Problems Facing the Convert to Judaism Today: A Sociological Analysis of the Conversion Process

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DIGEST

This thesis consists of eight chapters, each based largely upon original research of the author. The purpose of the thesis is to analyze the sociology of conversion in contemporary America within the Reform movement.

Chapter One attempts to put our present day realities into a larger historical perspective. It consists of a survey of material found in the classic Jewish texts of Bible, Midrash, Talmud, and Shulhan Arukh which relates to conversion, the convert, and Jewish attitudes toward the convert. Included also in this chapter are both the traditional requirements for conversion, and the requirements of Reform Rabbis interviewed in southwestern Ohio.

Chapters Two through Five present case studies of four different types of converts as identified and interviewed by the author. This is a typology based on the primary motivation of converts in seeking conversion. The four primary motivations include: a born-again type religious experience; a philosophical questioning of life which is answered by Jewish thought; a search for emotional roots; and the need to unify the religious identity of a family.

Chapter Six contains two parts. The first compares the author's typology based on motivation with Albert Gordon's based on sincerity. The second part presents the author's analysis of the conversion experience. Here we argue that the conversion experience is comprised of six stages: (1) a rejection of the original religious identity; (2) exploration for a replacement identification; (3) learning Jewish actions coupled with an intellectual acceptance of what is known about

Judaism; (4) emotional acceptance of a Jewish identity; (5) enrollment in a formal conversion program; (6) the conversion ritual.

Chapter Seven deals with the problems converts face. These include internal problems of identification, and external problems of acceptance of one's new-found Jewish identity on the part of spouse, in-laws, family, and general Jewish community.

Chapter Eight provides a summary and conclusion of the thesis.

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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this thesis is to study the phenomenon of conversion to Judaism in a contemporary, Reform setting. We want to arrive at a better understanding of the individual who converts, and toward this end we will direct ourselves by asking the following questions: What would motivate a person to choose to become Jewish? What is involved in the process of conversion? What have been the traditional Jewish attitudes toward converts? What, according to halacha must an individual do to become Jewish? How does the convert change his identity from that of "not-Jew" to "Jew"? What problems do converts to Judaism encounter with regularity? How do they deal with such problems? At what point does a non-Jew gain Jewish authenticity? What is the role of the Reform rabbi in the conversion process? These are all critical questions for rabbi and convert alike in an age when conversion is urged to alleviate the stigma of mixed marriage, at a time when individuals are seeking to understand just what "being Jewish" really means.

In addition to answering these contemporary questions, we shall seek, in our first chapter, to place the topic of conversion to Judaism in a larger historical perspective by examining key passages in classic Jewish sources. While this is not intended as a textual thesis, the author recognizes the need to consult the texts of the Bible, Midrash, Talmud, and Shulhan Arukh in an effort to discover historical antecedents to today's phenomenon. The Jewish community has learned its responses to (potential) converts, at least in part, through its long

history of contact with them. Our texts point toward attitudes which continue to thrive.

As we study the convert, we hope to gain a perspective about the native Jew. Our concern is not the age-old dilemma "who is a Jew?", but rather the question: "what is the source of an authentic Jewish identity?" Converts are unique in that they alone choose to adopt a Jewish identity. Through the examination of four case studies we shall seek to learn what motivates such a choice. Is conversion to be regarded as a religious and theological statement, or rather as a sociological/psychological phenomenon? We look to the convert to tell us what brings him to Judaism, and what his conception of "being Jewish" is.

The convert to Judaism experiences much non-acceptance from the time he decides to convert until the time he is accepted as a Jew. He copes with the reactions of his spouse, parents, in-laws (usually), the rabbi, and the general Jewish community. Anyone in any of these groups poses a potential threat of non-acceptance. In addition, the convert may encounter problems arising from internal questioning. While the degree varies with the individual, all these areas affect converts and the conversion process. We shall accordingly devote an entire chapter to exploring problems facing converts to Judaism.

A large portion of the research for this thesis is based upon personal interviews with twenty converts referred to the author by rabbis in southwestern Ohio. No claim is made that the sample is random, or typical of the entire class of converts to Reform Judaism. All interviewees converted within the past twenty-five years. Interviews, with one exception, were conducted in the home of the convert,

and ranged in length from forty-five minutes to two hours. Chapters Two through Five are case studies of four of these converts. Quotations in these chapters are direct quotations from the interviews. The author has changed all names and places to protect the anonymity of the individuals. In certain instances, minor facts have also been changed when their inclusion could lead to the identification of the individual. The author takes full responsibility for these cases.

Conversion to Judaism is an extremely broad topic. It contains several areas which are not included in this research. We will not deal in "macro" terms. No attempt is made to determine the number of converts to Judaism in any time period. Neither is this thesis intended to serve as a polemic arguing for or against the recruitment of converts. Rather, we assume that throughout history individuals have gained entrance into the Jewish community by means of conversion, and we recognize that all branches of Judaism are capable of receiving converts today. We assume that this will remain the case for the foreseeable future, and want therefore to study the phenomenon of conversion.

We will come to see conversion as a process containing six basic stages rather than as an event at the time of the conversion ritual. Conversion will be studied as a fundamental change in personal status which occurs through a period of time. We will view the rabbi as the perpetrator of acceptance of the convert into the Jewish community, and the guide to that community for the convert. We begin now with a description of conversion and the convert, and attitudes toward both which have occurred throughout Jewish history.

CHAPTER ONE

PERSPECTIVES ON CONVERSION THROUGH OUR CLASSICAL LITERATURE

Conversion to Judaism is a widespread phenomenon. Most American Jews could easily point to more than one individual Jew in their community and say, "S/he is a convert." Throughout every period of Jewish history non-Jewish individuals have sought both association with Jews and conversion to Judaism. In this chapter we shall week perspectives on today's conversion phenomenon by looking at the classic Jewish texts: the Bible, Midrash, Talmud, and Shulhan Arukh. We shall point to important trends determining the status of the convert within Jewish society, Jewish attitudes toward the convert, and requirements for conversion.

While this chapter deals with texts, it would be impossible within a single thesis to examine all the textual references to the convert, the prospective convert, and the conversion process. Here we consider some key passages in the various texts.

The Bible

What Is a Ger?

The English noun "convert" denotes an individual who has changed his personal identity and societal status by fulfilling entrance requirements made by his chosen religious group or its designated leaders. The closest Biblical Hebrew comes to such a word is ger. However, when rendering ger into English, no scholarly translation of

the Bible employs the word "convert." Most often, ger is rendered as "stranger" or "sojourner," and more correctly as "resident-alien."

Certainly there are instances when it would be most appropriate to employ a term which suggests "temporary resident" status for the individual involved. This might be anything from a person passing through one locale on the way to another, or a person belonging to one group of people residing with another group for a longer, indefinite period of time. Indeed, Abraham refers to himself as a ger in Haran[1] and Moses, in naming his son referred to himself as a "stranger in a foreign land."[2]

Most often, however, we find that the term ger refers to someone not born Jewish who resides among Jews in the land of Israel. Within this context, the ger may have retained his original non-Jewish identity, or he may have completely assumed the identity of the Jew and become Jewish. Although we find no mention in the Bible of a conversion ceremony presided over by the Priest--i.e., a "religious ceremony," clearly the one major act of conversion would consist of circumcision.[3]

Thus, the Biblical ger refers both to a "resident alien" and a convert. Only with great difficulty can one determine in any given instance which is which. It may well be that the "resident alien" ger would accept for himself some Jewish responsibilities and observances, but he would not feel willing to become a full member of the Jewish people by converting. Albert S. Goldstein writes,

> Regardless of where he originated or what his ancestral faith, elementary (obligations) were expected of every resident in ancient Israel. Monotheism might appeal to one ger, another might

> enjoy the Sabbath of the Hebrews or their holy dietary regimen, but entertain certain reservations about circumcision.
>
> However, if and when a ger assumed all the group obligations--ethical, ethnic, and ecclesiastic--he became a full-fledged member of the congregation of Israel and his progeny were legally indistinguishable from other Israelites.[4]

We turn now to Biblical texts, to learn laws governing the convert, and his status in ancient Israel.

Laws

The Bible makes it clear that the ger and the native Jew are to be considered equals in the eyes of the law, while within Israel. This is stated explicitly in Leviticus 24:22: "You shall have one standard for stranger (ger) and citizen alike: for I the LORD am your God."[5]

This general principle is brought to bear in specific, religious, and cultic practices in Numbers 15:14-16:

> 14 And when, throughout your generations, a stranger who has taken up residence with you, or one who lives among you, would present an offering by fire of pleasing odor to the LORD--as you do, so shall it be done by 15 the rest of the congregation. There shall be one law for you and for the resident stranger; it shall be a law for all time throughout the generations. You and the stranger shall be alike before the LORD; 16 the same ritual and the same rule shall apply to you and to the stranger who resides among you.[6]

Clearly the "outsider" was expected to take a substantial part in the society. Even before a full conversion by circumcision, he was expected to accept major elements of duties of citizenship in the

peoplehood of Israel. His very residence in Israel placed him in a client status in regard to Israel's God, YHVH. YHVH becomes his God, and blasphemy of YHVH's name resulted in death; (God speaking to Moses):

> 15And to the Israelite people speak thus: Anyone who blasphemes his God shall bear his guilt; 16but if he pronounces the name LORD, he shall be put to death. The whole community shall stone him; stranger or citizen, if he has pronounced the Name, he shall be put to death.[7]

The ger was required to appear at the Temple in Jerusalem on the important pilgrimage holiday of Shavout along with all Jews for the purpose of "rejoicing before the Lord thy God."[8] Likewise, the ger was required to be as religiously observant as the Jew regarding the eating of leaven during Passover:

> Seven days shall there be no leaven found in your houses, for whosoever eateth that which is leavened, that soul shall be cut off from the congregation of Israel, whether he be a sojourner (ger), or one that is born in the land.[9]

These passages indicate that the ger was considered to be a member of the "congregation of Israel." He did have a legally protected Jewish status. Because circumcision was not required of the ger, however, he was not a full member. He was not allowed to eat of the important paschal sacrifice until he had undergone a complete conversion by circumcision.[10]

The ger is included in God's command to rest on the Sabbath[11] and to "afflict yourselves" on Yom Kippur.[12]

While these laws relate to specific religious rituals, the Bible also deals with the ger in a more general and ethical tone as well. Jews are commanded:

> [20]And a stranger shalt thou not wrong, neither shalt thou oppress him; for ye were strangers in the land of Egypt. [21]Ye shall not afflict any widow, or fatherless child. [22]If thou afflict them in anywise--for if they cry at all unto Me, I shall surely hear their cry . . .[13]

The dictum commanding Jews not to oppress gerim is often repeated, and attached to it is the rationale, "for you were strangers (gerim) in the land of Egypt."[14] Indeed, the Jew is commanded not only to deal fairly with the ger but to "love him as yourself."[15]

Insofar as the stranger had left his native land and family, he was an orphan. Thus, the ger was placed alongside the fatherless and widow in the legal command for equal justice for classes of underprivileged people. "Thou shalt not pervert the justice due to the stranger, or the fatherless; nor take the widow's raiment to pledge."[16] ". . .[18]He (the Lord) doeth execute justice for the fatherless and the widow and loveth the stranger, in giving him food and raiment. [19]Love ye therefore the stranger; for ye were strangers in the Land of Egypt."[17]

Realities Underlying Biblical Law

Almost every law in the Bible relating to gerim is favorable toward them. The question must be raised: why? If the ger is so respected and welcomed, why should such a status need to be formalized by law? The answer is clearly that the Biblical author made a distinction between the real-life situation confronted by the ger and the

ethical imperative of a universal religion. Perhaps hyperbolically the Psalmist writes in reference to all the workers of iniquity, "They slay the widow and stranger, and murder the fatherless."[18] In a similar vein, the prophet Ezekiel charges, "The people of the land (the Jews) have used oppression, and exercised robbery, and have wronged the poor and the needy, and have oppressed the stranger unlawfully."[19] In short, we surmise that the Jews did not treat the ger as well as the prophets thought they should. We can well theorize that the purpose of the Biblical legislation regarding the ger was to legitimize his place in society as an equal with Jews in matters of civil laws, and at least an "almost-equal" in matters of religious observance.

The acceptance of the ger was a necessity in the late Biblical era of a burgeoning universalism. Bernard J. Bamberger argues, "in the early Biblical period, conversion in our sense of the word did not, and could not, exist."[20]

"As Judaism became a universal, and therefore a unique religion--under prophetic influence--conversion . . . became possible."[21]

Clearly by the late Biblical period, the prevailing attitude of the prophets was one of looking forward to a time when all peoples would acknowledge YHVH as Lord over the world. Toward this end, the ger would spread the name of YHVH, and more people could worship HIM.[22]

Ultimately, Isaiah prophesies,

> . . . the Lord will have compassion upon Jacob, and will yet prove Israel, and set them in their own land; and the stranger shall join himself with them, and they shall cleave to the house of Jacob.[23]

What do we know of the convert in the Biblical era? We have seen that in the early periods, converts as such did not exist, yet the ger--the sojourner-stranger-resident-alien--became the Biblical prototype of this class. Even though the ger's civil and religious lifestyle was affected by Biblical law, his life was nonetheless complicated by a lack of acceptance and a tendency for the Jewish majority in Israel to take advantage of him.

Another area of problem was intermarriage. Ezra 9-10 and Nehemiah 13:23ff present us with the picture of widespread mixed marriage among Jews and foreign peoples during the period of the exile. These prophets regard this as a grievous sin which Israel commits against herself, and Ezra facilitates the widespread divorce of these unions. He does this for the purpose of Israel's purification, and the ultimate survival of the Jewish people. These passages are to be labeled as "anti-intermarriage," and by extension, anti-conversion.

Bamberger writes,

> Scholars generally agree that the Book of Ruth was written in protest against the policy of Ezra. It does not deal primarily with the subject of conversion, but is a plea for tolerance and a defense of intermarriage. It shows that a foreign-born woman can assume and fulfill properly the religious obligations which entrance into the Jewish group demands. Here also the national and religious elements are combined: "Thy people shall be my people and thy God my God." (Ruth 1:16) Here also we meet for the first time a phrase which, in slightly modified form becomes almost a technical term at a later date for conversion: "to take refuge beneath the wings of the Lord." (Ruth 2:12)[24]

Thus, we find even within the Bible itself the initial development of a problematic situation which continues today for Jew and convert alike. How are native Jews to regard intermarriage: as a sin whose consequence can be the weakening and ultimate demise of the Jewish people? Or, does it provide at least the opportunity for a native non-Jew to gain admittance into the peoplehood and religion of the Jews?

Having raised this problem, the Bible leaves it unanswered. We move on now to the Midrash and Talmud for their interpretations of the Biblical texts and their insights into the phenomenon of conversion to Judaism.

