46]

Teaching about conversion need not be limited to adults. In 1989, Rabbi Mindy Portnoy decided that it was important for even young children to begin to understand conversion. She wrote *Mommy Never Went to Hebrew School*, an illustrated, basic story about a mother's conversion.[47] Bruce Kadden edited a mini-course for teenagers on this topic, first guiding them through the ancient teachings regarding conversion, then disucssing its modern difficulties and what can be done to help. "Because Judaism is more than just a religion, it is not always easy to feel Jewish immediately following conversion. It takes time—often years—for a Jew by Choice to feel Jewish. A 15 year old (or 17 or 25) who was born Jewish has had all those years in which to connect a personal identity with his/her Jewishness. A recent Jew by Choice, no matter how old, has had only a short time to connect his/her identity with Judaism and, therefore, is still in the 'infant' stages of being and feeling Jewish."[48] The students, as one activity in the course, are asked to help new converts connect with the community in different ways. They can help create a host-family program, volunteer to sit at services with someone considering conversion, invite someone considering conversion or a new Jew by Choice to a Shabbat meal or a seder, invite someone to a Jewish community event, prepare a presentation for the

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[46] UAHC-CCAR Commission on Outreach, *2004 Outreach Idea Book*, 164.
[47] Portnoy, *Mommy Never Went*.
[48] Kadden, *Jewish by Choice: Mini-Course*, 24.

Introduction to Judaism class, help a Jew by Choice learn to read Hebrew, write guidelines for others' sensitive treatment of Jews by Choice, or put together a packet of information for potential Jews by Choice.[49] This course attempts to add a demographic of the congregation who is attuned to the difficulties of being a Jew by Choice and ready to help, thereby hopefully changing the attitude of the whole congregation. "Only with constant support and encouragement from family, friends, and the community at large will a convert ever truly feel Jewish."[50]

Unsure of the reception she will receive, it can take a major effort for a prospective convert to enter the synagogue a first time or pick up the phone to make a first appointment with a rabbi. Congregations can simultaneously make the prospective convert feel more welcome and ensure that congregants understand the welcoming orientation of the temple by opening means of access. "Usually congregations that are doing [welcoming] well have an entry point on their website, something about conversion or welcoming interfaith families; the congregation is primed to be welcoming."[51] Rabbi Kerry Olitzky, the Director of the Jewish Outreach Institute, agrees that the internet is an under-utilized portal for prospective converts. "One of the pieces that's missing is that there's very little online direction for potential converts. Accessibility is difficult. There's close to no proactivity in the area of conversion; it's still dependent on people getting in touch with individuals, going through bureaucracy to get anywhere. There's a lot of stuff online that's impossible to navigate. One thing important to potential converts is assistance

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[49] Ibid., 25.
[50] Romanoff, *Your People, My People*, 41.
[51] Farhi, Interview.

there."[52] A prospective convert agrees, writing on her blog, "I know that you can't judge [a synagogue] entirely by its cover, but I have anecdotally found that the quantity of [conversion] information provided on a congregation's website directly corresponds to their acceptance of the process, and indirectly, their welcome mat."[53] Rabbi Zach Shapiro of Temple Akiba in Culver City, California explains the importance of congregational welcoming with a comparison to crossing the Sea of Reeds leaving Egypt. "An image: parting the Sea of Reeds. Which happened first, did the sea part and people entered, or did Nachshon go in, and then the sea parted? Does the congregation need to open its arms and embrace, or does someone have to jump in first? We can't wait for either one; we have to do it simultaneously."[54]

As conversion comes into the open, congregations are learning more and more about welcoming converts and treating them as full members of the congregation and the Jewish people. It is clear, however, that welcoming converts is directly related to accepting their Jewishness and making them feel a part of the community. "The most important thing [is] the tone of welcoming that gets created, a tone of giving people the tools they need to begin to own Judaism."[55]

In an ongoing effort to be welcoming, congregations are making sure that services, programs, and events are accessible to those with varying backgrounds and levels of Jewish education. "Our prayer books, who's in them? We haven't done a good job with that. The very Judeo-centric perspective; whenever the rabbi is reading and says 'we Jews' from the bima, and half of the congregation isn't Jewish.

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[52] Olitzky, Interview.
[53] *Mikvah or Bust*, July 22, "Shul Shopping: Thank you, come again."
[54] Shapiro, Interview.
[55] Kukoff, Interview.

There used to be a perception that that was what would make people want to convert, but I think there's a change in understanding. People want to see themselves as part of who's in the prayer book."[56] For some, there is a question about whether accessibility means watering down Jewish content and Jewish culture to the point that it is more difficult to identify the Judaism. They have argued that the best path is keeping some barriers, such as rabbis who refuse to officiate at interfaith wedding ceremonies, combined with a welcoming attitude. "I teach Intro [Introduction to Judaism] every other year, and I teach it with a certain agenda of Jewish particularity, and I talk about why intermarriage officiation is problematic, and why I won't do it, even while I'm busy opening doors left and right, encouraging, welcoming, intermarried people and seekers."[57] Those on this side of the divide aim to showcase Judaism at its best, to give the seeker a reason to convert, and to impart a sense of a vibrant, living religion with its own strong culture—as Judaism has always been. Congregations have to "trust ourselves and our product, Judaism, enough. We have a great thing going here, and it's our job to really present that to people who choose to become part of us—trust that it's so terrific that everybody's going to love it once they see what it is."[58]

Others, however, maintain that greater accessibility, including interfaith wedding ceremonies, can translate into easier entry. "As long as anyone can remember, at least the senior rabbi at this congregation has officiated at interfaith

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[56] Baesh, Interview.
[57] Gluck, Interview.
[58] Kukoff, Interview.

marriages, so we were perceived as more welcoming."[59] This welcoming is pervasive through the synagogue's mission, to be "open door, inclusive, loving, welcoming. We try with gentleness to weave candidates for conversion into the life of the congregation,"[60] and even onto their website. "When people look at your website, I advocate that there be pictures and people want to see themselves, so I want there to be Asians, black people, lesbians, so people see themselves."[61]

The work is not done. Even as congregations become more accessible, whether they have more barriers between Judaism and the rest of the world or fewer, and they become more understanding of the issues facing Jews by Choice, there are always newcomers joining the Jewish people who need to be welcomed and integrated from the beginning. "The Reform community has totally accepted and embraced people who convert to Judaism, and therefore they don't see the need for support as much as they did before—and that's a real concern."[62]

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[59] Berk, Interview.
[60] Ibid.
[61] Ibid.
[62] Chernow, Interview.

Chapter 5: Follow-Up

The question is not "what's your conversion program," but "how do you follow up?" What do you do with a wedding couple after the wedding, with the Bar Mitzvah afterwards, with the Jew by Choice after conversion? (Shapiro, Interview)

After the conversion ceremony, a convert is fully Jewish in the eyes of Jewish law. However, a new Jew is also compared to a newborn,[1] one who has no Jewish memories other than those acquired during the study period, one who has little or no Jewish family, and one who has little Jewish experience. As congregations came to recognize this shortcoming, they began to implement programming to help new Jews by Choice navigate the path of Judaism from the other side of the mikveh.

These follow-up programs took a long time to develop. Rabbi Chelbo's Talmudic statement that converts are difficult for Israel[2] has hindered community acceptance of converts; similarly, Mekhilta d'Rabbi Ishmael's statement that Jews are never to remind converts of their idol-worshipping, swine-eating past[3] has complicated the domain of post-conversion follow-up. The rabbis did not want born Jews to discriminate against converts because they did not grow up with Judaism, or because they had done things in their pasts that violated the Jewish laws under which they were now living. However, the rabbis did not intend for converts to

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[1] e.g., Babylonian Talmud, Yevamot 22a.
[2] e.g. Babylonian Talmud, Yevamot 47b.
[3] Mekhilta d'Rabbi Ishmael, Nezikin 18.

immediately be able to live fully as Jews on their own, with no allusions to the fact that they had not been doing so for their whole lives. Rabbi Hillel teaches to a prospective convert, "What is hateful to you, do not to your fellow. This is the whole Torah; all the rest is commentary. Go learn it."[4] That prospective converts were to be taught only a few commandments before they converted is proof enough that the conversion would have to be mentioned after the fact. "After conversion, converts had to learn the Israelite way of life, this process could take some time, and the environment in which one lived could affect the process."[5] Like the ger living among gentiles,[6] these new Jews would have to learn Jewish law for the first time and be guided in following the many community rules and norms.

Centuries later, with the advent of the Reform movement's Outreach, this directive to ignore a convert's past became almost taboo. "The Talmudic prohibition against reminding a ger of their pork-eating past was really taken to an extreme, so it was out-of-bounds to mention that someone was a Jew by Choice. Not ever mentioning [the conversion translated to] the person feeling like they have to pass, because where there's silence, there's shame."[7]

The Talmudic rabbis compared a convert to "a newly-born child,"[8] and therefore one who needs guidance, teaching, and support—not only before conversion, but also afterwards. "A gentile who converts is compared to a minor who reaches maturity, a deaf mute who gains the ability to speak and to hear, an

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[4] Bamberger, *Proselytism in Talmudic Period*, 223.
[5] Porton, *Stranger Within Your Gates*, 43. Referencing Tosefta Shabbat 8:5, discussion of a convert living among gentiles.
[6] Tosefta, Shabbat 8:5.
[7] Greenwood, Interview.
[8] e.g., Babylonian Talmud, Yevamot 97b.

imbecile who becomes sane, and a blind person who becomes able to see."[9] The comparison of being a gentile with various disabilities is yet another example of deep-seated ambivalence toward converts. In addition, however, it is clear that in contrast to the prohibition of even mentioning a convert's gentile past, this passage assumes a need for community support and help for all new converts.

In the Reform movement, before Rabbi Schindler's 1978 address, there was no institutional support for those who converted and were facing these post-conversion issues. "The ritual of conversion had made me a Jew on the outside, but my inner conversion had been a much slower and sometimes emotionally painful process."[10] Because of the teaching against distinguishing converts from born Jews, there were no programs for Jews by Choice, and there was no support system provided after conversion. "I was Jewish but I didn't know how to practice Judaism. I didn't feel authentic performing rituals and I didn't know where to go for support."[11] The overwhelming sense was that after conversion, one was a Jew, regardless of the level of the congregation's acceptance of converts. The convert was not to be treated differently from born Jews, so there was no specific support available for these converts; after the private conversion ceremony, they were on their own.

Unlike the other parts of the conversion process, where many acknowledged programmatic shortcomings, there was little official recognition before the advent of Outreach that this step of follow-up after conversion was important, although many Jews by Choice said that it would have been useful. "Finding a place for myself

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[9] Porton, *Stranger Within Your Gates*, 24. Citing Mishnah Gittin 2:6.
[10] LeVoy, "Discussions in my Life."
[11] Kukoff, *Choosing Judaism*, 18.

within the Jewish community and being comfortable in the synagogue was a gradual process and took a lot of practice and time. I was uncomfortable asking for constant help if I didn't know the person next to me."[12] Similarly, "It took years to be able to perform the mitzvot comfortably."[13] Lydia Kukoff was one of only a few early advocates for follow-up programs. She proposed "the creation of a system of post-conversion chavurot, . . . learning and discussion groups of limited duration, led by knowledgeable men and women who themselves chose Judaism, facilitating the study and experience of Judaism beyond that undertaken as part of the 'Introduction to Judaism' curriculum."[14]

Many compare a conversion ceremony to a wedding, something for which one prepares and anticipates, but can never fully know what happens in the weeks and months after the ceremony. In the same way that newlyweds thrive with models of healthy marriages to look up to and other newlyweds with whom to socialize after the wedding, new Jews need similar relationships. "[When you convert] you will not know everything you think you ought to know about Judaism, but you will know enough. You will not understand everything you think you need to understand about being a Jew, but you will understand enough. The rituals and ceremonies that mark your conversion are like a wedding, which does not celebrate the end of your engagement. A conversion, like a wedding, is just the beginning."[15] In 2001, when the CCAR's new Guidelines on Conversion were written, the need for follow-up for Jews by Choice was recognized. "The period following giyur also

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[12] Kathy Tennell-Wanderer in Lamm, *Becoming a Jew*, 28.
[13] Lamm, *Becoming a Jew*, 6.
[14] Kukoff, *Choosing Judaism*, 108.
[15] Diamant, *Choosing a Jewish Life*, 91.

involves important considerations . . . Rabbis are urged to remain in contact with recent gerim: to ensure that any unforeseen difficulties are being addressed; to provide opportunities for gerim to continue their studies and deepen their Jewish identity in appropriate and sensitive ways; and to find opportunities to integrate new gerim into the Jewish community."[16]

Because of the instruction not to remind converts of their non-Jewish pasts, follow-up programs developed slowly; some saw them as the opposite of what should be done. "One of the things [that makes me] roll my eyes: once you're Jewish, you're Jewish, and never mention it again . . . While that is true, and I sometimes get offended when someone refers to someone who's been Jewish for ten years as a Jew by Choice, for the first couple years it's very tentative, very overwhelming, still trying to create an authentic sense of who they have been their whole life and making that person Jewish."[17] Post-conversion support groups and programs took time to develop—more so than other areas of conversion support. By 1991, more than ninety percent of congregations that responded to a UAHC survey had an Outreach program of some kind, and many more than half had an "Introduction to Judaism" course and the rabbi had delivered at least one sermon on the topic of Outreach. However, compared to a survey from a few years earlier, "the prevalence of virtually every program measured by both studies has increased substantially. Only programs for new Jews by Choice have remained fairly static."[18]

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[16] CCAR Committee on Conversion, "Guidelines for Prospective Gerim," 13.
[17] Chernow, Interview.
[18] Commission on Reform Jewish Outreach, *UAHC Outreach Census*, 9.

Because these follow-up programs were so slow to develop, many wrote about the difficulties of starting Jewish life as an adult, and the time it takes just to begin to be comfortable as a Jew. "I don't think enough is done to support people once they've converted. That first year is very difficult, very tenuous. That's when someone's Jewish personality really forms; it's when they're standing alone."[19] However, it is unrealistic to assume a new Jew will instantly develop a Jewish identity upon emerging from the mikveh, and Jews by Choice may need permission to continue learning and developing as Jews. "The best thing we can do is help people understand that [they need time], embrace that, and understand that it's ok, understand that they're not going to walk out of the mikveh and know everything and do everything. The best gift we can give is the gift of time."[20] Others agree, stating that it may not be until after conversion that the real work of Jewish identity building happens. "[Sarna] focuses on the need to see conversion not simply as stopping after a conversion ceremony but as continuing after the ceremony to give new Jews a Jewish past, a sensibility, and a passionate attachment not just to a belief system but to a people and a culture."[21] Others, too, mention that post-conversion is when Jews by Choice can truly begin to build a collection of Jewish memories. "The process of becoming Jewish will not end with your conversion. We can't force our identities to change completely according to a specific timetable. The rituals of conversion will formally mark your acceptance into the Jewish community and your commitment to Judaism. But the work of creating Jewish memories for yourself, of

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[19] Chernow, Interview.
[20] Ibid.
[21] Epstein, *Readings on Conversion*, 121.

shaping the Jewish human being that you will become, is a much more subtle and long-term process. Most of us, even those who were born Jewish, take a lifetime with this task."[22]

As it finally developed, synagogues discovered that this post-conversion follow-up can be handled in a wide variety of ways, and it does not have to be a formal program or group. "The more difficult your own situation, the more important it is that you find support. Turn to your rabbi, your spouse, teachers, group leaders, and classmates in your conversion course, and other Jews by Choice."[23] While many synagogues provide mentors for prospective converts, new Jews may still be in need of this type of informal support and friendship. Montgomery's study of Philadelphia Jews by Choice found this need. "The need for acceptance and good Jewish role models was apparent throughout the discussions regarding what the respondents needed from rabbis, the Jewish community, their Jewish families, and the community planners."[24] Some years later, Diamant made the same assertion, implying that post-conversion mentoring was not yet widespread. "Most converts to Judaism benefit from a relationship with a nonrelated layperson who becomes a kind of Jewish big brother or sister."[25]

Just as mentoring is important both before and after conversion, congregations are in need of ongoing education about conversion, including how to accept and integrate Jews by Choice both before and after their conversions. "While attending to these needs [for follow-up with new gerim] is an important aspect of

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[22] Kraus in Einstein and Kukoff, *Introduction to Judaism*, 145.
[23] Diamant, *Choosing a Jewish Life*, 39.
[24] Montgomery, "Integration of Jews by Choice," 149.
[25] Diamant, *Choosing a Jewish Life*, 85.

the overall process of geirut, attention must also be paid to the continual need to educate the community on the importance of accepting gerim wholeheartedly and integrating them completely into the community."[26]

Just over a decade into Outreach, Montgomery's study found that most Jews by Choice wanted follow-up programming after conversion, but they were divided regarding the type of program, purely social, support groups, or distribution of more general information about Jewish life.[27] Some, however, disagreed with the desire for follow-up programming, echoing a debate that still continues. "A sub-group of respondents (9%) felt it was not in Jews' by Choice best interest to have separate programming in the community. They believed that this only exacerbated an already existing separatist attitude."[28] Nonetheless, for most, there is a need for follow-up after conversion. "A Jew by Choice is not unlike a Jewish child who needs nurturing and support. Outreach programs for post-conversion Jews need to be expanded. To be successful, they must rely on Jews of all backgrounds, not just Jews by Choice. Most of all, we need to remember that conversion is not so much an end as it is a beginning."[29]