Conversion in the Rabbinic Literature

Several scholarly studies have been done on the topic of the convert in the Midrash and Talmud. This section aims only at presenting background, and pointing toward the trends of the rabbis. The reader interested in obtaining further depth in this area is referred to: William G. Braude, Jewish Proselytizing in the First Five Centuries of the Common Era; the Age of the Tannaim and Amoraim (Providence, R.I., 1940); Bernard J. Bamberger, Proselytism in the Talmudic Period (Cincinnati, 1939); and A. Z. Marcus, [illegible] (Jerusalem, 1937). In each of these books, bibliographies for further reference will be found.

By the time of the destruction of the Second Temple (70 c.e.), conversion to Judaism had become widespread. The term ger came clearly to mean "convert" rather than sojourner or resident-alien. The Midrash and Talmud contain literally hundreds of references to conversion, the

convert, laws pertaining to both, Jewish proselytization and other related subjects. Here we shall cite representative passages to show both positive and negative attitudes toward the convert on the part of the rabbis. But we shall argue that this ambivalence in the classical Jewish literature is slanted toward a favorable view of the convert. We shall conclude this section with a description of the process and procedures of conversion as found in the Talmud.

Passages Favorable toward the Convert

The rabbis view Abraham and Sarah not only as the first Jews, but also as the first Jewish missionaries. Several midrashim portray Abraham and Sarah converting heathens to Judaism in Haran: ". . . And the souls that they had made in Haran."[25] According to R. Jose b. Zimra this,

> . . . refers to the proselytes. Then let it say, "That they had converted;" why (does scripture say) "That they had made?" That is to teach you that he who bring a Gentile near (to God) is as though he created him. Now let it say, "That he had made;" why "that they had made?" Said R. Hunia: "Abraham converted the men and Sarah the women."[26]

This passage is also found in Gen. Rabba 84.4 and Num. Rabba 14.11 in slightly altered forms. In Gen. Rabba 84.4 the couple's missionary activities are models followed also by Isaac and Jacob. The point the rabbis make by implication is that it is good and praiseworthy to seek converts to Judaism. One rabbi thought that Abraham's delaying his own circumcision for 51 years was a sign of the importance of

proselytization: "Why should he (Abraham) not have circumcised himself at the age of forty-eight, when he recognized his Creator? In order not to discourage proselytes."[27]

Typical of a midrash in praise of a proselyte who studies Torah is the following based on Numbers:7:16:

> (the verse) Alludes to the proselytes who would embrace Judaism in the future and to those who were present on that occasion, indicating that they were all worthy (to study) Torah, as may be inferred from the text, "Mine ordinances, which if a man do, he shall live by them" (Lev. 18:5). It does not say "priests" or "Levites" or "Israelites," but "a man." This teaches that even an idolater who becomes a proselyte and studies the Torah is like a High Priest . . .[28]

The rabbis make a close connection between conversion and the study of Torah. Clearly, they view conversion not as a means of social identification or national citizenship, but as a religious act.

The Midrash approaches a stance favorable toward proselytization when R. Simeon b. Gamaliel cites the following Mishna to a stranger on a road:

> My son, thus have the sages taught in the Mishna: When a would-be proselyte comes to accept Judaism a hand should be stretched out towards him to bring him beneath the wings of the Shechinah . . .[29]

This theme is made even more explicit in the Talmud. Not agreeing on the scriptural basis, both R. Eleazar and R. Johanan cite: "The Holy One, blessed be He, did not exile Israel among the nations save in order that proselytes might join them."[30]

Throughout the rabbinic texts many converts are mentioned by name, and Bamberger argues this "suggests the existence of a far larger group of average proselytes concerning whom we have no information."[31] Aquilas is one convert who is frequently mentioned. From his story we learn that, as today, there was pressure then from non-Jews against converting to Judaism. Further, his story demonstrates the flattery which the convert shows for Jews and their Torah by his very act of conversion.

> Aquilas once said the Emperor Hadrian, "I wish to be converted and become an Israelite." The reply was: "After this people do you hanker? See how I have degraded it, and how many thereof I have slain. You wish to ally yourself to the lowliest of peoples; what do you see in them that you now wish to become converted?" He replied: "The least among them knows how God created the world and what was created on the first and second day, and how long it is since the world was created and on what the world is founded. Moreover, their law is one of truth." He then said to him, "go and study their law, but do not be circumcised." To which he retorted, "Unless he be circumcised, even the wisest in they kingdom, and even a greybeard of a hundred years old, cannot study their Torah," for so it is written, "He declareth His word unto Jacob, His statutes and His ordinances unto Israel. He hath not dealt so with any nation" except with the children of Israel.[32]

Once an individual converts to Judaism, R. Aha b. Jacob declares that he "is like a child newly-born."[33] Such a status entails that the convert sever all ties with his native family and culture. Having such a unique status within society, the convert is said to be guarded over by God Himself. In this text we observe God's special love of converts: "The Holy One, blessed be He, said: 'The names of proselytes

are as pleasing to Me as the wine of libation which is offered to Me on the altar."[34] The theme of God's special care over the convert is expressed most concretely in the following passage:

> . . . In a like manner, ought we not be grateful to the proselyte who has left behind him his family and his father's house, aye, has left behind his people and all the other peoples of the world, and has chosen to come to us? Accordingly, He has provided him with special protection, for He exhorted Israel that they shall be very careful in relation to the proselytes so as not to do them harm; and indeed so it says, "Love ye therefore the proselyte . . ." (Deut. 10:29). "And a proselyte shalt thou not oppress" (Ex 23:9 cf. also Lev. 19:33ff)[35]

This small sampling of textual material demonstrates the high esteem of the rabbis for converts. For them, conversion was purely a religious act. The convert recognized the one true God and promised to observe the laws which He gave to man through the Torah.

Passages Unfavorable toward the Convert

Bamberger argues that the preponderance of rabbinic statements are favorable toward converts and conversion. He states,

> ..... only four passages in the entire (rabbinic) literature are unfavorable (toward converts) without reservation. Two of them are Tannaitic, two later. Significantly, only one of the four passages is altogether clear as to meaning . . .[36]

While the author of this thesis independently found the references which Bamberger cites, additional ones also exist. This author agrees, however, that the clear majority of references to converts are favorable.

One of Bamberger's statements is, "Converts and those who play (sexually) with children delay the coming of the Messiah."[37] He places this in the "dubious" category by relying upon a variant text in Kallah Rabbati, Chapter Two, which reads, "Converts and onanists delay . . ."[38] The connection appears to deal with individuals whom we would describe as "sexual deviants." In any case, it would seem to this author that the connection itself would be unflattering to all converts, and that while there may be doubt as to the precise meaning of the text, any conceivable rendering of it leads to an unfavorable image for the convert.

The most serious indictment comes from a statement found four times in the Talmud:

> That those who receive proselytes (bring evil upon themselves, is deduced) in accordance with (a statement of) R. Ḥelbo. For R. Ḥelbo stated: "Proselytes are hurtful to Israel as a sore on the skin."[39]

Throughout the Talmud converts are assumed to have been idolators and sexual deviants prior to conversion. Thus, we find statements like: "And the sages said: Zonah (prostitute) is none other than the female proselyte, a freed bondwoman, and one who has been subjected to meretricious intercourse."[40] In this connection we also recall the baraitha of Niddah 13b: "Our rabbis taught: 'Proselytes and those that play with children (sexually) delay the advent of the Messiah.'"[41]

That converts were considered idolators is evident by repeated references to their having made the Golden Calf. For example,

> For see it (Scripture) does not say, "This is our God (in reference to the Golden Calf) but This is thy God." Moses (from Egypt) that made the Calf and that said to Israel: "This is thy god."[42]

On Balance

Having sampled aggadic references to converts, we see both positive and negative attitudes expressed by the rabbis. In terms of both numbers of statements and the number of rabbis making the statements, those in favor of proselytes outnumber the opponents. This being the case, we ask: why? The hypothesis of this author, which might be the subject for a further research project is the following: The Jewish people to whom the rabbis addressed themselves were far more antithetical to converts than the rabbis. The leaders saw a necessary connection between any sort of universal element within Judaism and the seeking, or at least the accepting, of converts. Accordingly, they seized upon the abundance of Biblical texts as the basis for arguing for fairer treatment of converts, to praise converts, and indeed even to liken all Jews to converts. If Jews already held converts in such a high esteem, all these statements would be superfluous. The positive statements can only be explained as adurations and pleadings with the Jewish people to be more open and accepting of converts. If, however, this is the case, how are we to explain the vehement statements made by R. Ḥelbo and others who oppose not only converts, but those Jews who accept them into the Jewish fold? The answer to this lies within the hypothesis. Here, Ḥelbo et al. represent the minority viewpoint when compared to their contemporaries. But at the same time they did not disagree

with the majority of rabbis for the sake of disagreement alone. They represent the majority viewpoint of most of the Jews. Rabbis such as Helbo tell the average Jew via aggadah that which he already believed but wanted to hear again. All this, of course, is hypothetical and can serve as conjecture for future research. For the purpose of this thesis, the diversity of attitudes toward converts, and the divergence in attitude between the rabbi and the average Jew are illustrated. This foreshadows the dynamics of situations we shall explore later in this thesis.

The Conversion Process in Rabbinic Literature

Rabbinic literature abounds in stories of individuals converting to Judaism. For example, we shall recount here one version of Jethro's conversion, and two parallel versions of Ruth's conversion. These particular midrashim are important for shedding light on the rabbinic requirements for the conversion experience, and the aggadic explanation of the conversion process.

Central to any religious conversion is the recognition of the "true" Deity. Every convert is expected to affirm the unity and existence of God, and this act of recognition amounts to a verbal acknowledgement of a previous wrong belief on the part of the convert. The following midrash makes Jethro a paradigm:

> Jethro did not omit a single form of idolatry in the world without turning to it and serving it . . . but he finally declared, "Now I know that the Lord is greater than all gods." He turned in repentance before the Holy One, blessed be He, who accepted him and established him in Israel for generations.[43]

Indeed, the convert is here similar to a Ba'al Teshuva, "returning" to the worship of God and being praised for this action.

Conversion is not only the recognition of God, but in addition, the acceptance of His commandments. Before he can fulfill the commands, a convert must study them and become familiar with them.

To illustrate the convert's process of education regarding the nature of the commandments, the rabbis draw upon Ruth 1:16, which is Ruth's own conversion:

> And Ruth said: Entreat me not to leave thee, and to return from following after thee; for whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge; thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God; [17] where thou diest, will I die, and there will I be buried; . . .
>
> What is the meaning of "Entreat me not?" She (Ruth) said to her (Naomi), "Do not sin against me; do not turn your misfortunes away from me." To leave thee and to return from following after thee. I (Ruth) am fully resolved to become converted under any circumstances, but it is better that it should be at your hands than at those of another." When Naomi heard this, she began to unfold to her the laws of conversion, saying, "My daughter, it is not the custom of the daughters of Israel to frequent Gentile theaters and circuses," to which she replied, "Whither thou goest, I will go." She continued, "My daughter, it is not the custom of the daughters of Israel to dwell in a house which has no mezuzah," to which she responded, "and where thou lodgest, I will lodge." "Thy people shall be my people" refers to the penalties and admonitions (of the Torah), and "Thy God my God" to the other commandments of the Bible.[44]

By breaking Ruth 1:16-17 into its constituent phrases, the rabbis attempt to show that the conversion was gradual. First comes Naomi's guarded rejection of Ruth, then Ruth's insistence on conversion. Once

the critical psychological point has been achieved, her conversion is a matter of formalization. Here, Naomi's actions accord with the dictum, "He (the convert) is not, however, to be persuaded, or dissuaded too much."[45]

The same verse is expounded slightly differently in the Talmud:

> And when she (Naomi) saw that she (Ruth) was steadfastly minded to go with her, she left off speaking to her (to dissuade her from conversion).
>
> "We are forbidden," she told her, "(to move on beyond) the Sabbath boundries!"
>
> (The other replied), "Whither thou goest I will go."
>
> "We (Jews) are forbidden private meetings between man and woman!"
>
> Ruth replies, "Where thou lodgest I will lodge."
>
> "We (Jews) have been commanded six hundred and thirteen commandments!"
>
> Ruth replies, "Thy people shall be my people."
>
> "We (Jews) are forbidden idolatry!"
>
> Ruth replies, "And thy God my God."
>
> "Four modes of death (penalties for failure to follow the commandments) were placed at the disposal of the Bet Din!"
>
> "Where thou diest, will I die."
>
> "Two graveyards were placed at the disposal of the Bet Din!"
>
> "And there will I be buried."
>
> Presently she saw that she was steadfastly minded, . . .[46]

Although these passages are parallel, there exists one very important difference: in the first passage, Ruth is instructed in the various

commandments only after she has successfully convinced Naomi of her serious intent to convert. In the second passage, Naomi utilized succeedingly difficult commandments to accept as a means of testing Ruth's sincerity. However, in both passages Ruth's instruction begins with the relatively "easy" commandments, and works up to more "difficult" ones. At each stage the convert assents to following the commandment in question, making the conversion a step-by-step process. The length of the process is determined by the ability of the convert to understand and accept the commandments. Psychologically this gradual educational acculturation is far easier on the convert than would be a situation in which he was totally repulsed or frightened by confronting all the commands--major and minor--at one time. With this in mind, we turn now to the rabbi's ideas of how to receive converts and the requirements for conversion.

The Practicalities of Rabbinic Conversion: How to Become Jewish

Although we have seen that the rabbis are generally favorable toward conversion, as far as accepting a particular convert, some ambivalence is present. In a passage attributed to Judah b. Ḥanina we learn, "Three times isit written here (in Ruth 1:12) 'Turn Back,' corresponding to three times that a would-be proselyte is repulsed, but after that, he is accepted."[47] But in the same passage, R. Isaac deduces from Job 31:32 that, "a man should rebuff with his left hand, but bring near with his right."[48]

This approach, based on both rejection and acceptance, is evident also in the following halachic passage. This passage is later cited in

the Shulhan Arukh; it is of great importance in the final halacha.

We therefore cite at length from Yebamoth 47a-b:

> Our Rabbis taught: If at the present time a man desires to become a proselyte, he is to be addressed as follows: "What reason have you for desiring to become a proselyte; do you not know that Israel at the present time are persecuted and oppressed, despised, harassed and overcome by afflictions? If he replies, "I know and yet am unworthy" he is accepted forthwith, and is given instruction in some of the minor and some of the major commandments of Gleanings, the Forgotten Sheaf, the Corner, and the Poor Man's Tithe. He is also told of the punishment for the transgression of the commandments.
>
> Furthermore, he is addressed thus: "Be it known to you that before you came to this condition, if you had eaten suet you would not have been punishable with kareth, if you had profaned the Sabbath you would not have been punishable with stoning; but now were you to eat suet you would be punished with kareth; were you to profane the Sabbath you would be punished with stoning."
>
> And as he is informed of the punishment for the transgression of the commandments, so is he informed of the reward granted for their fulfillment. He is told, "Be it known to you that the world to come was made only for the righteous, and that Israel at the present time are unable to bear (47b) either too much prosperity or too much suffering." He is not, however, to be persuaded or dissuaded too much. If he accepts, he is circumcised a second time. As soon as he is healed arrangements are made for his immediate ablution, when two learned men must stand by his side and acquaint him with some of the minor commandments and with some of the major ones. When he comes up after his ablution he is deemed to be an Israelite in all respects.
>
> In the case of a woman proselyte, women make her sit in the water up to her neck, while two learned men stand outside and give her instruction in some of the minor commandments and some of the major ones . . .[49]

The proselyte must, according to this passage, pass through a series of stages in the conversion process: First he must articulate his motivation and a sense of perceived unworthiness. Second comes the initial acceptance by the rabbi which allows him to continue the process by means of the third step of learning the major and minor commandments along with their attached reward or penalty. Next come circumcision for men, and then immersion in water for both men and women. The circumcision and mikva when taken together comprise the act of conversion. Up to this point, the convert is free to change his mind.

Further requirements are deduced from a story told by Rabba of R. Hiyya b. Rabbi:

> . . . there came before him a proselyte who had been circumcised but had not performed ablution. The Rabbi told him, "Wait here until tomorrow when we shall arrange for your ablution." It may be inferred that the initiation of a proselyte requires the presence of three men (that is to say: a Bet Din or Rabbinical Court); and it may be inferred that a man is not a proper proselyte unless he had been circumcised and had also performed the prescribed ablution; and it may also be inferred that the ablution of a proselyte may not take place during the night.[50]

Here we have demonstrated the basically favorable attitude of the rabbis toward converts, with notable exceptions. We then hypothesized as to the reasons for this trend, and conjectured that the Jewish people were less favorably disposed toward converts than their leaders. This section concludes, then, with the fundamental rabbinic concepts of the conversion process and halachic aspects of conversion. We turn now to the ultimate arbitratic of Jewish Law, the Shulhan Arukh, to examine the prevailing requirements for conversion.

Conversion in the Shulhan Arukh

We will focus here on the key chapter of Yoreh Deah 268 entitled, "How the convert is converted and laws (relating to the sanctity of the convert)." The halacha was codified by Josef Caro in the Shulhan Arukh during the sixteenth century. Although references to converts and the conversion process are scattered throughout the work, we shall deal with the specified chapter. This chapter is a collection of laws and customs found in the Talmud and post-Talmudic halachic sources. No single clear order of the conversion process emerges. Rather, we learn alternative, and equally binding, approaches to be taken when a non-Jew seeks to convert. We learn, in addition, the basic requirements for conversion.

Accepting Proselytes

Converts are accepted only when they prove their motivation is solely theological and without regard to any possible personal enhancement. The prospects of marriage to a Jew, or financial gain are considered unacceptable motivations.

> When the would-be proselyte presents himself, he should be examined lest he be motivated to enter the congregation of Israel by hope of financial gain or social advantage or by fear. A man is examined lest his sole motive be to marry a Jewish woman, and a woman is questioned lest she have similar desires toward some Jewish man. If no unethical motive is found, the candidate is told of the heaviness of the yoke of the Torah and how difficult it is for the average person to live up to the commandments of the Torah. . . . If the candidate goes through all this and is not dissuaded and it

> is apparent that his motives are of the best, he is accepted (for conversion).[51]

The potential convert must exhibit both a knowledge of the possible hardships entailed in becoming Jewish, and at the same time not consider himself worthy of becoming Jewish. Caro codifies the talmudic practice we discussed in the previous section. He quotes directly from Yebamoth 47a:

> When one presents himself as a candidate for conversion, he is asked, "What motivates you? Do you not know that, in these days, Jews are subject to persecution and discrimination, that they are hounded and troubled?" If he replies: "I know this and yet I regard myself as unworthy of being joined to them," he is accepted immediately.[52]

The law thus suggests that only those individuals sincerely devoted to the ideals of Judaism could become eligible for conversion. Such an action could not legally be undertaken for less than ideal, theological reasons.

The Conversion Process

Once an individual is accepted for conversion, a program of study becomes mandatory. The would-be convert is expected to be familiar with the basics of Jewish theology, the mitzvah system, and at least the basics of how to lead a Jewish life. Moreover, he is to be instilled with a desire to continue to study to gain a greater mastery of Jewish teachings. Throughout this period he is to be exposed to both the positive and the negative, and always he is free to change his mind about conversion.

> The root principles of our faith, i.e., the unity of God and the prohibition of idol-worship, are expounded to him at considerable length. He is taught, too, some of the simpler and some of the more difficult commandments; and he is informed of the punishment involved in violating the commandments.[53]

Specifically, the convert is to be informed of both "major" and "minor" commandments, the rewards for fulfilling them and the penalties for the failure to perform such acts. All this education is put in terms of attempting to dissuade the potential convert from completing the conversion process. The convert must have a thorough understanding of the concept of the "yoke of the law." Caro cites the following examples,

> He (the convert) is taught . . . "Until now, if you did not observe the dietary laws, you were not subject to the punishment of being cut off from your people; if you violated the Sabbath, you were not subject to the punishment of stoning; but now you are subjecting yourself to the possibility of such punishment.[54]

At the same time, the convert is shown the rewards for keeping the commandments:

> . . .so too is he told of the rewards for observing them, particularly that by virtue of keeping the commandments, he will merit the life in the world to come. He is told that no one is considered wholly righteous except those who understand and fulfill the commandments. He is also told,
>
> "Know that the world to come is intended only for the righteous. When you see Jews in distress in this world, their suffering is in reality future merit stored up for them in the world to come. Unlike the idolators, Jews do not receive the major portion of their reward here, lest they

> become puffed up with pride and go astray and lose their eternal reward. Nevertheless, the Holy One, blessed be He, does not overburden them with troubles that might cause them to perish. On the contrary, the idolatrous nations will perish but Israel will survive.[55]

In these statements we can see an ambivalence in Jewish law toward the convert. Jews are not to seek out converts. They are to explain the difficulties of being Jewish in an effort to dissuade the convert from converting. Yet, once a non-Jew has demonstrated his sincerity in wishing to join himself to the Jewish people through a belief in God and a willingness to live according to His commandments, Jews are to accept him.

Conversion Requirements

Conversion is a three-fold process. The first stage is acceptance of the convert and a period of study as outlined in the preceding section. Then, once the convert has demonstrated his readiness to accept the Jewish law and theology, the male convert is circumcised. For a man the primary symbol of conversion is circumcision, with the stated aim of entering into the covenant of Abraham.

> The first requirement for a male proselyte entering the Jewish fold is circumcision. Even if he was previously circumcised or if he was born circumcised, it is still necessary to draw a drop of blood of the covenant.[56]

The final stage (for males, allowing time for the circumcision wound to heal completely) is immersion into the Mikvah. Thus, Caro outlines the conversion process as follows:

> The process involved in preparing a candidate for conversion-instruction, circumcision, and immersion requires the presence of a legal court of three learned Jews. The ceremony should be performed in the daytime.[57]
>
> Since the immersion of a proselyte requires a Jewish court of three men, the ceremony cannot be held on the Sabbath or a holy day or at night (because a Jewish court is not permitted to meet at these times); but if a convert can prove that he was immersed in the presence of three Jews, his conversion is considered valid, no matter when the immersion ceremony was performed.[58]

However much the convert is to be discouraged, it is a "commandment" for Jews to accept converts. Accordingly, Caro cites the correct benediction for one who circumcises a proselyte:

> Praised are Thou, O Lord our God, King of the universe, Who hast sanctified us with His commandments and commanded us to circumcise proselytes. In Israel, an additional blessing is said with regard to the drawing of blood of the covenant for, were it not for the blood of the covenant, heaven and earth could not exist.[59]

Significantly, the act of circumcision is to be regarded as a religious commandment, and not as a matter of health. Circumcision represents the covenant between God and the Jewish people.

Acceptance into the Jewish Community

Having converted officially, the convert still is required to provide witnesses of his conversion to obtain full membership into the Jewish community. Thus we find the law:

> A non-Jew who declares: "I was properly converted in such-and-such a Jewish court may not join the Jewish community until his conversion is established by witness thereto.[60]

The convert is regarded with continued suspicion. The burden of proof of his conversion rests with his lifestyle. The crucial test comes when the convert wishes to marry a Jew. Here, the halachic authorities demonstrate the traditional two strains of emotions toward converts who converted in different locales:

> . . . However, if such persons are observed over a period of time to be living as faithful Jews and keeping all the commandments, these are regarded as converts, even though there be no witnesses to prove that they were ever formally converted. Nevertheless, if such an observant person wishes to marry a Jew, he must either bring positive proof of conversion or undergo ritual immersion for the specific purpose of conversion. There is also a strong opinion that one who comes and states that he is a non-Jew who has been converted properly is to be believed. Maimonidis explained that, where the Jews are in the majority, the non-Jew who claims to be a convert is to be believed but, where the Jews are in the minority, the non-Jew is not to be allowed to marry a Jew unless he brings proof of conversion, because, in the latter instance, he is transferring from a less to a more favorable moral environment.[61]

Proof of conversion is essential for the acceptance by the community. Moreover, this proof gains added importance if the convert moves from one locale to another where the authorities are not known to each other.

Conversion as a Benefit

The Shulhan Arukh takes as a principle that a man may do a benefit for a second man without his permission. Using this principle, it deems the offspring of a pregnant woman who converts to be Jewish[62] and it allows a Jewish Bet Din to convert a minor orphan. However, in the latter case, the child may void the conversion upon reaching maturity.[63]

Summary

We have seen within this sampling of key laws an ambivalence within the greatest of Jewish legal codes toward the convert. Conversion is recognized to be a legitimate action, but much skepticism is encouraged in dealing with each convert. Converts are to be warned of the drawbacks should they convert, yet at the same time are to be told of the rewards of the righteous Jew.

The key elements in conversion are: (1) the application of the convert for membership into the Jewish group; (2) a period of education about Jewish thought, and major and minor commandments; (3) circumcision or the drawing of a drop of blood for men; (4) ritual immersion in a mikva in the presence of three learned Jews--Bet Din. Once a convert has completed these stages and shown proof of this to the community, he is to be accepted as any other Jew.

Conversion in the Reform Movement

While Conservative and Orthodox rabbis all adhere to the traditional halacha, with slight variation depending upon their understanding, most

Reform rabbis make no such claim. Each rabbi determines, according to his own understanding of the halacha, the conversion process, and conscience, his criteria for conversion. More traditional rabbis part company with Reform rabbis on those instances when conversion is asked for the sake of an impending marriage. While traditionalists would doubt the sincerity of such a convert, and refuse to perform a conversion, the opposite would likely be the case within Reform circles.

What then are the requirements of Reform rabbis? This author interviewed seven rabbis of Reform congregations in Cincinnati and Dayton, Ohio. Three types of conversion programs are found to exist: (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. This class is sponsored by the Union of American Hebrew Congregations and is available to all the Reform congregations in the area. In addition to the class, the convert is expected to meet periodically with the rabbi of his or her Temple who will perform the conversion.

In each of these situations, the rabbis stress the "basics" of Judaism, assigning between seven and eleven books and encouraging even further study. The areas covered included: 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." Periods of study range from four months to one year.

No rabbi interviewed either required or urges immersion, or circumcision. Five rabbis indicated they would not take part in such rituals, while two indicated that they would, if the convert initiated these rituals.

One rabbi has instituted a Bet Din in his Temple, comprised of officers of the congregation. The Bet Din's purpose differs from its Orthodox counterparts in that its role is to welcome converts into the congregation and clear up any doubts or questions the convert has prior to the conversion ritual.

While all rabbis encourage potential converts to attend services regularly while preparing for conversion, none makes this a hard and fast requirement.

Each rabbi's program is slightly different in emphasis, but all share the basic requirements of study, periodic visits with the rabbi, and occasional counseling. When both rabbi and convert feel that the convert is "ready," a conversion service is scheduled. Generally, these 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. The other does so only at the specific request of the convert.

We see considerable variation in the duration and intensity of study, the type of ceremony, the number of contacts between rabbi and convert. Yet each of these elements comprises the basic conversion programs offered through the Reform movement.

CHAPTER TWO

ZELDA KLEIN: THE REBORN CONVERT

Zelda's Background

Brought up as a Baptist, Zelda, 49, converted six years ago. Her deceased husband was Jewish. She married at age 28, has three sons, and works as a teacher's aide. Her husband worked part-time as a salesman, and also for an architect. She was raised on a farm in the South, the second of three surviving sisters. "Some people," she claims, "were jealous because we were all such a close-knit family." Zelda was graduated from high school. She remembers,

> As kids growing up (we went to church a great deal), but when we moved to Dayton, we just kind of got away from going to church . . . But after I got married, I started going to Church. Especially after Jon was born, I felt I needed to go to church, or somewhere or something. So we went to different churches. My husband went with me. Then I went to the one that he chose. He didn't belong to one, but he would go with me, anywhere or to whichever one I wanted to go to. He did like one the best, and that was the Baptist church over here on (Maple) Street. I said, "That's where we'll go if you with me." My husband was born a Jew, but he didn't insist that I go to Temple or anything.
>
> The minister at the Baptist Church was really nice . . . he was a nice person. When he preached, his sermons didn't talk about every other denomination. . . . After I had three children, it became a hassle to drive all the way across town to that church. Then I went to the Southern Baptist church (closer to home). I joined the church, but I didn't really like it . . . I never felt that I did believe what they were preaching . . . So I guess it wasn't meant to be.

Reverend Peach was a great guy. But the others--(negative tone of voice)--I just don't know. (They all behaved as though) their way was the only way!

Some of the people over here at the Southern Baptist Church wouldn't speak to my husband outside of the Church, but they were decent enough if he came with me to church to speak. But that was it. (There was no real attempt to socialize.)

We did listen to sermons on the radio, and then, any one we liked, or thought we would like, we would go to his church . . . for a visit.

I think my husband was the first Jew I ever met. (That fact) didn't bother me, because I loved him. Right after we met, I knew I loved him. And I think he did too. So far as I knew, my husband never practiced Judaism during the time we knew each other. But, without my knowledge he did attent High Holy Day services.

Zelda's Conversion

Wednesdays were my one day a week that I could have free . . . so one Wednesday I went to my mother's and took the baby. And as I went down XXX Avenue, past the temple, everyone was going in for the High Holy Days. And I had the weird, awful feeling that I should be going there. I just, I just . . . something was, you know, bringing me there. And I thought, well, what would they say? I've never been (to Temple) before. I don't know what it's like. I don't have any idea whether they would even let me in or not. I don't know what in the world I'd do with the baby, 'cause he was little and he could have cried out (during) the service. And what would they say?