These follow-up programs are sometimes restricted to personal, individual interactions with Jews by Choice. The UAHC regional office in Toronto recommended that synagogues "appoint a liaison to follow up with class participants for one year after class ends" with phone calls, plans to meet one

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[26] CCAR Committee on Conversion, "Guidelines for Prospective Gerim," 13-14.
[27] Montgomery, "Integration of Jews by Choice," 147.
[28] Ibid., 147.
[29] Berkowitz and Moskovitz, *Embracing the Covenant*, 98.

another at services, invitations to programs, and Shabbat dinners.[30] In other places, the follow-up is dedicated to integrating Jews by Choice into the rest of the congregation. "In our congregation, we have learned that our Jews-by-Choice and intermarried couples do not wish to be isolated from other congregants. Many have asked, 'what do we do now that we've completed the 'Exploring Judaism' classes?' Our primary goal was to provide a friendly, fun, comfortable setting in which congregants could learn about the holidays with an emphasis on home celebration. By offering the workshops to the entire congregation, we enabled anyone who wanted to gain an understanding of holiday practices to do so, without targeting any particular group who might be embarrassed by a lack of knowledge."[31]

Ultimately, the work of the Task Force on Outreach and others revealed that a complete conversion program could not end with the conversion ceremony, but rather had to help new Jews integrate and process their developing Jewish identities. "Jews by Choice may also [like brides and grooms] experience a liminal period, a time of change and adjustment that follows the formal commitment. While most converts report that it takes substantially more than twelve months before you feel comfortable calling yourself a Jew, the first year is nevertheless filled with milestones."[32]

In addition to group programs and communal integration for new Jews by Choice, the sponsoring rabbi should have the responsibility to continue working with and checking in with these new Jews. Not long after the beginning of Outreach,

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[30] Caryll "Outreach Memo."
[31] Temple Israel, Memphis, Tenessee, Commission on Reform Jewish Outreach, *1997 Idea Book*, 347.
[32] Diamant, *Choosing a Jewish Life*, 230.

Romanoff pointed out that rabbis have the authority to remind new Jews by Choice to continue learning, even after the ceremony. "The most important thing the rabbi can pass on to the convert is not the meaning of words in a book, but a love of Judaism and a thirst for a Jewish way of life so that the process of absorption will continue."[33] Recent converts who were asked directly agreed that they wanted post-conversion support from their rabbis. "The respondents' most pressing need from the rabbis was for them to be involved in the ongoing socialization process. Of this group of 42 individuals, 30 stated that they had felt abandoned by the rabbinical community after the official rights [sic] of passage had been performed. They wanted the rabbis to understand that conversion is only the beginning of a lengthy socialization process and they need to take an active role in it."[34] While those married to or marrying Jews are still the largest portion of converts, this study revealed that single Jews by Choice—perhaps a growing cohort[35]—may need even more from their rabbis. "The single respondents . . . needed the rabbis to be available for ongoing socialization, and to work on acceptance problems in both themselves and the community."[36] Finally, in 2001 the CCAR added this dimension of rabbinic follow-up to their guidelines. "The importance of staying in touch with recent gerim cannot be overestimated. Following the intensity of the geirut process, feelings of alienation and abandonment are not unusual. In addition, assistance in

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[33] Romanoff, *Your People, My People*, 159.
[34] Montgomery, "Integration of Jews by Choice," 138-139.
[35] Bach, Interview. "The profile of the Jew by Choice is no longer so easy to peg as the non-Jewish spouse looking to convert before, after, or long after a wedding. More and more, it's single folks coming through the door looking to convert out of interest or conviction."
[36] Montgomery, "Integration of Jews by Choice," 141.

how to become involved in synagogue life as well as information on opportunities for further Jewish education will be extremely valuable to the ger/gioret."[37]

As follow-up programs continue to develop, there is a question of whether there is too much support for new Jews, separating them from the rest of the congregation. For example, at Temple Mount Sinai in El Paso, Texas, Rabbi Larry Bach instituted a program for new Jews by Choice: "'New Jew Review,' for those up to three years post-conversion, [is] sort of a chavurah, to process how they're doing, share recipes, make plans to get together around holidays. It creates comfort, but also insulates them."[38] Some rabbis and communal leaders are worried about forming sub-congregations of Jews by Choice who only know other Jews who have converted and who do not interact with the rest of the congregation. "One of the first ideas was Jew by Choice groups, and I think they should be time limited to a year or two; at first they went on forever."[39]

Some communal leaders, however, are happy that these converts are making connections with other Jews, and they help them to form chavurot of Jews by Choice (and their families) who converted within the same few years. Rabbi Zach Shapiro of Temple Akiba in Culver City, California, encourages such groups, because it helps Jews by Choice to feel connected to others who are like themselves. "There's a program I began called Entrée to Judaism, a take on food. A few times a year, I invite everyone who's gone through Intro to my class and we discuss a holiday. I teach them to make a meal, and it gives them opportunities to talk to one another outside

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[37] CCAR Committee on Conversion, "Guidelines for Prospective Gerim," 14.
[38] Bach, Interview.
[39] Chernow, Interview.

of the synagogue. I'm not expecting them to be regular synagogue-goers, but I want them to have a connection to each other, and to know who else has gone through the program. They form a chavurah, and go off and create their own group."[40]

Regardless of the specific post-conversion programs offered (or not offered) by a synagogue, Jew by Choice Katherine Winiger Benhaim suggests jumping into Jewish life with both feet after conversion as the best kind of follow-up. "My recommendation to anyone wanting to convert to Judaism and be completely assimilated is to become a nursery school teacher in a Jewish preschool. I have taught for many years, and the highlight of my experience was teaching and experiencing Jewish holidays with children. When you talk about Lag B'Omer with expertise, you know you arrived."[41]

[40] Shapiro, Interview.
[41] Schulweis, *Embracing the Seeker*, 10.

Chapter 6: Synthesis and Analysis

Becoming a Jew—converting—is the easy part. Becoming Jewish—creating a Jewish identity—is a bigger challenge. (Diamant, *Choosing a Jewish Life*, 207)

The issue of Jewish identity formation in Jews by Choice is not an issue unique to modern Reform Judaism. In ancient times, if one wanted to convert to Judaism, one had first to live as a Jew. Under rabbinic authority, living as a Jew entailed following the commandments and immersing oneself in the Jewish community; a Jewish identity was a born Jew's primary or only identity. Converting to Judaism meant knowing all of the laws of kashrut, for example, so that one could eat; converting meant living among Jews so that one could fulfill the obligation to pray in community several times every day. Jewish identity was not something that could be put on or taken off depending on surroundings, and there was not a question of what had to be learned or experienced; one learned as he went along, and conversion was a major decision involving text study as well as a massive lifestyle change. Additionally, all that remains to teach about ancient Jewish life is the writings of the rabbis. "We do not have 'first person' testimony by converts to Judaism in late antiquity. All we possess are the *rabbinic* discussions of what *they* thought the converts felt and believed . . . It tells us nothing about the views,

motives, and ideas of the converts themselves."[1] However, there are many rulings regarding the rights of converts, how they should be treated, and the host of problems they can cause to the Jewish community. It is clear that it was not so simple for ancient converts, immersed as they were in all aspects of Judaism, to fully become part of their new Jewish community.

In modern Reform Judaism, the world cannot easily identify who is and who is not a Jew. One can go about one's daily business without acknowledging one's Jewishness, and Jewish identity can be more about one's home and synagogue life, somewhat separate from other aspects of life. The amount of knowledge or experience that one needs in order to be Jewish in this context is minimal; many born Jews readily admit that they know little about their tradition, and barriers to participation are often set intentionally low. In modern Reform Judaism, one may have to work harder to develop a Jewish identity and to feel Jewish, because it is only a segment of one's life, and not all-encompassing as it may have been in the past or even for some, in the present.

The challenge in facilitating, as Jews by Choice discover and come to own a Jewish identity, is in synthesizing the different parts of conversion education with the research on identity formation. Most studies of forming identity are done with children and adolescents, but one exception is the Rose Community Study in Denver, which focused on young adults ages 21 to 40. This age group parallels many of those converting to Judaism, but the born Jews in the study fit a very different profile. Where the born Jews are confident and connected, the Jews by Choice are tentative

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[1] Porton, *Stranger Within Your Gates*, 194.

and separate; where the Jews by Choice are educated and practicing, the born Jews are apathetic and disconnected. Thus an added challenge of developing Jewish identities in Jews by Choice is connecting them with their born-Jewish peers, who have a very different religious profile and identity. Imparting the Jewish self-confidence that many born Jews have in excess may be one key to helping Jews by Choice to develop their Jewish identities.