I just had the thought that I should be there. Why--I don't know. That's God's work, I guess.

I went home, spent the day with my mother, and came home not realizing how sacred the holy days were. I called the temple and asked to talk to Rabbi Israel who is deceased now. He was accepting calls at home. I called him (there) and told him how I felt and what I wanted to do and he made me

quite welcome and as if to say, "Why have you waited this long to do this?"

My husband was in the temple that day, but I didn't know it at the time. He didn't tell me (beforehand), because I guess he didn't want to beg me to go or ask me to go and make me feel that I should if I didn't want to.

When I came back I told my husband about my experience. He didn't say much, but he was very pleased. My husband went to all the conversion classes with me. From that point on we had the Friday night meal, and lit the candles and everything. Always together. We had Hanukah instead of Christmas trees (laugh).

My children were very happy . . . Of course my youngest had been in a Nursery (school), but not in the church or a Sunday school. He was too little to know what was going on. But the other two boys just accepted it as absolutely fabulous. They were welcomed by the other kids in the religious school.

I had no qualms. I just said that's what we're going to do. And we registered in religious school and were very, very happy. They accepted Hanukah over Christmas, and they thought that was great and they just moved up. Up to this point now. And of course my youngest is further along in the Jewish religion, naturally you can understand that. Because he started through kindergarten. He said right away that he was going to be a rabbi.

Making It Formal

We went to (conversion) class every Sunday afternoon. But really, I didn't get out of it what I wanted. It was too deep for me. I'm not that well-educated and I think that Rabbi . . . well, let me just say that for me it was too much. I learned the most that I learned--of course I went to the classes, and apparently it was OK by the rabbis--or they wouldn't have converted me. But I read the storybooks out of the library with the kids. I went from kindergarten level through all the books. And I learned there.

And then there was the conversion ceremony which wasn't all that much, but I did invite some friends and family.

Analysis

Zelda's case is important for us because her motivation is relatively clearcut. She reports what she interprets as a truly religious experience. This is the closest experience in Judaism to that of the "born again" Christian. Zelda can be studied as representative of this type of convert.

Zelda's background is that of a relatively poor, Southern farm girl. Religion played an important role in her early childhood family life. She makes a connection between active church attendance and her cohesive family structure.

From the time she moved to Dayton until her marriage, church attendance slackened off. This would be expected, because it was the one time in her life when she was not an active member of a nuclear family. However, once she married, church (i.e., religion) regained its former importance. When she became a mother, she sensed an even greater inner need to become involved. On one level, she looked to the church for individual support, but on another level, she looked to the church for a sense of cohesiveness for the family.

At no time did her husband indicate a desire to be active in a Synagogue. Indeed, he went with her to several Christian churches. The husband apparently never told her of his continued Jewish marginality. She claims not to have known he was in the Temple when she had her "religious experience," but her conversion may have been an attempt to please her husband, and create family unity around his native "church," veiled in religious terminology from her past. Coming from a

religious background stressing a "born again" experience regarding Jesus, she translates such a conversion into terminology suitable to Jews.

One important factor in her conversion to Judaism was the reluctance of the people in the discussed Baptist church to accept fully her husband. Although she remembers her pastor there fondly, the people who fulfill the role of an extended family only tolerate her and her family. Such a relationship conflicted with her early remembrances of the warmth and acceptance found in her church. Having experienced both positive acceptance associated with family unity and bare tolerance not conducive to family feelings, she was confronted with a need to change churches. Listening to the radio sermons of the various ministers was an attempt to find a church with a "welcome" message. Indeed, these radio sermons amounted to an invitation to the various churches and the hope of affiliation. Although she does not tell us much about these visits, we assume that they did not meet her needs for family unity by accepting her husband into the Christian fold. Such needs could only be fulfilled through a unification based on his prior affiliation. The need for such a unification made itself apparent when she drove past her husband's temple on the High Holy Days.

Zelda's husband was the first Jew she ever met--prior to her initial contact with the rabbi, she knew almost nothing about the Jewish religion or lifestyle. She did not comprehend the difference between any of the various Christian churches and the Jewish Temple. For her, Temple was just one more "church," and she approached it as such. She took the sum total of her prior religious experiences and

applied them to Judaism. Initially, Judaism might have been just one more Protestant denomination. Her conversion experience, in keeping with her background, was nonintellectual. It arose from an inner need for family closeness and unity. The religious group becomes a surrogate for extended family, giving a mooring to the nuclear unit.

Her conversion might be viewed not as a change, but as a substitution of values and symbols. The change is outward, and is manifested by the change in religious schools for the children, and the substitution of Hanukah for Christmas, etc.

As conformation of our theory, we specify again her report of her husband's attitude and reaction. His attendance at High Holy Day services without her knowledge is testament to his continuing affinity for Jewish behavior, despite his frequent appearances in church. He welcomed his wife's "religious experience" and reinforced it by attending conversion classes with her. Her conversion to Judaism not only united her family around a common religion, but more importantly, it united them in common religious practice and a common community. The Jews at the Temple accepted both her husband and her, and provided the support to the family structure which was not found in any Christian group.

Her children were not required to undergo a conversion experience. They were enrolled in the religious school of the Temple. Zelda reports, "They (the children) didn't convert. They just went to Sunday school. The rabbis and everyone (else) accept them as Jewish kids." Once again the pattern of parents and children going to "church" is re-established.

While the model presented so far does explain some underlying motive for the conversion, it does not do justice to the full measure of conversion. While Zelda brought to her new Jewish experiences a complete set of Christian models of religion, her own models did change. Her conversion was not one dominated by a change in theology. Indeed, she insists that she always prayed to God, and never through Jesus. What appears to be a spiritual experience enables her to begin a formal conversion program. This program instilled within her Jewish identity models with which to work.

We now return to a verbatim report of her interview to see how Zelda adapted to her new identity.

First Jewish Action

> (The first Jewish thing I did was) lighting the candles on Friday night. After I converted, on our fifteenth wedding anniversary, we were remarried by the rabbi. Of course we didn't buy a license and all this, you know. He did come to the house, and we had a Jewish ceremony, and I had a cake here. I taped it. We still have the tape. I felt complete then. I felt like . . . we had all come together.

It is significant that Zelda's first Jewish action was not attendance at a service in a temple. Given the story of her first attraction to becoming Jewish, that is what we would have expected. Her underlying motivation was a striving for family unity, and such a unity is formed at home, and is shown by the family lighting Shabbat lights. Even more significant is the desire shared by her and her husband to be remarried by a rabbi. It is symbolic of a new beginning together, and of giving to the couple once and for all some sort of religious legitimacy

and authenticity. Indeed, her statement, "I felt complete then. I felt like . . . we had all come together," suggests a self-perception of being less than complete prior to the conversion.

Zelda had a unique experience which drew her toward becoming Jewish. She brings with her a set of expectations molded from her Protestant past. Yet, at some point, she gained a conception of being Jewish as something not limited to sharing a common faith. We are interested in seeing how Zelda perceives of herself now and how she practices her religion.

Zelda's Religious Practice

Zelda goes to Friday night services, "not often enough. Once every two or three months. Which is not right. I don't feel that it is." But, on Saturday morning, she goes--"Yes, I go more often then--during the time of religious school. I asked that my boys be put in the Saturday morning class so that I could go to serves and pick them up." She goes on to tell us,

> I like the chapel better (than the sanctuary). It's small. I like the Saturday morning services, because those that go then are there for the reasons that I feel you should go. Not for to be seen or counted as oh . . . you know . . . they go to get the message or whatever you would call it and hear what the rabbi has to say. And this is what I like best.

Here we examine two concepts. On one hand, Zelda has adopted the Jewish pattern of rather infrequent trips to the temple for Friday night services. On the other hand, she still feels a sense of remorse or guilt for not going. At least to some extent, she equates being a

good Jew with regular Temple attendance. This is a holdover from the perception she had of the good Christian as one who goes to Church regularly. This tension between Jewish non-emphasis on going to Temple and inner need to go resolves itself in her arranging to go Saturday mornings while her sons are in religious school. This convenient arrangement is also a flashback to the days of her youth when the whole family went to church together on Sunday mornings. Outwardly she lives in a totally Jewish style. Inwardly she has brought to that style the Christian concept of the "religious person."

Indeed, her preference is for the service where people come to pray instead of to be seen, where there is a small intimate setting rather than one of show and ostentation. Zelda's level of observance is higher than that of the average Reform Jew. She rigorously observes Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, Passover, and Hanukah.

She maintains that since the time of her conversion her level of Jewish practice has been "just about the same. Except that I don't go to Temple that much." She attributes this change to the fact that her husband is now dead, and she prefers not to go to Temple alone. Such a sentiment further confirms the thesis that the conversion was originally motivated in large measure by a desire to become closer to her husband in religious practice.

Although we place Zelda in the category of the "born again" convert, we recognize that such a categorization must have limited value. While she had the religious experience unique to people in this category, she also had a predisposition to change religious denominations.

Throughout this period of constant change she claims to have felt Jewish without knowing it. When asked when she first felt Jewish and about the conversion ceremony, she replied,

> No, no (the conversion ceremony did not change me) because I think I was a Jew before I ever went to a conversion class. But I didn't know it. Do you understand that? That's my feeling, although no no one else would accept me as one (a Jew).

Many of the converts interviewed for this thesis indicated that prior to their giving serious thought to conversion, they felt somehow Jewish. They saw the entire outward conversion process--from the initial meeting with a rabbi to the conversion ceremony--as merely the formalization of a prior inward, informal conversion. So it is that when asked if she had to give up anything to become Jewish, Zelda's answer was typical: "No, not really." When asked specifically about belief in Jesus, and celebration of holidays such as Christmas and Easter,

> Well, I never felt about Jesus as others did. When I prayed, I never prayed to Jesus. I prayed to God . . . Christmas trees are a lot of fun, but so is Hanukah--more so, really. And Easter wasn't a big deal. It wasn't much to give up. One funny thing, though, I've always eaten pork. My husband ate pork, but after I converted I wouldn't have pork of any kind in the house. I just didn't. No one asked me not to. My husband didn't ask me not to. The rabbi didn't ask me not to. I just didn't.

Zelda brings to her Jewish practice her concepts of the ideal religious individual from her past. While attendance at temple services on Saturday mornings is usually small, Zelda goes out of her

way to make sure that her son is registered for Saturday morning religious instruction. This ensures her convenience in attending Saturday morning services. Also, it is reminiscent of her youth when her parents would take her to church Sunday school while they prayed. Observations of Zelda's activites presents us with a paradox. Zelda partakes more regularly in Jewish activities than most "native" Jews. This is a sign not of being a "better" Jew, but of not being totally assimilated into "feeling Jewish." She approaches this more noticibly in her guilt feelings about not attending more regularly on Friday evenings. Here, she has achieved an average Jewish level of attendance, but still maintains her former attitude of what constitutes the ideal. Strangely, she might be considered most Jewish when, or if, she reaches a point at which her attendance and guilt will both decline even further.

Zelda and the Rabbis

Without exception, every convert felt that his rabbi was especially concerned about him. Zelda first mentions this in connection to her conversion experience when she called the rabbi at home, asking to come to High Holy Day services. Although she insists that the level of the conversion class was above her head, she nonetheless developed a special sense of kinship with her rabbis at her Temple. She tells us,

> Rabbi X, soon after I started conversion and Rabbi Y (his associate) were very good to me. Especially when my husband passed away . . . I don't know but that I couldn't have gotten through if I belonged to some other Church. Because I felt that the people at Temple really did stand by me.

Here she makes a close connection between her rabbis and the members of the Temple. One suspects that the rabbis symbolize the Jewish community for the convert, and that when a kindness is done by the rabbi, it is interpreted as coming from the entire congregation, or Jewish people. The rabbi is not only seen as the representative but the embodiment of Jewishness. Consequently, the expressed doubt about other religions "standing by me" at a time of great stress is to be seen as the convert's perception of the closeness of the Jewish people, and the application of application of a positive value to such a sense of kinship or caring.

Zelda is atypical in that after a period of years, she returned to the Temple and sat in on the conversion classes again. This time, they were taught by a newly-ordained rabbi. She explains why:

> I didn't know the (Jewish) customs. I didn't know anything. Period. I didn't know how to prepare the meals (for holidays). Rabbi Z started at the very, very beginning, as even the kids in kindergarten, and that's what I needed to know. Even though I was an adult, I didn't know even the basics. That class was great. Last year I worked with a Catholic girl who was not converted yet, but was in the process. I tried to impress on her how much more knowledge she received from Rabbi Z than I received in my (original) conversion class.

Clearly the major distinction to be made between Zelda's former church hopping and her conversion to Judaism is her commitment to live Jewishly. While she remains relatively uninterested in learning Jewish theology in any depth, she does want to learn how to act Jewishly. This entails a knowledge of "Jewish cuisine," holiday customs, and the

like. For such a knowledge she returned to the conversion class. Yet there is a basic difference in her self-perception between the first and second time around.

> I went (to the second conversion class) because I think Rabbi Z is a fabulous person. And I wanted to know more, because when I went through it (the first time), I was scared to death. I was afraid I wouldn't be able to convert. And so much of it I didn't understand. I'll never live long enough to know all that I want to know. I just felt I wanted to go back. And from Rabbi Z it just rolls out and I listen to every word he says. That was one important thing that made me want to go back. I may go back again sometime.

Here we see the development of a rabbi-disciple relationship. Zelda indicated in passing that she was drawn to Rabbi Z originally, because he taught a class in which her son was enrolled. The son thought highly of the rabbi. Rabbi Z's teaching skills are evident. Yet critical to the development of the relationship was the convert's new status--she was no longer in need of proving her worth. Having reached a point where she was confident of passing, she could then sit down and study Judaism comfortably.

What Kind of Jew Is Zelda the Convert?

Zelda probably converted to unify her family. We might assume from this that her model of the Jew as that of a member of a strong family and ethnic unit. Yet, Zelda clearly brings to her Judaism a sense of, and desire for, religion. Zelda is a believing person. She believed that she had a spiritual experience while in her car, driving past her Temple one Yom Kippur. While she has a strong desire to be

accepted as a Jew by Jews, she thinks of Judaism as "the Jewish religion. When someone says, 'You're Jewish,' I take it to mean that I practice the Jewish religion."

While there are unquestionable reasons for her original attraction to Judaism, she has adopted for herself a religious Jewish identity. When asked, she states that for her, the most important Jewish holiday is Yom Kippur. She says of it,

> I guess Yom Kippur makes you reflect back on what you should have done. It makes you think. At least it does me. I don't know if that's for everyone, but for me it is. It shouldn't be just a holiday. This is one thing that upsets me. And of course I can't say that against anyone else, because I've fallen into the same bad habits of not going to Temple every Friday night--or not even every other Friday night. But I feel my excuses are valid. But of course they're not. Not more than anyone else's. One thing that bothered me the most is that Temple is absolutely overflowing on the High Holy Days, and there are two services, but any other Friday night, you can always count the people. And this upsets me more than anything else. But as I said I've fallen into the same pattern. It shouldn't be. And I don't feel happy with myself for doing it.