Referring to religious identity development, Chana Tannenbaum indicates that the most important influences are "family, church, peers, and religious schooling."[2] These four agents should help to guide converts who are seeking a new Jewish identity. Family is the most difficult for converts, because they did not grow up in a Jewish family, and therefore the closest Jewish family they are likely to have is their (future) in-laws—if they are marrying a Jew. Even if they are marrying into a tight knit, welcoming Jewish family, acquiring this family as an adult is very different from having this family from birth, and family has proven to be the most vital to identity formation. "The family [is] the single most important source of Jewish identity, and the site at which it is most frequently enacted and contested. Childhood relations with grandparents were consistently recalled by our subjects as key positive influences upon their later adult decisions on behalf of more active Jewishness."[3] For born Jews, even more than church (synagogue), peers, and religious schooling, it is through family that one learns what it means to be Jewish. As a result, Jews by Choice are at a distinct disadvantage for identity formation,

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[2] Tannenbaum, "Influences on Religious Identity," 22.
[3] Cohen and Eisen, *Jew Within*, 9.

lacking both the childhood experiences of a Jewish family and even the presence of such a family as an adult. However, Rabbi Lev Baesh, Director of the Resource Center for Jewish Clergy at interfaithfamily.com, encourages attempting to build even these basic memories for adult Jews by Choice. "Some of what engages Jews as kids, teenagers, is really important for adults. Having a camp experience, going on retreats, is really helpful, [as are] spending Sukkot and the High Holidays together."[4]

The many and various studies of Jewish identity each identify different components of Jewish identity.[5] However, while using different terminology and measures, they generally agree that Jewish identity includes components of Jewish observance, ethnicity, culture, and peoplehood. Jewish observance may be the aspect of Jewish identity that is easiest to observe, define, and teach; the others are more difficult to ascertain and teach to both born Jews and Jews by Choice.

The traditional Jewish religious rituals and behaviors may be the easiest to learn, but according to Jewish history, converts have not been assumed to have the same ritual knowledge as born Jews. "[Both Talmuds] contain the opinion that a group composed exclusively of converts cannot be formed to select and offer the Passover sacrifice because they may not fully understand the complicated rituals connected with these practices. To ensure that the rites are properly followed, the group must contain at least one native-born Israelite . . . Unlike native-born Israelites who were raised from birth in an Israelite environment, converts, who were nurtured in a gentile environment, might not know exactly how to observe

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[4] Baesh, Interview.
[5] See Chapter 1.

these sacred seasons."[6] Converts also frequently mention that they are held to different religious standards than born Jews.[7] Thus while religious behavior can be learned, it is also the most observable aspect of Jewish identity—and therefore one on which a prospective convert can be allowed or disallowed from conversion. On the question of whether an atheist could be accepted for conversion—in spite of many born Jewish atheists—the CCAR responsa committee wrote, "While an atheist would not be accepted [as a convert], an agnostic might be accepted if the local rabbis are convinced 'that her attachment to Judaism and the knowledge of it are sufficient to bring her into Judaism and to help her develop a commitment to this religion.' The important qualifying phrase is *commitment to this religion*. Reform Judaism is a religious movement, a community of faith dedicated to God. A ger must show a readiness to accept that faith in order to join our community."[8]

Jewish culture is also widely believed to be an aspect of Jewish identity, albeit one that is nearly impossible to define—and therefore difficult to teach. "All [Jews] feel a part of a culture and a tradition that goes back for thousands of years—a tradition that speaks of God's Biblical covenant with the Jewish people and the mission of the Jewish people."[9] The idea of adjusting to a new culture has been an issue since Biblical conversion. "Conversion in those days was a process of assimilation and naturalization, of accepting the norms and rules of Hebrew culture

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[6] Porton, *Stranger Within Your Gates*, 183.
[7] e.g., Romanoff, *Your People, My People*, 33-34.
[8] "Atheists, Agnostics and Conversion to Judaism," in Plaut and Washofsky, *Teshuvot for the 1990s*, 147-152.
[9] Belin, *Choosing Judaism*, 2.

and giving up other beliefs and practices."[10] This assimilation faced by new Jews can be compared, on the culture dimension, to new immigrants. "Immigrants to a new culture must first learn a new language and acquire the skills with which to earn a living. Secondly, the immigrant must learn to perform various roles in the new environment. And last, the immigrant has to gradually rebuild his self concept by acquiring a new set of values and testing them out in his new roles."[11] Perhaps one difficulty for Jews by Choice assimilating to Jewish culture is that they can observe differences between themselves and Jewish culture, but they cannot immediately adopt that culture as their own. "My real challenge arose because I viewed religion separate from my life . . . Being Jewish felt not only like a title but a culture that seeped into every second of my life, changing the food I ate, the way I acted, the way I celebrated. Being Jewish was daily. It takes place in the home even more so than in the synagogue. How was I, a true WASP with a 230-year history in America, suddenly going to be 'Jewish'?"[12]

As noted by Cohen and Eisen, Jewish culture is often wrapped up in memories. "Converted Jews lack the foundation of years and years of Jewish ancestors, practices, traditions, get-togethers, and identity. For me, that history and foundation is the backbone of my faith."[13] In this area, Jews by Choice are not only lacking, but they can never experience Jewish life as children or with their grandparents. Some converts sorely miss this part of a Jewish identity. "Because I began my Jewish life as an adult, my choice also created a challenge. I had to build a

[10] Diamant, *Choosing a Jewish Life*, 241.
[11] Montgomery, "Integration of Jews by Choice," 25.
[12] Katherine Wininger Benhaim, in Schulweis, *Embracing the Seeker*, 9.
[13] Mann, *Sex, God, Christmas, Jews*, 220.

Jewish past for myself."[14] In other cases, they acknowledge that they will never have those missing memories, and they look to create more experiences for themselves in the present, in order to have more Jewish memories and a stronger Jewish identity in the future. "Often, someone will mutter something to me in Yiddish, and I have no idea what they are talking about. I am missing a Jewish memory. It is somehow my task to build a Jewish identity that is part of the larger whole, but also reflects my unique experience."[15]

Additionally, while lacking childhood memories may make aspects of a Jewish identity more difficult, coming to Judaism after childhood and by choice can also add a very positive dimension to identity—although new Jews by Choice might not see it the same way. Born Jew Dennis Prager writes, "New Jews bring healthy attitudes toward Judaism, toward the world. True, they don't come with childhood memories of Shabbat, but neither do the vast majority of born Jews anymore, and they also don't come with unhealthy Jewish emotional baggage from childhood."[16] In contrast, Leah, a Jew by Choice, gives the opposite perspective on her blog, feeling that the negative aspects of lacking Jewish memory outweigh the positive action of choosing Judaism. "Tonight I encountered a new reaction—envy from a born Jew. She thought I was lucky to be able to be a Jew by Choice as an adult . . . It is the same envy I feel of my Jewish friends. Here I am, at 27, struggling to read Hebrew, stuttering when I say Shabbat shalom, not knowing what the holes on the seder plate are for. Learning things they take for granted, that they've always known. Even

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[14] Kukoff, *Choosing Judaism*, 3.
[15] Sarah in Berkowitz and Moskovitz, *Embracing the Covenant*, 59.
[16] Dennis Prager, in Epstein, *Readings on Conversion*, 87.

my secular friends who claim Jewish ignorance, they know more than me. It is ingrained in their bones, they can't help it. They are Jewish."[17]

Ethnicity is also often considered an aspect of Jewish identity, one which, from rabbinic times, has excluded converts by definition.

> The converts' precarious status within the People Israel underscores the importance of Israel's ethnicity and the fact that the rabbis viewed Israel as both an ethnic group and a religious community . . . The rabbinic views on converts and conversion illustrate the dual focus of rabbinic Judaism. On the one hand, it was an ethnic system designed for native-born Israelites. On the other hand, it was a religious system open to all who accepted its beliefs and practices. Israelites were included in both; gentiles were excluded from either. Converts occupied a middle ground. While they could never fully become part of the ethnic People Israel, they could almost fully participate in the religious Congregation of Israel, as a distinct segment of that congregation. (Porton, *Stranger Within Your Gates*, 17 and 220)

While many Jews today would argue that ethnicity—as separate from culture—is not central to Jewish identity, it is still present, such as in the stereotype of Jewish physical features. While conversion has long been part of Judaism, it is unclear how—or if—the issue of ethnicity was addressed in the past. "Changing systems of belief is difficult, for it marks a rejection of a former self-definition and the acceptance of a new one. But this can be accomplished. By contrast, changing lines

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[17] Jones, *Leah in Chicago*, "You are so lucky, you get to choose," January 27, 2005.

of descent is biologically impossible. The most one can do is join a socially constructed descent group, which need not be biologically based; but there is no evidence that the rabbis in late antiquity sought to create such a socially constructed descent group, which converts could join."[18] In the present, however, we welcome Jews by Choice and draw them in, although all the while we emphasize the ethnicity and common ancestry of most Jews. "The integration of converts into Jewish society is no less a challenge for the Jewish community of contemporary America than it was for the Jewish communities of twelfth century Europe and Egypt. The major obstacle to their integration is the fact that we Jews see ourselves as members of an *ethnos* or nation or tribe, a people linked by descent from a common set of ancestors . . . And because their ancestry is not our ancestry, and their history is not our history, converts remain liminal, on the margins of the community but not securely within it."[19]

A final important aspect of Jewish identity is peoplehood. In order to give Jews by Choice an understanding of the concept of Jewish peoplehood, they must understand not only its existence, but also its function; peoplehood is not a vacuous concept, but a beneficial network for all Jews who tap into it. "This concept [peoplehood] has had many positive benefits ranging from shared community responsibility and concern for the care and education of children to sustainable charitable commitments for the care of the elderly and concern for the welfare of

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[18] Porton, *Stranger Within Your Gates*, 6-7.
[19] Cohen, "Can Converts Say," 428.

other Jews, including those in other countries who need help."[20] Explaining to converts and even demonstrating how Jews care for one another across communities, the country, and the world, can show them the importance and beauty of this construct.

In the best conversion scenarios, a Jew by Choice has been living a Jewish life and felt part of the Jewish people even before a formal conversion. "The Hebrew word *gair* comes from the root *goor*, which means 'to live with,' and when a non-Jew becomes a Jew he does not change over from one religious point of view to another. He approaches, he becomes part of, he comes to live with a group of people and becomes a member of a religious fellowship with whose point of view he has agreed for a long time."[21] More often, however, peoplehood can be troubling for prospective converts. "Becoming Catholic or Buddhist does not require this personal immersion into a historical experience, which is also a transcendent, religious one. Joining other religions does not require becoming part of a people who are inseparable from that transcendent, historical experience . . . But Jews are a people. They are of many nationalities and tongues . . . Yet they are Jews. That is what is so confusing to others about being Jewish. It is not a belief system or even subscribing to a particular religious practice. It is belonging to a people, not only those who are living but also those who are not."[22]

The concept of peoplehood, as discussed in Chapter 1, varies widely. It can be understood as a commandment to love all Jews. "Adopting Judaism means adopting

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[20] Belin, *Choosing Judaism*, 13.
[21] David Max Eichhorn, in Epstein, *Readings on Conversion*, 132.
[22] Lester, *Lovesong*, 173.

the Jewish people as the convert's people, Jewish history as the convert's own history, Jewish destiny as the convert's own destiny. One should not underestimate the difficulty of this demand . . . it is a religious mandate to love all Jews."[23] It can be understood differently as embracing a shared history, at least symbolically. "The questions raised in the cited texts wrestle with the tension between factual history and collective memory: From a strictly biological perspective, converts cannot claim to have ancestors who were brought out of Egypt and who benefitted from the salvational miracles of Jewish history. But from a sociological perspective, the process of conversion includes incorporating into one's personal identity the collective experiences of the Jewish people."[24] It can also be understood as looking forward, to a common destiny of the Jewish people. "Finding your place within Jewish history is a way to find roots as a Jew and to imagine yourself into the future of the Jewish people."[25]

The rabbis, in their commentary on the Book of Ruth, perhaps understood this concept of joining a people, not just a religion.

> Ruth said, "do not urge me to leave you, to turn back and follow you." What is "do not urge me?" She said to her, "do not sit against me. Do not turn your misfortunes against me, 'to leave you, to turn back and not follow you.' My mind is made up to convert in any case, but I prefer that you be the one to guide my conversion rather than someone else." When Naomi heard that, she began to acquaint her

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[23] Lamm, *Becoming a Jew*, 75.
[24] Cooper, "God of Our Ancestors," 61.
[25] Diamant, *Choosing a Jewish Life*, 8.

> with matters of Halachah pertinent to converts. She said to her, "My daughter! It is not the way of women of Israel to go to Gentile theaters or to circuses." [Ruth] responded to her, "for wherever you go, I will go." [Naomi] told her, "My daughter! It is not the way of Israel to dwell in a house in which there is no mezuzah." [Ruth] replied to her, "Wherever you lodge, I will lodge. Your people are my people, therefore punishments and warnings [apply to me]. Your God is my God" [represents] the rest of the commandments. (Miller, trans., *Midrash Rabbah: Ruth*, 108-110)

This Midrash is understood to explain many of the same peoplehood issues that modern converts face. "The rabbis of the Land of Israel, who composed this midrash, seem to concentrate their definition of a good ger/gioret, and therefore a good Jew, on basic core values of Judaism: identification with the Jewish people through following community norms, pride in Jewish identity and adherence to the Torah."[26] Rather than focusing on the details of the laws, this midrash, and therefore the rabbis who composed it, focused on the conventions of living with and among the Jewish people.

Huberman distinguishes between born Jews and Jews by Choice, and how they approach the many facets of Judaism. "Multiple memberships in Jewish organizations are uncommon [for converts]. When we compare this pattern of non-involvement among converts to that of born Jews, we note that born Jews are more involved in Jewish organizational activity. The conclusion to be drawn is that to the

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[26] Abrams, "What Characterizes Ideal Ger," 30.

Jewishly committed convert the synagogue, not the organization, is central . . . Converts seek religious rather than purely ethnic routes to the rewards and satisfactions of social relationships."[27]

Peoplehood is a complicated part of one's Jewish identity, one which for many is acquired only over time. "By the time the conversion process is complete, the Jew by Choice should have begun to understand something about Jewish prayers, holidays, rituals, customs, history, and, it is hoped, a little Hebrew. However, converts discover very quickly that it is not enough to embrace Judaism by means of a conversion course. To become Jewish, one must not only accept the Jewish religion but also identify with the past, present, and future of the Jewish people. Jews feel pain when other Jews suffer, joy when Jews are triumphant. To acquire this identity requires time, patience, and commitment."[28] Sometimes, a sense of peoplehood bursts forth suddenly, in the context of feeling, perhaps for the first time, as a part of a minority. "I knew [I had made the right decision] more clearly when I was in a Target store during December of [just before] my conversion. Although I was still officially Christian, my visceral response—at hearing two women disparage the display of Chanukah decorations as 'Jewish Christmas' and the observation, itself, in even more belittling terms—was swift, strong, and direct. I asked the women if they were aware that their comments were bigoted and stereotypical. I identified myself as a Jew in that moment—not in a

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[27] Huberman, *New Jews*, 25.
[28] Romanoff, *Your People, My People*, 33.

synagogue but in a Target store. I affiliated, I acknowledged, I engaged in dialogue, and I became Jewish."[29]

Hopefully, by the time of conversion, Jews by Choice have at least begun to develop a Jewish identity. Born Jews too, however, can suffer from a lack of confidence in their Jewish identities, often for similar reasons. "Factors conducive to marginality include the paucity of Jewish education, role models, ritual observance, and a Jewish ambience in the home."[30] It is hoped that in the preparation and time following conversion, these issues are addressed, and the different aspects of Jewish identity detailed above are at least beginning to develop.

As one begins to consider conversion, the first and most obvious portion of preparation is the course of study, both the length of time it requires and its content. It can be argued that no course of study can adequately cover all of Judaism: "The Jewish experience is not mastered but acquired through life and study."[31] However, since learning can continue after a formal conversion, the course of preparation does not generally last a lifetime. The amount of time required or strongly suggested for study before conversion has lengthened, however, from a few months to a year or more. This change incorporates Rosenak's first three criteria for making a value decision: that one makes a "free choice" from "available alternatives" after "due reflection."[32] In modern times, this course of study began as informal learning with the rabbi or reading books individually. With the advent of Outreach, it moved into the classroom, where prospective Jews by Choice studied with those in the same

[29] Trish McCauley, "Keeping Pace" in Weiss and Rubel, *The Choice*, 197.
[30] Linzer, "Changing Nature of Identity," 145.
[31] Midler and Stein, "Basic Judaism Indianapolis," preface.
[32] Rosenak, "Education for Jewish Identification," 121.

situation and others interested in studying. As Outreach matured, this course of study has moved out of the classroom somewhat, with more informal sessions with the rabbi and a plethora of informal and experiential options, either in conjunction with or in lieu of formal classroom study. Rabbis should be careful, however, not to make the course too individualized, because working with and learning from others in similar situations can be a valuable learning experience. "The interaction of a small group of peers, with the subject matter and among each other, constitutes a significant dynamic in the communication of content and the effecting of personal change."[33] This change to informal, experiential education helps make Jewish learning more behavioral. Rosenak also supports this type of learning. He reports that the value choice "has to be incorporated into behavior,"[34] and therefore one cannot validly choose Judaism without changing any behavior.