We note that she did not point to Passover, a family home holiday par excellence, but to Yom Kippur. Here, the emphasis is purely religious and spiritual. From her answer we surmise the great importance she attached to Shabbat. Shabbat, in the sense that she refers to it, is a Synagogual holiday, and it shares with Yom Kippur a sense of spirituality. Clearly this is arreligious value found in Judaism, and one which Zelda emphasizes because of her Christian background. Zelda is little concerned to go out of her way to demonstrate

for Israel, has little sense of kinship with Soviet Jewry. She is religious, and from such a perspective she gleans her Jewish identity.

Problems Zelda Has Encountered

The first problem Zelda encountered was that of her mother. She tells us, "I don't think my mother ever really accepted my conversion. But my dad didn't say one way or the other. I guess it was OK with him." Yet this first obstacle seems not to have deterred Zelda's determination to convert and at the same time retain a relationship with her parents. Zelda was hesitant in the interview to supply detailed information about her mother's reaction to her conversion. She said she maintained a close relationship despite the conversion.

The most significant problem seems to have been Zelda's desire to be accepted by Jews and her fear that she would not be accepted. We heard above that she was reluctant to speak up in her conversion class lest she not gain admittance. We remember that Zelda considered herself a Jew from the time of her spiritual encounter. Her problem, then, was going through the motions for converting in order to gain the status of a convert and the title of a Jew.

Summary

Zelda represents those converts we place in the "born again" classification. Here, the conversion is consciously motivated by a sudden, unmistakable "religious experience." Underlying such an experience is a need for family unity.

Converts in this classification tend to be from the lower end of the socioeconomic spectrum, have minimal education, and view religion as an emotional rather than intellectual activity. The conversion experience is nonintellectual, and predicated upon earlier Christian ideas of the religious ideal. Jewish actions are undertaken willingly and they serve as substitute sources of identity. Yet, the conversion experience is real, and it plays a continuing and vital role in the lives of the convert and family.

CHAPTER THREE

SARAH SMART: THE QUESTIONING CONVERT

Sarah, 30, and her older brother are the only children of an upper middle class, Episcopalian marriage. Both children were sent away from home to attend college preparatory schools. She and her father have completed three years of college, while her mother has received an M.A. Sarah married an Episcopalian at 19, and had a son two years later. This marriage ended in divorce, and at 26 she remarried, this time to a Jew. Three years after this marriage, she decided to convert to Judaism. Her husband, a high school graduate, is a vice president of marketing for a grocery chain store. She sells advertisements for a local radio station.

What follows is a case study of a convert whose motivation is an intellectual search for a religion with meaning and personal acceptance. Sarah is representative of this type of convert, middle or upper middle class, articulate, and educated. While partaking fully in the prevailing values of American society, such converts do not find personal fulfillment within this social system.

Sarah's Family Background

Sarah reports that her father was "very successful." His job required extensive travel. Once Sarah went to school, her mother devoted time to volunteer work. Her family, she recalls, was "not very close." Sarah and her brother are "closer now than (we were) when growing up. He is very protective of me." Sarah's parents are

divorced--her father lives in Florida, her mother in Sarah's city. Sarah thinks that when growing up, both she and her brothers were "loners."

Sarah reports ambivalence in her family's religious actions:

> My father let mother choose three Sundays a year when he would accompany her to church . . . the other Sundays was golf for him . . . I was brought up as what my mother called a "good Episcopalian." I was baptized, confirmed, had perfect attendance for 14 years at Sunday school.
>
> I really kind of dropped out in college. I grew up in the "questionable 60's" and getting answers to questions became very important.
>
> In high school there were a group of us who did everything together--we joined choir, overnights, youth groups. We had a super minister who was a great motivator for us. He left, and when I asked the same sorts of questions from the other priest there, he always said, "believe it on faith." That was very upsetting to us back then and I think a lot of us left. When I went to college, (church) just didn't happen to be on the schedule. Sundays were for recovering from Saturday night.

Sarah received conflicting examples of Christian religiosity. Her father's marginality opposed her mother's fulfillment of societal expectations for the "good Episcopalian." The young priest's flurry of religious activity and answering of questions differed radically in both style and content from the older priest's passivity, and theological ideas on faith. Significantly, her religious activity was based on a group of peers. Having no religious solidarity at home, she sought a surrogate kinship in the church.

In part, Sarah was influenced by her peers. Also significant were "the times." During the "questionable 60's" students sought

relevancy, and asked critical questions cutting to the core of both church and state institutions. Such an antagonism between the youth of the 60's and the establishment became the basis for Sarah's initial rejection of her Episcopalian identity. Paradoxically, her search for a heightened sense of Christianity led toward her ultimate acceptance of Judaism. She recalls:

> We were asking things about the Old Testament. I remember also asking if Jesus had any brothers or sisters. The answers were never explained (by the older priest). I asked a lot about other religions. We asked to visit a Jewish synagogue, but were put off. We wanted to get into religions--like take a program on and do--a week here or there and visit a synagogue or another church. And it never seemed to materialize.

Sarah actively sought out her authentic identity through religious programming--she was motivated by her need to understand the answer to the questions: "Who am I and what do I believe?" While the young pastor met these needs for a period, he was viewed as "temporary help." The other pastor's reversion to the old-time "believe it on faith" was an unacceptable answer to questioning minds like Sarah's.

Sarah's Conversion

Soon after her second marriage, she informs us,

> I contacted Temple. I started in the conversion class, but was unhappy. I stayed with it four to six weeks, but then dropped out. I was hoping to get some answers. I really wanted someone not to say, "Believe me because I'm telling you it's so." . . . I really needed someone to talk to me and give me a logical explanation of religion.

> I called Rabbi A., who was the rabbi at the temple before Rabbi Z. He said he wasn't excited about me converting. He had a lot of negative feelings about it, and said, "we don't go out and get converts."
>
> But I felt I wanted to be a part. When we went to Don's family, it was so close. I felt like an outsider. This was just another motivator. He never said anything to me--never said to go to conversion class. He didn't care. So I was on my own.

Sarah's husband is typical of converts' spouses. He has a religious background and acts out a rejection of that background by marrying a non-Jew. Sarah reports elsewhere in the interview that her husband's first wife was also an Episcopalian, and that his family was Orthodox.

Rabbi A's initial rebuff lasted for three years. Then, Sarah returned to the same temple and was welcomed by A's successor, Rabbi Z. His approach was markedly different:

> I wanted to see him. I told him what I wanted to do. He said, "Why?", then sat back in his chair. The class really was not ready to start at that time. It gave me a little more time to think. He was very enthused for me because I was enthused about it (converting). He was willing to talk to me about it and answer my questions. He was pleased that I wasn't doing this just because I was marrying Don, and he did give me his views about it. He wouldn't have left me out, but was pleased that I had been married three years before I started this class. He wanted somebody who would come to Temple, to do things, to participate. That was the feeling that I had, too.

This first interview with Rabbi Z came at a time when Sarah had no real religious alternatives to Judaism. She had been shunned by her native church, first for her divorce, and then for her marriage to a

Jew. She had rejected her church's attitude of "believe it on faith," and she in turn had been rejected by the church. Parallel to such rejection is the acceptance offered by the Jews. She recalls,

> I felt I wanted to be a part. When we went to XXX to meet Don's family, it was so close. I felt like an outsider. This was just another motivator.

Although the husband rejected any formal ties to Judaism, his family's closeness is perceived by the convert to be a function of their Jewishness. The potential convert seeks such closeness and views conversion as a means to this end.

Because Sarah delayed three years after her marriage before converting, Rabbi Z's reception was perceived as being especially warm. From his perspective, this was a conversion without ulterior motive. We see, however, two important factors motivating Sarah toward conversion. First is her search for an intelligible religious faith, and second is unification of her family. While this second reason is of considerable importance, it is significant that Sarah recalls "dating a lot of Jewish boys in college." Indeed, she remembers each of them as "very considerate, very kind, very generous, very thoughtful." Asked if she felt strange going out with Jews, she replied, "No, absolutely not!"

Sarah's background indicates that she was predisposed favorably toward Jewish people, and by extension, to accepting a Jewish identity. Certainly, by restricting herself to dating Jews while in college, she enhanced her chances of ultimately marrying one, and converting for the sake of creating a single family religion. But the question must be raised: why would she create this situation to begin with?

One might suggest that given an unstable childhood homelife, she looked at Jews as representing a warm, stable home environment. We could posit that she dated Jews in hopes that one would provide her with the stable home as an adult that she missed as a child. Clearly, such a motivation is present with many converts in this class. This would be especially true in cases where a first marriage to a non-Jew ended in divorce.

Yet, we are dealing with an intellectual motivation above and beyond other sociological considerations. Sarah's conception of the conversion process, and the very essence of Jewishness centered around studying Judaism rather than praying, or acting out Jewishness in some other fashion. We have seen above her constant search for someone to make sense of religion for her. This opportunity finally appears in the form of her conversion class. She describes this experience as:

> . . . The greatest time in my life. Rabbi Y (the assistant rabbi at her Temple) led the class. He wanted my husband to attend if possible. He said, "We're going to teach him a few things." I like that attitude. Now I'm an authority on whatever questions come up on religion. My husband defers all questions to me. My attendance at the class was perfect . . . his wasn't quite as good when Ohio State played football, but for the most part he was there every Saturday.
>
> The classes were something we looked forward to. I wish they had lasted longer, and that there was still a class that I could go to. It was an absolutely beautiful experience--a real learning experience.
>
> Most impressive was Y's discussion on Christianity. He did two sessions on that. It was embarrassing not to be able to contribute, but everyone was in same boat as I . . . We still get together to discuss such topics. The class was a very moving experience, something I'd go through again . . .

Significantly, Sarah is most interested in her rabbi's lectures on Christianity. Here we find a repeat of her earlier positive high school experience with a young clergyman, although in a different context. In both instances, young clergymen were willing to discuss her concerns. While these concerns may not be termed "scholarly," they are academic and intellectual, not emotional or non-cognitive. Sarah's concern for studying is demonstrated by her enthusiasm for the conversion class, and her desire to repeat this experience. She reports that after the class concluded she "felt a void."

Sarah's rabbis required all converts to meet with members of the Temple Board prior to conversion. This Reform Bet Din has a purpose of allowing the convert to raise any questions and articulate feelings prior to a conversion ritual. She remembers,

> I was so nervous. I went there, and they asked me questions for about an hour. I was very comfortable. My feelings were very hard to describe, but it was a very special moment. They made it clear that the questions they asked me had no right or wrong answers. They just wanted to discuss things like what my religion meant to me, how I was going to raise my child, what we were going to do in the home, how I felt about Israel and more. They especially wanted to know if I would become an active member in Temple. After it was all over I got a big kiss and hug from both rabbis. Rabbi X set up a date for the conversion ceremony.

Such a ceremony formalized the community's acceptance of the convert. The experience by its nature plays upon both the rational and emotional elements of the convert. The convert is required to articulate thoughts and feelings about becoming Jewish, about anticipated dilemmas, and the conversion experience. Sarah, understandably, approached the

Bet Din with both fear and comfort. She seeks acceptance, fears rejection, but she relates to the experience in an academic fashion. She gives the answers as if it were a regular exam. She sets herself up as the expert student, demonstrating her mastery of the material covered in class.

Sarah's Jewishness

When asked what they think is the most important Jewish holiday, converts interviewed split about evenly between Yom Kippur and Passover. However, all those whom this author considers to be in the category of "intellectually motivated" answered Yom Kippur. In part this is to be viewed as a carryover from their Christian origins. Yom Kippur is the Jewish Holiday par excellence observed in the temple (church) rather than in the home, stressing prayer rather than observance of some other ritual, and man's atonement for sins. In each of these areas, Yom Kippur can be seen as a holiday which by its nature is closer to the Christian religious ideal than the Jewish history or ethnicity found in other holidays.

When Sarah reports that Yom Kippur is the most important holiday, we must bear in mind her High Church, Episcopalian background. The closest she can come to achieving this type of religiosity within a Jewish framework of group acceptance and cognitive acceptance is on Yom Kippur. Indeed, her concept of "religious action" did not change with her conversion. When asked what her first Jewish act was, she replied, "I'm sure I did nice things for people before I converted, and

I consider that Jewish." Being Jewish is no different than being Christian in that both have as primary religious actions being nice to others.

The highlight of her conversion is both the unification of her family with one religious title, "Jew," and the finding of some understanding of religion. It was her rabbi in the conversion class who finally made sense of Christianity for her. Through this pursuit, she became at ease theologically, and intellectually with a new identification: "Jew." She began to feel Jewish prior to the actual conversion and remembers that she "resented anyone assuming that I wasn't (Jewish)."

Problems Facing Sarah the Convert

The convert relates to people around him from the standpoint of a new religious/ethnic identity. Yet, problems arise when those around him do not accept that identity as authentic and valid. Specifically, the convert relates differently to, and is perceived differently by, his native family, spouse, spouse's family, and members of the Jewish community. Finding acceptance and comfort from these varied individuals is often problematic. The more distant from her native nuclear family, the more rational is her approach. Sarah does, however, understand the difficulty her mother has, and says, "I don't react." Even this is based on her essential quality of intellect.

Sarah's family reacted with shock and disbelief when they first learned of her conversion plans. They asked, "Do you know what you're doing? Why are you doing this to us?" The conversion to Judaism is perceived as a direct threat or rejection by the parents. Her father

accepts conversion to a degree. Sarah reports, "I'm sure that he tells his friends that his daughter is Jewish. He considers Jews as tops in their field . . ." Yet, it is clear that this acceptance is predicated upon old stereotypes of the professional Jew.

Her mother is more ambivalent. We learn,

> (She) calls me on Friday nights. She called me on Christmas Eve last year and asked me to go to Midnight Mass. I said, "No, I'm busy." She called me the day of my conversion and asked me what time it was scheduled for. She said she'd be there. She and my grandmother came. I didn't invite her, because I thought it would upset her . . . She didn't and doesn't understand to this day why I converted. . . She mistook my regularity at church for a real religious attitude. She still calls the Temple, "church," and can't bring herself to call it anything but that . . . I don't react.

Sarah's mother and grandmother outwardly accepted the conversion and demonstrated that by their attendance at the event. There still remains an inner, psychological denial of the significance of the event. This takes the form of understanding the synagogue as simply another "church," and the expressed hope that Sarah will again come to church with her mother on Christmas Eve.