Knowing this dimension, rabbis and others should use classroom time and individual meetings to discuss how the prospective convert is changing behaviors to incorporate Judaism, whether through exploration of dietary laws, Shabbat observance, daily prayer, or something else. Jews have long acknowledged that Judaism is not practiced only at synagogue, but that it is a life-encompassing religion. This aspect of it is one of the most difficult for converts, especially if they come from a background where religion is only done at church, with few home rituals. Explicitly exploring how Judaism is incorporated into one's behavior can lead to discussions and explorations of home rituals, but also of Jewish values, and

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[33] Reisman, *Jewish Experiential Book*, 19.
[34] Rosenak, "Education for Jewish Identification, 121.

how the way one acts in everyday life can be considered Jewish, thereby strengthening one's choice of Judaism and one's Jewish identity. If the acts one does every day, such as acting ethically in business and giving to charitable causes, can be reframed as Jewish, it could help convince a new Jew that she is already acting Jewish, encouraging further confidence.

The second portion of conversion is the ceremony itself. Before Outreach, the conversion rituals of circumcision and immersion were seldom carried out in the Reform movement, and the ceremony of accepting Judaism was often done in private, either in a rabbi's office or on the bima, but not during a public service. With the advent of Outreach, rabbis have been encouraged to hold public conversion ceremonies, so that the congregation can properly celebrate with new Jews, and so that conversion would not continue to feel like a secretive, and therefore negative, lifecycle event.

Rosenak's research on value choices supports this congregational ceremony, stating, "the choice must be publicly affirmed."[35] The public affirmation enables the congregation to welcome the convert, and it conveys conversion as a positive, normative lifecycle event. There are also ways to continue publicly affirming the choice of Judaism after the conversion itself, further reinforcing the value choice. Some congregations have Outreach services, where those who have converted to Judaism are honored with an aliyah, a short speech, or other honors. Some congregations print conversion stories in their newsletters, allowing for a public affirmation which reaches the whole congregation, not just those in attendance on a

[35] Ibid., 121.

particular day. Congregation Shir Ha-Ma'alot in Irvine, California was recognized for doing this type of outreach program: "Each month, a different congregant is invited to share his/her Jewish journey with the congregation [in the temple newsletter]. Each person's path through the waters of Judaism is unique and a story unto itself. From the experiences of Jews by Choice to born Jews, this column shares the varied and many paths to and through Judaism."[36] An increase in public affirmations can lead to positive outcomes for the Jew by Choice, and also for the congregation.

In the present day, however, Reform rabbis have moved toward more extensive ritual requirements, with greater numbers requiring or encouraging immersion and/or circumcision. The number of public ceremonies may be declining, due in part to the increase in performance of rituals, which fill the same emotional need for the Jew by Choice as a ceremony on the bima. Additionally, there are, at least anecdotally, a greater number of people converting after living for a long period of time as Jews, who therefore do not want to make a public affirmation of something they have been doing for years, especially if many others already think they are Jewish. Even years after beginning to live as Jews, however, conversion is a value choice, and therefore the importance of a public affirmation should not be discounted. It could take a different form, such as an aliyah or oneg sponsorship, but the choice of conversion should be acknowledged within the congregation.

The congregation as a whole makes up the third aspect of conversion. Before Outreach, the issue was the congregation's silence regarding conversion—the congregation did not publicly acknowledge conversion, so there could be no

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[36] UAHC-CCAR Commission on Outreach, *2004 Outreach Idea Book*, 177.

welcome of converts. There was also widespread ignorance regarding the Jewish status of those who had converted. As Outreach spread, congregations began to learn about welcoming the convert. Programs such as mentoring began, and rabbis started to give sermons about the issue, leading to greater understanding and openness within congregational life. More attention may still need to be given to Jews by Choice who are not married. "Judaism is deeply rooted in the family, the home, and the community. For any Jew, it is hard to be Jewish alone. For the new Jew who is alone, it is not only hard to *be* Jewish, it is even harder to *feel* Jewish."[37] Those Jews by Choice who are married to a born Jew may be better guided through this time of transition, but only if the spouse has been prepared for what he might encounter, or if he is willing to be a welcoming face of Judaism for the converting partner. "A new Jew is an intellectual but not yet an emotional Jew. He or she cannot immediately share the feelings of a born Jew about Israel, the Holocaust or a special Jewish movie or event. Nostalgia, pride, and heartfelt emotions will only emerge with time and with constant exposure to a Jewish environment. It is here that a spouse can be invaluable in guiding a Jew by Choice and nurturing those feelings."[38] Outreach spread to all aspects of congregational life, and synagogues tried to include all, regardless, sometimes, of even Jewish status.

Rosenak's research on value choices teaches, "the choice that is made must be prized (i.e., one must be proud of it)."[39] This item instructs that one who is converting must take pride in Judaism. As has been mentioned by some sponsoring

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[37] Romanoff, *Your People, My People*, 228.
[38] Ibid., 73.
[39] Rosenak, "Education for Jewish Identification, 121.

rabbis, the way to retain or reclaim pride in Judaism—for born Jews as well as for Jews by Choice—is to make sure that the bar separating Jews from non-Jews is not set too low. Transliteration in the prayer book helps foster a welcoming community and ensures that all can participate, but perhaps it also discourages people from learning Hebrew. Allowing non-Jews to be on the bima, to light Shabbat candles, to carry the Torah, or even to have an aliyah may show the congregation to be welcoming to all kinds of families. However, perhaps it discourages conversion, because there is less to be proud of and to reach for that is specifically Jewish. Similarly, some believe that performing intermarriages may encourage a couple to join a synagogue after their wedding, but others insist that it may also decrease the pride in Jewish particularism that is part of the value decision of conversion. There is certainly a balance to be struck, and removing some of the barriers to participation to be welcoming is certainly a positive change, as it was at the beginning of the Reform movement. However, the idea that one must prize the choice made in a value decision reminds us that Judaism is something in which all Jews, those by birth and those by choice, should begin and continue to take pride.

Finally, there is the follow-up aspect of conversion. Initially there was none; after conversion one was declared to be a Jew, the conversion was never to be mentioned again, and the new Jew was set free to participate (or not), to learn further (or not), and to be equal to all other Jews—except that the new Jew did not have the necessary skills or comfort to continue working to build a Jewish identity and a Jewish life without support. The Outreach movement began to help encourage follow-up programs, moving past the issue of not mentioning a convert's non-Jewish

past to honoring that past with increased support from the clergy, from interested lay leaders, and from peer groups with other Jews by Choice.

Rosenak's research underscores the importance of following up after conversion. His final criterion for a value decision is that the "behavior is repeated in the life of the chooser."[40] Jews by Choice must know beforehand that Jewish practices cannot end with the conversion ceremony. Although the ceremony legally makes one a Jew, in order to strengthen one's Jewish identity and the decision to choose Judaism, the new Jewish behaviors must continue long past the conversion ceremony, and it is the duty of follow-up programs to help the new Jew by Choice to incorporate Jewish life into their lives, through habit, through enjoyment, and through the pull of community. "A conversion certificate may make one officially Jewish, but that is not enough. Only by actively participating in the Jewish community in one way or another can a convert really come to feel Jewish. Converts who convert into nothingness will flounder for much longer than those who actively pursue a Jewish identity. It is normal for new Jews to lack tremendous confidence about their Jewishness; this insecurity can be overcome only through active participation and practice."[41] By making the choice of Judaism simply a part of life, the new Jew may be more inclined to continue these behaviors after they are no longer required or scrutinized. "I guess for me this process of 'feeling Jewish' is an

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[40] Ibid., 121.
[41] Romanoff, *Your People, My People*, 145.

ongoing one. Once in a while, I still feel like I'm in limbo—what is my real identity? But most of the time, I don't even think about it. I just am what I am."[42]

Many congregations have instituted some of these improvements to the conversion process, and best practices are recognized by the Reform movement through the Belin awards, and then published (and publicized) through the *Outreach Idea Book* series. The Reform movement is moving in the right direction with respect to helping Jews by Choice develop their Jewish identities. The next steps that congregations should take are toward integration of the steps of the conversion process and providing choices for Jews by Choice.

Integration is the idea of continuing to make progress in all areas of conversion preparation and welcoming and creating and sustaining connections between these areas. There are congregations with much-lauded mentoring programs, some with innovative and public ceremonies of conversion, others with proven post-conversion chavurot, and still others with outstanding congregational welcoming. However, as Rabbi Yoffie mentioned in his 2005 speech, there is still much work to be done.[43] The fact that just a few congregations are often held up as great examples indicates that other congregations are far behind. They can learn from the congregations doing so well and begin to institute improved programs; because these programs are published, the initial work is done and only the implementation remains. The congregations with one aspect of an excellent program should not be content to rest on their previous Belin Awards, but should

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[42] Jeanne Lovy in Diamant, *Choosing a Jewish Life*, 73.
[43] Yoffie, "Sermon at Houston Biennial."

move forward, continuing to innovate and collaborate, perhaps borrowing from other congregations in other aspects of the program to elevate it to the level of their award-winning aspect. Until they are as forward-thinking with all aspects of their conversion education, there is much room for improvement; a congregation that educates its Jews by Choice but does not welcome them is not fulfilling its duty any more than a congregation that recognizes its Jews by Choice but does not follow up with them after conversion. It is telling that congregations tend not to receive awards in more than one aspect of their conversion programming; even in the congregations with strong Outreach programs, there is much room for improvement.

In the 2004 *Outreach Idea Book*, Temple Beth El in Charlotte, North Carolina is highlighted for their programming. Their materials list the steps in the conversion process: "Initial contact; academic; spiritual; conversion group; communal; mentor program; time-line for conversion; concluding rituals and ceremonies; follow-up."[44] They are certainly ahead of many other congregations (as evidenced by the Belin Outreach honorable mention award earned for their programming). At the same time, the details of the follow-up portion simply encourage meeting with the clergy. There is no mention of adjustment time or other suggested (or required) participation or groups that might help with identity building.

Belin Award winning congregation B'nai Israel in San Diego, California, also integrates their program in an above average way, but they, too, do not include follow-up in their programming information.

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[44] UAHC-CCAR Commission on Outreach, *2004 Outreach Idea Book*, 159.

> The key to integrating the Basic Judaism students into the life of our synagogue was to encourage social interaction, first between class members, and then between class members and clergy, staff, and members of our synagogue. The rabbi, other teachers, and Outreach Committee liaisons created a warm, welcoming atmosphere. Additionally there were Outreach members who were greeters at each Outreach program. Every class and program included a break for refreshments and schmoozing. Several programs offered activities . . . [where] students were engaged with others. Clergy made it clear that they were approachable and accessible to speak with and meet with class members. (URJ-CCAR Commission on Outreach, *Outreach and Membership Volume III*, 155)

If these synagogues, on the forefront of Outreach programming, have not yet integrated every aspect of the conversion process, then those congregations whose Outreach programs are not at the same level have much more work to do in all aspects of the conversion process.

Ultimately, Judaism is a choice, and therefore every Jewish behavior is a choice. Many rabbis already call for prospective converts to participate in the life of the congregation, in addition to the Introduction to Judaism class, but this condition or suggestion is often undefined or based on requirements, not choices. Scholars of experiential education insist that their style is successful because it gives learners control over their learning. “The key dynamic in change was the direct involvement

of people in the process of change itself."[45] Additionally, Daryl Bem's research on self-perception theory explains that people form opinions and attitudes by observing themselves and their own circumstances.[46] When a student is required to perform a behavior, such as attending services weekly, that student assumes that she attends services because of the requirement. However, when the same student makes a choice, coming to services when not explicitly required to do so, the choice is seen as a more attractive option in the future, so it is more likely to be repeated.

A more defined framework could be given to prospective converts, allowing them to approach conversion education like a university degree. Each prospective convert would have certain 'core courses,' such as the "Introduction to Judaism" class and meetings with the rabbi, and also a number of 'distribution requirements,' spanning different aspects of the congregation, such as a minimum number of services, adult education classes, and cultural programs, and finally some 'free electives' to be used on any other Jewish or synagogue program or event. In framing conversion in this way, several things would be accomplished. The prospective convert would be able to choose activities that were appealing and skip those that are not, without feeling guilty about not participating. The prospective convert would be introduced to different areas of the congregation, such as the men's or women's group, adult education, members' homes, a committee, and worship, thereby making connections with other Jews. By doing a few activities repeatedly, the Jew by Choice might gain the confidence to try something new. This university-

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[45] Reisman, *Jewish Experiential Book*, 18.
[46] Bem, "Self-Perception."

style model allows the prospective convert to choose activities in which to participate, making them seem more attractive, and more likely he will return by free choice in the future. It also integrates the core parts of the conversion process, educating the prospective convert and the rest of the congregation simultaneously, and integrates Jews by Choice into the life of the congregation. The congregation would gain exposure to prospective converts through their participation in different activities, therefore making it easier to be open, welcoming, and more educated about conversion. Prospective converts would also model for the congregation that they attend events and classes by desire, not requirement. "You demonstrate that ethnicity, nostalgia, and guilt are not what keeps Judaism alive; that choice and commitment are the real source of Jewish identity."[47] The program could continue after conversion through follow-up, with a different distribution list, encouraging a new Jew to participate in a number of activities across different areas of the congregation, perhaps suggesting fewer Outreach activities and a greater number of general adult education activities, promoting continued learning in a different environment.

Many have said that building a Jewish identity in Jews by Choice mostly requires time. Giving new Jews the time to grow and develop as Jews is certainly important, but equally important is making sure that they have the confidence, access to programs, and partnerships, both before and after conversion, to continue to grow those Jewish identities. "Just because people miss out on intensive Jewish exposure early in their lives does not mean that they will not have such experiences

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[47] Diamant, *Choosing a Jewish Life*, 234.

during adolescence and adulthood. In fact, what appears to have the greatest impact is the voluntary experience. Jewish identity development involves a process of exposure—internalizing and ultimately reflecting on both the early involuntary experiences [of a child] and what a person acquires later out of desire."[48] Rabbis and other points of contact for prospective converts need to be more explicit that while conversion formally ends with the mikveh, truly feeling Jewish requires much more than that, and that the more one participates and chooses to learn, the more one will truly feel authentic in one's Judaism. By making this expectation explicit and integrating the parts of conversion, Jews by Choice will gain the permission they may need to take their time, and the structure and confidence to use that time to build a strong, authentic Jewish identity.

[48] Bethamie Horowitz, in Reisman and Reisman, *New Jewish Experiential Book*, 422.

Conclusion

Jews by Choice have special needs and we need special guidance on how to meet those needs . . . It is time for us to stop relating to the new Jews as if they were curiosities . . . for we need them to be part of our people. They add strength to us . . . Newcomers to Judaism, in short, must embark on a long-term naturalization process, and they require knowledgeable and sympathetic guides along the way, that they may feel themselves fully equal members of the synagogue family."

(Schindler, "Outreach")

Forming a religious identity is a long, involved process, one which usually begins in childhood. For Jews by Choice however, who change their religion later in life, identity formation cannot follow the usual pattern of absorption through childhood experiences, indoctrination, and accumulated memories. Instead, Jews by Choice turn to synagogues and the Jewish community to learn about Judaism as adults. Soon, they learn that Judaism is more than "just" a religion, and that to truly feel authentic in their Judaism, they must learn more than what can be learned from a book or in a classroom, and they must learn to live Jewishly.

The course of instruction for conversion in modern Reform Judaism now spans, in most cases, at least a full year. Synagogues have moved from an early model of individual study with the rabbi to formal, structured classroom study with a group, and then back out of the classroom to an emphasis on informal learning.

Looking to the future, the course of study will have to come to a balance between formal and informal education. The first few years after Outreach began, Jewish leaders found that some experiential learning is necessary, because too much emphasis on the classroom makes for well-educated Jews by Choice who know a lot of facts about Judaism, but who do not know how to live Jewishly. However, too much experiential learning without an academic component will lead to an opposite problem, Jews by Choice who know exactly how to live Jewishly, but who do not know why they are doing what they are doing, which is antithetical to the values of Reform Judaism.

The major change to the conversion ceremony since Outreach began is that it has moved from a private, seemingly secret ceremony to one often completed in the company of the congregation, during a public service, and celebrated widely. This change has allowed conversion to take its rightful place as an important lifecycle milestone which merits congregational festivities. Looking to the future, congregations have several challenges to face regarding the conversion ceremony. As Reform Judaism returns somewhat to the traditions of the past, more converts and their rabbis are choosing to include immersion and circumcision. As a result, the declaration of intent, that part which is often carried out in front of the congregation, will lose some of its importance as the central moment of conversion. Rabbis will have to find additional ways to continue to raise the profile of conversion ceremonies. At the same time, there are many people who convert not before marriage, but later in life, after living Jewishly for a long time, who do not want public ceremonies, because they already feel Jewish. Congregations will also

have to seek a way to balance the importance of public affirmations, for both the Jew by Choice and for the congregation, with some converts' desire for privacy.

Congregations have come a long way, through the work of Outreach, in welcoming Jews by Choice. Outreach has raised the profile of conversion and educated born Jews on the process of conversion and the status of converts, so that Jews by Choice are both accepted and embraced. Congregations have turned from the idea of never mentioning one's conversion to helping the convert in sensitive ways. There is, however, still a balance to seek in this area as well. As congregations try to be more open and lower barriers to participation for all members, some are leaning towards making Judaism as universal and inclusive as possible, while others worry that downplaying particularism causes Judaism to lose some of the luster that has kept it vibrant for thousands of years. The challenge for congregations, looking to the future of Outreach, is how to balance the need for access and welcoming with a charge to maintain Judaism's particularity and unique flavor for the generations to come.