Although her husband went through the conversion process with her, Sarah reports that "He calls me a shiksa all the time." She adds quickly that "he is teasing." Perhaps it was the very fact of her gentile origin which originally drew her husband to her. He received what is described as an "Orthodox upbringing and he used to walk to synagogue with his grandparents." In all likelihood, he rejected this type of identity as he grew up, and his marriage to a non-Jew was the height of

that rejection. Her acceptance of his Jewishness is contrary to his rejection of his own identity. It is he who, in the marriage, is reluctant to go to Temple and observe other holidays at home. We can suggest that he relates to his wife as a "shiksa" as the only way he can preserve the marriage. This is a serious problem in many of the cases interviewed for this thesis. Sarah's type of convert somehow intuitively knows not to press the issue. She talks with him periodically and observes by herself those Jewish practices in which he does not want to take part. The potential for conflict remains. She does her part to desensitize the issue by allowing her husband to express himself jokingly, so that the issue need not be addressed head on.

Summary

Sarah is representative of these converts who approach Judaism for what we call intellectual reasons. Such individuals are involved in a search for a religion that makes sense. They are middle to upper middle class in origin, educated and articulate. Parallel to the intellectual questioning is the search for a religious leader who will share her concerns and accept her. This in turn becomes a means of entry into the Jewish group. Significant in this regard is her family's religious ambivalence, her parents' divorce, and her own divorce from her first husband.

It is clear that underlying her conversion was a desire to unify her second marriage and identify with what was perceived as an accepting, theologically acceptable, and long-lasting religious group. We call her motivation intellectual because of her constant questioning--at whatever

level--of religious matters. We are concerned with the fact that it was through a questioning of her native religion's theology, and her rabbi's answering of such questions that she came to feel a sense of Jewish identity. This questioning served as the means, and motivation by which she could gain acceptance into her spouse's family and the more extended kinship of the entire Jewish group at the Temple.

CHAPTER FOUR

SUE'S CONVERSION--A SEARCH FOR EMOTIONAL ROOTS

This chapter will analyze the conversion experience of those seeking in their newfound Jewishness the basis for a stable emotional identity. Converts of this type perceive that they have "always" (or at least for a long period of time) felt and identified themselves to be Jewish. Thus, their formal conversion experience is both the vindicator of such a belief, and the formalization of a conversion which occurred long prior to a first meeting with a rabbi. This type of conversion is motivated solely by a perceived, emotional need to be Jewish. Most of the converts in this category come from the lower to lower middle class, have minimal educational backgrounds, and have experienced a major trauma at some critical period in their emotional development. In such cases, an easy identification with Jews is made because "they too have suffered in their development," and as a consequence they are "kindred spirits." In addition, the potential convert seeks the acceptance and closeness which are felt to exist in Jewish families for a compensation for the trauma which they have suffered. Sue serves as a representative of this type of convert.

Sue's Family Background

Sue's family structure was one of constant change during her early youth. She was adopted when six weeks old. Before she was five her parents divorced, and after protracted legal maneuvers, the court

awarded her father custody of her. When she was seven, her father remarried, to a woman who herself was divorced and the mother of three girls. Her father is described as "a strict German Lutheran," and her mother a "devout Roman Catholic." With the advent of her father's second marriage, Sue "went into the (new) household and decided they were to be her family, no matter what." She decided,

> If I loved them enough the only thing they could do would be to love me back. I was so excited about having a family, there wasn't much I wouldn't do for them. I felt a tremendous need to be part of that family.

Clearly, even at age seven Sue recognized a lack of continuity in her family life, a lack of closeness with her sisters. She consciously decided that this situation must be changed, and worked to do so. She considers that she "made them into a better family." Her role within the family was one of unification, yet she operated from a deep need and desire for acceptance.

Sue, at age thirty-four, married a non-observant Lutheran. They have no children. She converted formally to Judaism at age 46, and is presently 48.

Sue's Religious Background

Although she never made pretenses of being Catholic, Sue received two years of Catholic instruction and reports that she "was bored to death." Yet, she became very involved in attending church between the ages of 18 to 23. She attended both Catholic and Baptist churches,

but reports that neither "took at all," meaning that she was dissatisfied with what she found there. She recalls,

> I've never been that involved with Jesus. There was no conflict in my mind. I never believed in the Trinity. . . . I just couldn't accept that idea. I felt sure there was a Jesus but I wasn't so sure that he was God's son. But I didn't argue about it with anyone.

She reports no early attendance at a Sunday school. Her surge of religious activity coincides with her late adolescent period, and was probably intended to curry favor with her stepmother. It is an attempt on Sue's part to learn about religion and be a part of a group larger than the nuclear family. At this same period, however, she began dating and found that most of her dates and other friends were Jews.

Initial Jewish Contacts

Sue argues that she first became Jewish at age 17, and describes this early Jewishness as:

> Protecting other people, and getting involved on the basis of if anyone did or said something anti-Semitic. For example, at an early job I worked for a kindly, gentle Episcopalian German. He asked me, "I know you love the Jews, but do you have to hate the Germans so much?" I answered, "Only when they act like that (referring to the Holocaust)". I told my parents that I thought I was Jewish. Father said that it was up to me. I thought that if I was the very best person I could be I could change maybe one person's prejudices about Judaism. I wanted to teach people that they must first accept a person as a person, whatever they are.

Elsewhere in the interview she indicates that she looked around one day and suddenly realized that almost all of her friends and dates were Jews. Within her family structure, she took on a Cinderella role in which she would do excessive amounts of work to win the acceptance of her mother and sisters. She was the "odd girl out," and most likely was the butt of jokes and otherwise not fully accepted. She identified with Jews, who at that period in time were first discovering the magnitude of the European Holocaust. Just as she wanted to defend family unity to prevent another family breakup, so too did she want to protect the Jew. She empathized with the individual Jew who had a long history of nonacceptance in the context of a larger society. She was vocal in her defense of both her family unity and protection of Jews from what she perceived as anti-Semitic remarks. From the stage of protecting individual Jews, she progressed to seeing herself in the role of the Jew, and ultimately identified herself to her family as a Jew.

From the age of 17 to 34 she increasingly identified as a Jew. Sue placed a large Star of David in her solarium. She tells of numerous instances where she defends the Jews to those who make anti-Semitic remarks, and she frequently mentions to her friends and husband her desire to convert formally.

The Conversion

Sue's first contact with a rabbi came at the initiative of a friend, and Sue Recalls,

> My friend said she was so sick of hearing me talk about conversion that I should either do it or shut

> up about it. She called her rabbi and handed me the phone. I said, "Rabbi, I'm Sue A., and I have this peculiar problem. I think I'm Jewish and it's time to find out." He responded by saying, "That's certainly an interesting problem." I said, "I want to find out for sure. I want some formal education."

Significantly, her conversion cannot in any way be seen in terms of uniting her home and marriage, since her Lutheran husband remained completely apart from the process. Even though she talked for years of becoming Jewish, a spontaneous stimulus from a friend was necessary for her to initiate the process. This may be seen as an invitation on the part of the Jewish partner to affiliate formally with the Jews, and as such it is an act of acceptance. It is the fear or rejection that prevented this move for so long. Having made the first "official" move, the rest of the process proceeded rapidly.

> Everything clicked right from the beginning. I made up my mind that I couldn't wait, I had waited too long as it was. It was a new experience for me to go to Temple on Friday nights, but since I began I've only missed when I'm out of town. Some people don't think that going to Temple is very important but it has changed my entire life. I really do have a Sabbath. I'm not deeply religious. I believe in God and that's the beginning and end of it. But when I go to Temple on Friday night, I have a really spiritual experience. The week is gone, and I feel better spiritually and physically. I find great peace in observing the Sabbath. And it sets the pace for the new week ahead.

Having made the initial step toward the formalization of her Jewishness, Sue became impatient to demonstrate her affiliation publically. Despite her claim to have felt Jewish since she was 17, she reports that the Friday evening services did significantly affect the quality of her

life and make a profound change in her personality. In an interview with her husband, this fact was independently substantiated. Sue's formal identification with Jews at Friday services, the acceptance of a new mode of prayer, did set a different tone to her existence at home. Her husband claimed that she became "easier to live with."

Sue's rabbi required her to register for an Introduction to Judaism Course, taught under the auspices of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations. While she praised this program for its educational aspects, she is critical that

> It doesn't have enough religion in it. I'm so envious of people who know what's going on in Temple. I would include more ritual, or ceremony (in the conversion instruction). I feel that my rabbi includes more ritual in his services . . . I think it's good to have a class where some want to convert, and others are already Jewish and want to improve their Jewish family life.

Here we learn two significant points. First, Sue's conception of Judaism as a religion rather than ethnic or cultural identity, and secondly the emphasis she places on ritual. She sees in Judaism an authentic, authoritarian identity. The authority of the Jewish tradition speaks to her need for strong family unity, despite the fact that her conversion to Judaism broke her and her husband's identity as a Lutheran family. Significantly, she was raised with much strict discipline throughout the traumatic period of her father's divorce and subsequent adjustment to a new mother and three sisters. We may speculate that it was the authority which she experienced in her years of critical development which led her toward a predisposition to yield to the authority which she experienced in her Jewish relations.

Moreover, she perceives that Jewishness is a force which binds families together. Her conversion to Judaism stems from her inner emotional need, for a strong, cohesive family structure.

Sue's Religion

We have seen above Sue's desire to internalize Jewish ritual, and her constant observance of Shabbat through attending her Temple. Her theology, however, is simplistic, and emotional. She informs us:

> . . . I've always tried to be a good person. I've been very tied to humanity all my life. I've been responsible since I was born. I intend to continue to assume responsibility for other people and to be involved. I couldn't turn my back on anybody. It's unfortunate, however, that the hand that does the feeding gets bit. It took me many years to understand, and this isn't in keeping with God's word. That's how I know I'm Jewish. I've had many conversations with God--ever since I was a little girl. I've gotten mad at Him. I've said to Him, "You've put me here, so help out!" I know there are some people you cannot save--I didn't say they weren't worth saving, but they can't be saved ("saved" refers to physical rather than theological saving). It's heartbreaking; it can tear you up.

God is seen as someone Sue can turn to in time of distress, someone to whom she can ventilate feelings and frustrations, and engage in dialogue. God's major commandment, for Sue, is "being a good person," Nothing is said of complex ethical systems or value structures. This simplistic idea which forms the basis of religion for most converts, and especially those in this class, is retained from earlier Christian origins where God is seen as love and compassion. The key to conversion is the failure of the Christian world to exemplify this simple value.

The true "Christian" must emotionally sever ties with the Christian group and identify himself with the persecuted. Thus for Sue and others, anti-Semitism on a group societal level becomes an attraction to the oppressed class: the Jews.

Sue and the Anti-Semites

Throughout the interview, Sue stressed repeatedly her concern with anti-Semitism, and gave many stories of incidents in which she both stood up for Jews prior to her conversion, and felt personally insulted both before and after the conversion ceremony. As we learned in the section above, "Initial Jewish Contacts," her first perception of herself as a Jewess was when she assumed the role of the protector/defender of the Jewish people. This concern is based totally on emotion. Nowhere do we learn of a previous contact with a Jew, or a study in any form of Judaism. This attachment is not an intellectual one, based on shared beliefs. The intellectual development in terms of study of things Jewish came after the emotional attachment had developed into a firm pattern of defense of the Jews.

If there is a key to understanding Sue's motivation for conversion, it must lie in the uncertainty of her family life, which on a societal level paralleled the uncertain existence of the Jewish people during the decade of the forties. Her deep-seated will to have a strong family was threatened by her position as an outsider. Not only was she a half-sister to the three daughters of her stepmother, but she was ever-conscious of her origins as an adopted child. She experienced rejection as an infant by her natural parents, and as a young child

when her parents divorced. Her personal life was parallel to the Jewish people who had traveled from country to country in the world, sometimes accepted, yet never having established a firm certainty of their continued welcome or very existence. In this context her preoccupation with anti-Semites begins to take on added meaning. Because they threaten the existence of the Jews in a society, they counterpart in her family: her sisters threaten her continued welcome and acceptance by her father and stepmother. Consequently, the stage is set for her initial identification with the Jews, and her ultimate conversion.

Summary

Sue represents those converts motivated by a strong, long-term emotional identification with both individual Jews and the Jewish people. Although this affinity was long in duration, the official conversion program served to heighten her sense of Jewishness through partaking in specific ritualistic Jewish actions. Further, this official process granted her authenticity within the Jewish group which she lacked.

Converts of this type tend to be from the lower middle to the slightly above middle socioeconomic group. Educational level ranges from a high school diploma to some technical or college level courses, but not the completion of a B. A. program or its equivalent. The informal conversion experience is non-intellectual in nature, while the formal program bases itself on experience and a cognitive mastering of some Jewish material. Jewish actions are actively pursued, and

Christian actions dropped. The formal conversion process deepens a longstanding commitment and authenticates the Jewish identity for both society and the convert. Significantly, this conversion is not based on a need to unify a family with one Jewish identity, and in Sue's case it did the opposite. This type of conversion experience is deeply personal, emotional, and powerful.

CHAPTER FIVE

JAMES DREW: THE FAMILY UNIFIER

James, 37, was raised as a Southern Baptist by college-educated parents. James has one brother. His father has always had a management position. James married at age 27, and converted formally two years later. At the time, his wife was pregnant with their first child. James now works as a toy designer. His youth was one of constant movement, as his father frequently changed jobs.

James represents the category of converts who openly maintain that the only purpose of conversion is to foster religious harmony and unity within the home. Converts in this class may ultimately become active and identified Jews, or be pro forma Jews who bear the title "Jew." However, they neither think nor act upon this identification. Conversion may be undertaken to please, or gain acceptance of the spouse, or more often the in-laws. In James' case, the motivation was internal. Although converts of this type act primarily upon the motivation of unifying a family, other intellectual and emotional factors enter into the conversion process. If the family's religious unification is the goal, the question which is raised in any case is: why is the non-Jewish partner converting to Judaism, rather than the Jewish partner accepting a non-Jewish identity? The answer lies in the social and religious background of both individuals.

James' Family and Religious Background

James was born in Wisconsin, moved to a small town in the stage of Washington when he was three, and again to Seattle when he was seven. His brother was born when James was six. James began college, intending to major in Geology, but dropped out and entered the Naval Reserves. Later, he resumed college with a different major. He was graduated was UCLA, moved back to Seattle for two years and then back to California for two years. His job required that he move to southwestern Ohio and at the time of this interview, he was expecting to move once again to an unknown destination. As he was growing up, he did not have a close relationship with his brother, and he attributes this to the six-year age span. He adds, "We always went our separate ways and we still do."

His life can be characterized by one word: mobility. James is a man without ties to any locality, school, or family. He reports a very loose family with which he lost almost all contact during his college years. If the family had a structure, he was the odd man out, the loner.

His parents both received rigid religious upbringings, which they rejected. We learn,

> Mom and Dad both went to church very often when they were young, and they both had religious parents, but they weren't close to it. . . . They didn't go to church much at all when I was growing up. I can only remember that they went on certain holidays. My dad was always turned off because the minister chastised him for not coming more frequently. He reacted to that very negatively.

James reports that he attended Sunday School from age seven to fourteen. He then had a disparaging experience which caused him to become critical of his native religion. The following narrative expresses James' increasing concern over a perceived dichotomy between the truths offered by modern science and those offered by the Southern Baptists.

> When I was little I couldn't recognize hypocrisy. As I got older, it became much more obvious . . . especially learning about the advances of science which didn't jive with the very strict Southern Baptist fundamentalism. I couldn't compromise the two.
>
> And when I saw the minister turn down a black couple from entering the church, I really became violently anti-Baptist. I think I stopped going to church then . . . that was the last straw. To my mind, what the minister did was unforgivable. (This last paragraph was spoken in an increasingly loud and emotional tone of voice.) (softly) I don't think you can compromise a loving, forgiving religion with that kind of action. I didn't want to be associated with it.

Long before he began dating, this quote shows, James demonstrates a critical break with the native religion of his parents, and his affinity for out-groups. In this critical incident, his concern was for a black couple. This same concern is later transferred toward Jews. Further, we learn that an early and formative period James took active, decisive steps to define what religious values should be practiced. Clearly, he would require of any religion an explanation of the workings of the universe and at the same time a promotion of harmony among people.

James' Relationship with His Wife

James met his wife while they were both in college. They studied for exams together and began dating.

> We felt we had a lot of things in common. We went together all through the summer, and agreed that if it worked out, we would consider getting engaged and married. The next term in school we graduated. I went to work for a while and we got married . . . We have a similar reaction to things. Like politics, or to the way people treat each other. We couldn't believe that someone else felt the same. That's what attracted us to each other at first. Although our backgrounds are not much alike, we have a lot of the same qualities and concerns. We both care a lot about people.
>
> I knew my wife was actively Jewish from the day I met her. But I was, at that time, more interested in her as a woman. She was very attractive sexually, and I just didn't care much about religion at that time. I expected it would be a short-term relationship, so religion just didn't make any difference.

Although it is apparent that the relationship began on a sensual level, it grew because of the discovery of shared sensitivities. In the relationship, both partners sought shelter from the world around them. Both entered the relationship estranged from their environment, feeling that they were unique individuals with no conceivable match. Such shared emotions confirmed the "OKness" of each individual, and fostered the continuation and development of the relationship.

Beginning the Conversion Process

Prior to their marriage, James and his wife enrolled in an "Introduction to Judaism" class sponsored by a temple. This class was

required of all converts, but completion of the class does not necessarily entail a conversion. James waited until just prior to the birth of his first child for a formal ceremony. Discussion of religious differences between James and his wife occurred before marriage. He remembers,

> The matter of children came up. I didn't feel very strongly. Let me change that. I felt very strongly about my religious background and I didn't want them to have the same one.
>
> From what I had seen of her family and the way they felt about each other, of course going to the religious school and learning about Judaism, I felt that Judaism was something I could live with as an educated person. And I wouldn't feel like a hypocrite. I especially liked the feeling I was given that I could take from it what I wanted, and reject what I wanted. And I could still be a Jew. From what I had seen of other religions you couldn't do that, so that was very attractive.

Conversion was originally considered in terms of the children. Judaism was a moderately acceptable alternative to the religion he recalled from his youth. Religion as a whole is viewed in marginal terms, as something which children ought to be exposed to, something of value yet something from which James is detached. Religion, in the form of Judaism, was something James could "live with," but at this point no real commitment is in evidence.

The fact that Judaism is viewed at all as something James could tolerate stems from his perception of his spouse's close family structure. He connects the family religious identity with the perceived sense of personal closeness which he views and wishes to create in his

own marriage. Conversion is seen as a means to achieve such closeness, but the conversion experience is not fully complete prior to marriage.

James explains why he converted,

> Before our first child was born, my wife was pregnant then, I decided I wanted to convert--just so that the child would have parents of one religious background, and they wouldn't have to wonder what they were. It would give them security. I've always been a little insecure, and I think I wanted to help them out. I didn't do it out any of any deep need. I felt comfortable. I wanted to relate to other Jews in town as a Jew, but it wasn't really a rejection of my parents' religion, because they really didn't practice one. I wasn't rejecting anything I felt positive about. I was rejecting something I felt negative about.

We can date James' conscious decision to convert. The above quotation indicates that he did this more for himself than he admits. An unborn child needs no sense of religious identity or affiliation. Clearly, the approaching birth represented for him a critical period during which he worked out his own needs although avowing concern in this matter for the child's welfare. His admitted sense of insecurity had to be replaced with a more stable emotional and intellectual grounding. He looked to his wife's native identity as a Jew, with the family connotations we mentioned above, to provide such an identity. This becomes even clearer as he stated (totally out of context), "I wanted to relate to other Jews as a Jew." He reveals to us the beginnings of his more positive identification as a Jew. At this point he seeks the group acceptance of the Jewish people to further assure himself of his worthiness as an individual. To become the senior

member of a nuclear family, he seeks to become a junior member of a larger family: the Jewish people.

First Jewish Contacts and Identifications

Although the critical conversion occurred at a time of serious reevaluation of his life, such reevaluation occurred also at the time James finished college. At that time also, James underwent what we term an "informal conversion to Judaism." Without the benefit of a formal conversion program or ceremony, James gained a sense of Jewish identity. He perceived that his religion and the religion of the Jewish people were one and the same.

> . . . about four years before I converted I knew the things I felt were similar to the things Jews felt. When I met my wife and her family, later, I was convinced that I felt the same way about people, personal responsibilities and everything else which I think about when I think of being Jewish. I felt my religion was the same as the Jewish religion.

Significantly, the convert perceives no change in his own religious attitude. Rather, he experiences wonder that his own religious ideas coincide with those he identities as "Jewish." Once this preliminary identification is made, its logical consequence is the attraction he expresses toward the Jewish people in general, and his wife and her family in particular. This identification, then, can be seen as a preliminary stage in a later formal conversion, or as an informal conversion in and of itself. The conversion, however, is at this point one of terms, where the "I" is perceived to be "Jew" and is not yet public or official.

Acceptance from the In-Laws

Many of our "unifier" converts found conversion to be the line of least resistance toward gaining acceptance into the spouse's family. In these instances, conversion might be looked upon as a "pledge of allegiance" to the new "tribe" of affiliation. James, however, passed this rite of initiation by caring for his wife throughout a long illness during their courtship. This test of affection won his approval by the parents of his wife, and consequently, they made no demand for a conversion prior to marriage.

Ritual: The Event of Conversion

At the time of marriage no conversion ceremony was necessary. A rabbi performed the marriage. James remembers,

> I didn't really feel a need to convert until we decided that we would have a common religious background. The longer I lived with my wife, and the more I was acquainted with her family, the more I wanted to be a Jew. So I didn't really feel a need at the time of the wedding to convert. And then, within two and a half years later, I did. She didn't ask me. No one did. It was my own choice. She already considered me a Jew.
>
> The conversion ceremony is something I will always remember. I was up on the platform in front of the sanctuary, and we had a ceremony in front of her family, and my wife with a pregnant stomach--she was full with child--. It was kind of interesting and symbolic. It was the start of a new life for me, a new way of living.

It is significant that his wife and in-laws considered him as a Jew prior to the time he wished to make a formal commitment to convert. This fact was confirmed in an interview with his wife. He had internalized the value structure of the wife and family, and had brought into his marriage no particular Christian practices which would differentiate him from Jews.

The conversion ceremony, for James more than many converts, was a significant event. It coincided with a perceived change in lifestyle. For an individual who earlier in life could not believe that anyone could share his sensitivities, the ceremony demonstrates his compatibility with, and acceptance into, the Jewish peoplehood. But, of even greater personal significance, is the final recognition of his own worth as demonstrated to him by his new group of identification. The pulpit is regarded as "the platform." He was the center of attention. The presence of family members demonstrates a final, formal acceptance of James, the person. The wife, with "pregnant stomach" represents on one hand the continuing chain of Jewishness throughout the generations, while concurrently bringing to mind the midrash suggesting that each convert be regarded as a newborn infant.

James approached the conversion ceremony as a means of confirming an already changed identity, and as a means of once and for all providing a common religious identity for his family. His conversion experience began with his early rejection of the hypocrisy of his native group. The final ceremony, the conversion event, did serve the purpose of placing James in the focus of attention of his family, thrusting him into a role of active acceptance, and acceptability.

Moreover, the conversion ritual provided him a sense of "newness" and of beginning once again. It did fundamentally change his perception of himself, and consequently of his relationship with wife and family.

Summary

James is representative of the convert who is middle class, educated, disenchanted with his native family and religious identity. He seeks a replacement identity which can harmonize his moral and ethical sensitivities with the conception of the world provided by modern scientific enquiry. Further, his religion must serve to unify men in general, and his family in particular.

His conversion, however, is to be regarded primarily as a sociological and psychological phenomenon. It is a search for an acceptable family unit and a positive self-image. These aims are expressed symbolically via moral and/or theological terminology. The fundamental driving force is the desire to be accepted into an extended family unity, and to provide this unity with a broader sociological base.

CHAPTER SIX

THE PRESENTATION OF TWO CONVERSION TYPOLOGIES AND THE HYPOTHESIS OF CONVERSION AS A SIX-STAGED PROCESS

This chapter has as its purpose the presentation of Albert I. Gordon's typology of converts, and a comparison of this typology to that of the author. The chapter will also proceed to analyze conversion phenomena in terms of a six-stage theory presented by this author. These stages are: (1) a rejection of the original religious identity; (2) exploration for a replacement identification or value system which will culminate in a perceived sense of "feeling Jewish" or "finding Judaism"; (3) learning Jewish concepts on an elementary level coupled with an intellectual acceptance of that which is known about Judaism; (4) emotional acceptance of being or feeling Jewish; (5) enrollment in a formal conversion program; (6) the conversion ritual.

Gordon's Typology

Albert I. Gordon, in The Nature of Conversion, argues that there are three types of converts: Pro Forma, Marginal, and Authentic. This type of typology is based both on the degree of sincerity and the level of observance of the convert. Such a characterization is grounded in the Rabbinic literature and Gordon's case study approach. Gordon explains the characteristics of his three types:

> The Pro Forma Convert has no real interest in conversion as an end in itself. He has an ulterior motive that is most often associated with the desire to marry a person of another faith. He may be concerned with the establishment of some degree of religious "unity" within the family. He believes that a formal submission to conversion will, somehow, "satisfy" his partner in marriage and his spouse's family. In order to meet this requirement, he undertakes to convert and meets all the legalistic and ritual requirements that the church or synagogue, through its clergy, demands. He studies, he memorizes, and otherwise prepares himself so that he may achieve the ultimate goal he has set for himself. He is to be compared to the college student who has registered for a course in which he has not the slightest interest but which, once passed, will provide him with the college credits he needs for graduation. He may pass the course with a high mark and yet acquire absolutely nothing from all thathe has studied simply because he has no real interest in, or concern with it.
>
> The Pro Forma convert observes all the rules; he follows the forms and meets all requirements except the basic qualification of sincerity of purpose. He is a nominal convert, a convert in name only.[1]

Gordon makes a value judgement about this type of convert. He is insincere, and, by implication not a desirable type of individual. His motivation is less than acceptable. For Gordon, the pro forma convert is not converting for theological reasons, but rather for social ones--family peace and harmony. This categorization assumes that such reasons make the conversion less genuine.

Only a convert in this classification would make a statement such as the following, coming from one of Gordon's case studies:

> My formal conversion satisfied them (parents-in-law). Now I was a Jew in name. Our lives haven't been particularly Jewish since the conversion. We have Jewish friends but we have Christian friends also. Our children have gone to a Jewish Sunday

> school and we belong to a temple. But that is all surface stuff. I can tell you honestly, it really doesn't mean a thing.[2]

The crucial factor in placing any individual in this category must be the attitude "it (conversion) really doesn't mean a thing." Gordon does not give any figures relating to the numbers of interviewees, or the percentage of converts whom he would classify as "pro forma". While the author of this thesis readily admits that the sample of 20 converts he interviewed is not necessarily random, not a single interviewee expressed any emotions which would place him in Gordon's "pro forma" category.

The Marginal Convert

> The Marginal convert is distinguished by a desire to retain ties of some kind with the religion of his origin even though he has converted. He is represented here by 5 cases or 11.1 percent of our group. He lives in two worlds, with two religious philosophies whenever possible and is not completely "at home" in either. He celebrates Christmas and Hannukah; Easter and Passover. Such a convert often feels that his marriage has not been properly "blessed," if, having been born into a Catholic family, the marriage service was conducted by a minister or a rabbi. This type of convert, if a Jew who was originally a Christian, cannot understand why Jews will not accept Jesus as the Messiah. He is sorely troubled. . . . an undercurrent of uncertainty, of mixed emotions and equivocation, may readily be discovered."[3]

Gordon dealt not only with conversion to Judaism, but also to Catholicism, and Protestant sects. He finds that marginality has a greater chance of occurrence when the convert converts either to Judaism or from Judaism to Catholicism.[4] Such converts were found

during the research for this thesis. Sue, for example, retains the Christmas tree in an attempt to please her husband. She readily admits that it would be hard to part with even this Christian symbol if she were by herself.

The Authentic Convert

> The Authentic Convert is a term I have borrowed from Hebraic sources. The Hebrew is "Ger Tzedeck" and it means the convert who, for reasons purely intrinsic, has converted to his new religion. Such a convert does not adopt his new faith for reasons either ulterior or negative. He does not convert in order to overcome a personal insecurity, nor does he accept a new and different faith because this may help to assure a happy marriage. This type of convert is concerned only with finding what, to him, is the "true" religion. He is determined to worship God and serve Him with the fullness of his heart, mind and soul. This convert, it seems to me, applies equally well to all converts whose motives are purely intrinsic, be they Protestant, Catholic, Jew, or any other religious philosophy. Authentic converts are to be found among all groups, but, as I see them, they are a minority.
>
> Among the forty-five whose stories I have recorded, I have found fourteen persons (31.1 percent) whom I classify as "authentic converts." The test I have used in all instances is a simple one: Has this convert any other motive for conversion than the desire to find the true God and serve Him to the best of his ability?[5]

Gordon's concept of the authentic convert is a reflection of his own values, and a conception of religion as a fundamentally theological endeavor. For Gordon, religion should be based of one's faith in God, and one's religious identity based on identification with others who share such beliefs and the resulting practices. Accordingly, only

those individuals who convert for purely theological reasons are seen to be "authentic."

The author of this thesis has met only two individuals who could qualify for this classification. Both have husbands who are not Jewish (thereby eliminating the possible "ulterior motive" of conversion for the sake of family unification). Both also fit into this author's category of the "emotional" convert.