The process of conversion used to end with the conversion ceremony and the congregation's reaction to it—or their lack thereof. However, since learning the importance of follow-up programs and education for Jews by Choice, many congregations have begun to add this vital piece to the conversion process. Some congregations provide mentors for new Jews, and some have special Outreach programs or chavurot for those who have recently converted. The balance, however, which many congregations continue to seek, is between separation and integration. Many follow-up programs continue to provide support and fellowship for Jews by

Choice, but they do so separately from the rest of the congregation. Some separation may still be necessary, to give Jews by Choice the space to reflect on their experiences and the process they are still undergoing in the company of similar others. However, there also needs to be an aspect of integration, where they join with the rest of the congregation and develop a Jewish identity as a part of the larger congregation. Because follow-up programs developed more slowly than any other part of the conversion process, these programs have the most opportunity for future growth, and the most about them still to be discovered.

A Jewish identity usually develops from childhood, but Jews by Choice must develop this authentic sense of Judaism as adults. Such an identity includes discovering, learning, and becoming a part of the Jewish religion, ethnicity, peoplehood, and culture. The religious aspect is the easiest to learn, whereas the other constructs are difficult to even define. Research shows that the more that Jews by Choice can participate in all aspects of Jewish life, at the synagogue, in their homes, and throughout their lives, the more they will develop Jewish friends, memories, confidence, and ultimately, identity.

The education of Jews by Choice has come a long way since Rabbi Schindler called for Outreach in 1978. The difficult work of discovering the problems with identity formation and the shortcomings of the conversion process has been done; the difficult work of continuing to discover what is successful and continuing to make positive changes lies ahead. Identity formation takes time, but armed with strong programming, thorough research, supportive born Jews, and a vibrant

Judaism, Jews by Choice will continue to choose Judaism, to live Judaism, and to increasingly feel authentically Jewish.

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Appendix

"A Good Jew" (Reisman, *Jewish Experiential Book*, 162-164)

Purpose: What is the essence of being a "good Jew"? Are there certain basic beliefs, behaviors, and attitudes which are requisite to being defined as a "good Jew"? While the answers to these questions cannot be resolved by responses to a survey questionnaire, this activity offers people an opportunity to examine the several dimensions that contribute to Jewish identity and to assess their relative importance. Also, since the Good Jew questionnaire has been used in several studies of American Jews over the past 20 years, it allows people to compare their responses to those of other groups and also to assess whether there have been any trends over time.

The 23 questions can be subdivided into 5 categories, for purposes of more specific analysis of the results:

(1) Jewish particularism (questions 1, 14, 16, 22)
(2) Jewish secular and cultural behaviors (2, 8, 15)
(3) Israel (3, 4)
(4) Jewish religious behaviors (6, 7, 10, 11, 12, 13, 23)
(5) Humanism/liberalism (5, 9, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21)

What are the items considered to be most essential and least important to be a Good Jew? Typically, respondents define few items as essential. What does this say about the demands Judaism makes on its adherents? How would this compare to the essential requirements of other religions?

A Good Jew

"To be a 'good Jew'" (rate each item)		Essential	Desirable	Makes No Difference	Essential Not to Do
1.	Accept his being a Jew and not try to hide it				
2.	Contribute to Jewish philanthropies				
3.	Support Israel				
4.	Support Zionism				
5.	Support all humanitarian causes				
6.	Belong to a synagogue or temple				
7.	Attend weekly services				
8.	Belong to Jewish organizations				
9.	Lead an ethical and moral life				
10.	Attend services on High Holidays				
11.	Observe the dietary laws				
12.	Be well versed in Jewish history and culture				
13.	Know the fundamentals of Judaism				
14.	Have mostly Jewish friends				
15.	Promote the use of Yiddish				
16.	Give Jewish candidates for political office preference				
17.	Gain respect of Christian neighbors				
18.	Promote civic betterment and improvement in the community				
19.	Work for equality for Blacks				
20.	Help the underprivileged improve their lot				
21.	Be a liberal on political and economic issues				
22.	Marry within the Jewish faith				
23.	Believe in God				

"The Three Children" (Reisman and Reisman, *New Jewish Experiential Book*, 389-394)

Purpose: To address what defines a "good Jew". You may have heard the comments: "Yes, he is a member of the synagogue but look at the way he runs his business!"; or, "I don't have to go to synagogue to be a good Jew. What's important is my sense of ethics." The story of the "Three Children" is a program technique that is an exciting way for the group to become involved in trying to find an answer.

INVITATION TO THE READING OF THE WILL

YOU ARE ASKED TO ATTEND
THE READING OF THE WILL
of the late
SELMA COHEN

Which will take place at _____ on _____

BECAUSE of a strange request which appears in this Will; and

BECAUSE implementation of this Bequest is only possible with the earnest assistance and considered judgment of a selected group of citizens, including yourself,

The Community's Leading ATTORNEY will read the Will in the presence of

THE THREE CHILDREN of the deceased.

ANNOUNCEMENT BY ATTORNEY

"I have an unusual document in my hand. It is the last Will and Testament of the late Selma Cohen. Now, Mrs. Cohen is a completely fictitious character, but you are asked to pretend that she was a leading Jew in our community, who died only one week ago. I am her attorney and it is my duty, in the presence of her three children, to read you her Will.

THE LAST WILL AND TESTAMENT OF THE LATE SELMA COHEN

This will is made by Selma Cohen of Miami, Florida. I wish that my entire belongings shall be given to whichever of my children be deemed to be the best Jew. My attorney shall select a committee of representative Jews to make this determination. If this committee decides that none of my children is worthy to be called a good Jew, or if the committee cannot agree on a selection, my belongings are to be divided equally among the following charities . . . [ellipsis in the original]

This much of the will is relevant. You have been selected as the committee to make the required decision. I hope that you will pay close attention as the basic facts are presented to you by the three children—David, Aaron and Joshua Cohen."

Background of DAVID COHEN

David Cohen, the oldest child, is also the wealthiest. He is the chief executive of an automobile plant. He is married and has three children. David Cohen is an observant Jew. He is a member of the synagogue and has been for a decade its most generous single contributor, as well as donating to Jewish charities. David Cohen always attends Friday evening services, even when he is travelling in other parts of the country on business. In addition, Shabbat and Jewish holidays are observed in the home. All the children attend Hebrew school.

Apart from faithful attendance every Shabbat, David does not participate personally in other phases of the synagogue's activities or the work of other organizations in the community, except for free legal advice to members of the community; this is his particular interest. When asked to serve on committees of the synagogue or other groups, he replies, "I'm sorry, my business and Legal Aid work take all my time. I don't have time to give. There are many who have the time. You know that I give generously to all worthy causes in the community. That's all I can do."

David recently became a controversial figure when he refused to make any safety improvements at the plant following an accident that killed three workers. David issued the following statement: "The demands of providing the lowest cost product possible have unfortunately made it unrealistic to make changes in our plant's operations."

Background of DR. AARON COHEN

Dr. Aaron Cohen, the second child, is an atheist. An intellectual and a scholar, Aaron teaches philosophy at a university. He has contempt for his older brother's religious views, which he terms "blind religious conformity."

When Aaron was a young boy, approaching Bar Mitzvah, his best friend was struck by a hit-and-run driver. Aaron prayed for his best friend to recover. After lingering in a coma for days, the boy died. Aaron decided "there is no G-d" and refused to go through with his Bar Mitzvah. Since that day, Aaron has had no interest in religion. He will not belong to a synagogue, and does not send his two boys to Hebrew school. His wife shares his views on these matters. Despite this attitude towards Jewish religious life, Aaron has always been active in secular Jewish groups concerned with the welfare of Jews in and outside the community.

Several years ago, Aaron suffered a stroke, and his teaching hours have been greatly reduced. His brother David has gone out of his way to help Aaron with the cost of private medical treatment and make arrangements for therapy.

In gratitude to David, Aaron refused to turn his back on his brother after the controversy over the fatal accident. To the extent that his injury allows, he is also active politically in the civic life of the general community.

Background of JOSHUA COHEN

Joshua Cohen, the youngest child, married a non-Jewish woman. She converted to Judaism and has become an active member of their synagogue. Joshua, although a member of the synagogue, is not active and does not attend services regularly. He explains that he is trying to clarify his own religious views and his conceptions of God, Judaism, Zionism, etc. He is presently learning Hebrew.

Joshua is serious-minded and has read the Bible in its entirety five times and reads Jewish literature voraciously. He has ha running arguments for ten years with his older brother David, who always says: "Aaron—I can understand he doesn't believe. At least he knows where he stands. You just never grew up. You're confused, and you'll always be confused." Joshua is active in civic and political life within the general community.

Joshua, at one time, served as a financial consultant in his brother's business. After the accident, Joshua wrote a letter to David, saying, "While I am still uncertain as to just what I believe in terms of ritual and theology, I believe that if my being Jewish means anything at all, it means doing the right thing. I am therefore resigning from all association with the factory."

David has not spoken to Joshua since this incident occurred. Joshua and his wife have had a series of rows as a result of this because she disapproved of his resignation. "You like to be a hero," she said. "But if you're such a social reformer, why did you wait until now? You knew all the time that conditions were unsafe, didn't you? When did David's money get dirty to you?"