Reform rabbis interviewed for this thesis all argued that conversion today is much more of a social and psychological phenomenon than a theological one. This is supported by the fact that 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.

Nonetheless, we must agree that theology does play a significant role. We could accept Gordon's categorization of the "authentic convert" more easily if we would allow for the influence of social factors, and measure "authenticity" on a basis of combined social and theological motivation. We might better suggest that the "authentic" convert is the individual who has become fully acculturated into both the Jewish "religion" and peoplehood.

Analysis of Gordon's Typology

Gordon is correct when he suggests that his typology is "borrowed from Hebraic sources".[6] His authentic convert is analogous to the ger tzedik--the righteous proselyte. His marginal convert is much akin to the ger toshav, the person living in two civilizations

simultaneously. The pro forma convert resembles the insincere proselyte, whom the rabbis would not admit to Judaism. Gordon's attitude, resembling that of the rabbinic tradition, scoffs at such individuals. The fact that Gordon is so directly affected by traditional Jewish attitudes toward, and perceptions of converts is an important position. While the author of this thesis shares Gordon's Jewish background, he also suggests that an alternative typology can be more helpful in conceptualizing the various kinds of converts.

An Alternative Typology

The author of this thesis has identified four basic types of converts on the basis of their motivation. These designations include: the religious experience, the emotional search, the intellectual search, and the family unifier. Each type has been exemplified by the presentation of a case study comprising Chapters Two through Five in this thesis.

We argue for the acceptance of a motivational approach because it assumes that each convert has a varying degree of religiosity, but four basic motivations which can logically lead to conversion to Judaism. A basic desire on the part of converts for family unity is assumed throughout. It is further assumed that the vast majority of converts to Judaism are planning to be married to a Jew, or are already married to one. Basing our typology on descriptive motivation, we attempt to reduce value judgements. Instead we analyze the phenomenon of how converts come to the conversion process.

Conversion: A Six Stage Process

The major hypothesis of this thesis is the theory that the conversion process is comprised of six identifiable stages. These stages assume a prior motivation. The last stage of the process is the conversion ritual, but we will argue that prior to this stage, converts reach a level of "informal conversion," at which point a strong internalization of the identity "Jew" is made. We argue that this is the point at which conversion really occurs, and that consequently, the role of the rabbi is to recognize this stage, and confirm the conversion by formally acknowledging the change in personal status and identity with the conversion ritual. Implied in this statement is the rabbi's responsibility not to perform a conversion ritual prior to this time. We proceed now to examine and illustrate the process of conversion to Judaism.

Stage One: Rejection of the Original Religious Identity

Rejection of one's native religious identity occurs for a variety of reasons. It may result from a critical incident. This is seen in an interviewee's childhood experience of observing his minister refusing a black couple entrance into the church. Alternatively, rejection may be the end result of a series of less significant events which, when taken together, were perceived to be a failure of the church to meet the individual's intellectual or emotional needs. Here we call to mind Sarah Smart's continuous search throughout her high school years for answers to simple questions of faith. The

rejection of one's religious heritage often takes place long prior to any thought or desire of conversion to Judaism. Indeed, it is this rejection which makes the search for an alternative identity possible.

One convert, who was married before deciding to convert, reports,

> I was looking for something--an approach to life. My church didn't offer any answers to significant questions. So I took a course in college about religions and I discovered that basically I was not a Christian. That allowed me to look . . . and after reading a great deal and more looking, after talking to people I decided to see what Judaism had to offer. I was interested in learning about its ideas, its rituals, everything . . .

This convert's rejection of Christianity based itself ostensibly on theological differences between the church and the individual. Significantly, this convert and many others expressed the viewpoint that they had long since ceased being Christians prior to their discovery of their Jewishness. Jewishness is an identity which becomes internalized only after the family religious identity is rejected.

Stage Two: Exploration for a Replacement Identity

Having rejected one's religious identity, the potential convert seeks an alternative identity. This search can be an intellectual one, where the individual studies alternative religions, or it can be limited to a single alternative: the religion of the (future) spouse. In either case, this stage of conversion is the time when initial judgements about the Jewish people and religion will be made. The search for a replacement identity can be either a conscious or unconscious search. Indeed, this search may predate the relationship

which will lead to a Jewish marriage, and one may argue that the product, a sense of compatibility with Jewish feelings will be a motivating factor in an unconscious search for a Jewish spouse.

One convert who rejected his religious identity as an adolescent recalls his first contact with Jews:

> When I started maturing with all these ethnic groups around, I made all different type friends. I can't think of anything except a general clannishness of the Jewish kids in junior high school. I recall being jealous of it even back then. In retrospect, I don't think my own family unit was sufficiently large or close. The Jewish kids somehow always stuck together like one big happy extended family. I thought that that was great.

Here we see that the identity being sought was one of a part of a clan. The need to be part of something larger than oneself is a theme which runs throughout many interviews. The potential convert perceives a sense of closeness within the "in-group" of his Jewish counterparts. The convert views this closeness as a by-product of Jewish identity, and desires group acceptance. Such perceptions form an initial positive Jewish identification, upon which a fuller Jewish identity can be built.

Joyce was married to her husband for four years prior to making a decision to become Jewish. Even having made the decision to identity Jewishly she "shopped around for a Temple." This initial search brought her in contact with one rabbi who offered to convert her without a period of study. She rejected this offer, and instead tried another Temple. She recalls:

> We wanted to join a temple, but I wanted to make sure it was the right one for us--one that would make us feel at home, and provide some answers for my questions about religion.
>
> We went to Temple XXX and we stayed for a service. After the service there was a discussion after the reception line. We introduced ourselves. The rabbi seemed very nice.

The initial contact with Judaism is most often meeting a Jew and having a positive relationship develop. The exploration of Judaism takes the form of developing such relationships, and perhaps becoming involved in Jewish activities through the Jewish contact person. Thus, the first experiences of converts are widely varied. They range from attendance at Passover Seders or Friday evening services to more personal exploration. Some report that their initial impressions of Judaism are formed by reading works of Jewish fiction or non-fiction.

This stage of initial exploration of Judaism is, by its nature, tentative. A link to the Jewish people is usually present in the form of a Jew who serves the role of a guide. This stage is one of exploration, which culminates in the formation of initial favorable judgements about Jews. From the limited experiences of this stage the potential convert progresses easily into stage three.

Stage Three: Informal Learning of Jewishness

This stage of conversion is characterized as a search on the part of the convert to learn more about Judaism, and an exploration of newfound Jewish feelings. Having made an initial contact to "the Jews" by means of a single "Jew," the convert actively seeks to learn more

about the group through the individual. Such learning takes place prior to any initial meeting with a rabbi. This stage of conversion is analogous to a courtship. The convert has made primary identification as a Jew, but has not taken on any responsibilities for a long-term relationship or marriage. The identification is still internal and private. However, this stage concludes itself with an acceptance of a Jewish identity. For Rudolph it is manifest by the statement, "I discovered that Judaism was something I could live with."

There are no particular actions to be identified with this stage of conversion. Rather, the convert deepens his knowledge, understanding, of Jewishness. This comes about through repeated Jewish contact, actions, or study. Thus, the deepening of a relationship with a Jewish person to the point of a commitment to marriage, or a change in the family structure when married through the birth of a child comprise in the convert's mind a better understanding of Jewishness as he learns more about a particular Jew.

Coupled with an increased knowledge of Judaism is an intellectual acceptance of Jewishness. This is expressed by statements such as "I really felt this way all the time all the time about X, and now I see that this is the Jewish viewpoint." The convert comes to internalize those Jewish teachings he has learned, and identify them as his own. Such an identification is a major component of the entire conversion process.

Stage Four: Emotional Acceptance of Jewishness

This is perhaps the most critical of the conversion stages. It is at this point that the convert can comfortably say, "I feel Jewish." He accepts for himself a Jewish identity, and feels fully at ease with being outwardly identified by others as a Jew.

This stage can occur prior to the enrollment in a formal conversion program, during it, or for the pro forma convert, even some time after a conversion ritual has been performed. Only three converts interviewed considered their conversion ritual as the time when they "became Jewish." We identify this stage as whenever a convert "becomes Jewish." The convert who undergoes a compelling religious experience, such as Zelda, has an emotional acceptance of her Jewishness immediately. The majority, however, consider that they become Jewish prior to their enrollment into a formal conversion program. We do not cite specific numbers here because they would doubtless be misleading with the small sample size with which we are dealing.

We recall that Sue reached this stage at 17, many years prior to undertaking a conversion program. During this period, she identified herself as a Jew. We can argue that in a very real sense she had undergone the most significant identification as a Jew, and that she was what we can term an "informal convert" for this long period of time. The informal convert is to be defined as the individual who has made internal and external identifications as a Jew, but who has not undergone a conversion ritual, and is not officially thought of as a Jew by Jews. This acceptance of the Jews for a conversion is achieved by the

individual's participation in a conversion program under the direction of a rabbi, followed by the ritual.

Stage Five: The Conversion Program

Earlier in this thesis we outlined the three types of conversion programs widely accepted and used within Reform Judaism today. These include individual study with a rabbi, enrollment in a class taught by the rabbi, and enrollment in a class sponsored by the UAHC, with joint supervision by a rabbi.

Unlike the first four stages, this stage is an external sign to the Jews that the individual wishes to formally identify himself with the Jewish people. While generally the convert will have undergone the first four stages prior to meeting with a rabbi, this is not always the case. For example, we look to the individual Gordon describes as "pro forma." Such individuals never experience stages two, three, and four. Yet the marginal convert, and certainly the authentic convert have by the time of visiting with a rabbi relinquished ties to the Christian church of their origin, and have made preliminary inquiries and value judgements about Jews and Judaism. Thus, in the majority of circumstances, the formal conversion program comes to deepen an already existing commitment to Jewish lifestyle and values, but perhaps more importantly, it authenticates for both the convert, the family, and the Jewish community the experience of informal conversion.

While there is great diversity in types of conversion programs, all aim to give the convert a basic Jewish education. Although the convert will have some knowledge of Jewish practice and theology prior to

enrollment, this knowledge is not systematic. Often it is mistaken. Interviews with rabbis indicate a growing trend to require the (intended) spouse to engage in the formal learning process with the convert. This serves to reinforce his own identity as a Jew, and place him in the role of "guide" for the convert. Further, it becomes a significant shared experience which can increase communication between marital partners.

The formal conversion program also serves to create a teacher-disciple relationship between rabbi and convert. Every convert interviewed expressed satisfaction, and often delight, with the rabbi with whom he worked. Rabbis are perceived to be scholars, but converts indicate that more importantly the rabbis are perceived to care about them as individuals. When asked the question, "If you were to create the ideal conversion program, what would you include in it?", over 90 percent of the interviewees indicated a high degree of satisfaction with the program they experienced, and a desire to maintain the program as it exists. Such a high degree of satisfaction indicates a high degree of receptivity to the authority and authenticity of the rabbi, and an internalization of his values.

Those converts who would alter conversion programs suggest only minor changes in emphasis rather than overall structure. Generally, they would ask for more extensive study, reflecting a lack of their own knowledge of Jewish subject matter. They would suggest changes to coincide with personal interests. Most often encountered was a request for more study of the Hebrew language as an aid to understanding and following the Friday evening service. Here again, the criticism of

rabbis is mild, and the dissatisfaction is not considered to be a major problem for either convert or rabbi.

We surmise, then, that the formal conversion program provides the convert with a means of demanding formal entrance into the Jewish "in-group." It authenticates through a process of study and dialogue with rabbi the conversion experience, and serves to further heighten Jewish consciousness of both convert and spouse.

Stage Six: The Conversion Ritual

The conversion ritual serves to conclude the formal conversion process. For the "pro forma" convert it is analagous to graduation from a course of study; for the more committed individual, it symbolizes formal entry and acceptance into the Jewish faith and people.

Reform rabbis interviewed do not adhere to the traditional requirements of circumcision and mikva as prerequisites for conversion. A ceremony is conducted in front of the open Ark in the sanctuary. Present at the ceremony are the rabbi, the convert, and his family and invited guests. One congregation has initiated a policy of encouraging conversion ceremonies to take place during the regular Friday evening services. This is seen as a means of generating open acceptance of converts on the part of Jews.

Only three of the twenty converts indicated that the conversion was an emotional experience. It is perceived as something to go through in order to become Jewish. It was often equated in the interviews as being the equivalent of either induction ceremony for the military, or an initiation ceremony into a college fraternity.

This event is seen as a specific point in time when a convert can first say with Jewish group approval, "now I am a Jew."

The conversion ceremony, as a public event, is regarded by converts as important for their families and spouse's families. The ceremony is, seen by the families involved as the "seal of approval of the rabbi, making the marriage kosher." It is seen as a rite of passage into both the Jewish religion and Jewish family. The conversion ritual symbolizes outwardly the internal change that has occurred within the sincere convert. It is a graduation and diploma for the insincere convert. In either case, it is a means of gaining official acceptance by the Jewish group of the new outward title "Jew" applied to the convert.

Summary

This chapter has contrasted Albert Gordon's typology of conversion with this author's typology. While the former is based in part on sincerity and in part on the degree of Jewish practice, the latter is based on those factors which motivate an individual to convert formally to Judaism. In our opinion, value judgements should be kept to a minimum, and the unification of a family should be accepted as a legitimate motivation for conversion.

We then proceeded to outline and illustrate a six-stage conversion theory. These stages proceed from an initial rejection of the original religious identity toward the formal acceptance of a Jewish identity through the conversion ritual. This approach attempts to describe phenomenologically the process of conversion to Judaism.

CHAPTER SEVEN

PROBLEMS FACING CONVERTS TO JUDAISM TODAY

This chapter will discuss problems encountered by converts to Judaism. While these areas of difficulty do comprise formidable obstacles to the total assimilation of certain converts into the Jewish people, we should preface this chapter with two important caveats. First, only a minority of converts encounter such problems, and second, no convert interviewed experienced all of the problem areas. The observation made by this interviewer is that the wider the divergency of the socioeconomic group between the convert and the spouse's family, the greater the degree of the problems. Further, the higher on the socioeconomic spectrum, the less of the problem. Those converts who encounter the greatest resistance come from the lower end of the spectrum and marry into the middle of the economic spectrum.

The great problem of converts is the lack of acceptance of the Jewish group of their genuine conversion. Converts are treated with mistrust and skepticism, and are daily watched to detect signs of insincerity of purpose. Such suspicions are found in family, Temple, and the Jewish society at large. Converts can experience difficulties with anyone they encounter.

We divide the remainder of this chapter into the following: internal problems; problems with the native family; problems with the spouse; problems with the spouse's family; and problems with the local Jewish community.

Internal Problems

The greatest internal problem faced by converts isa lack of a total acceptance of the new identity "Jew". Such problems can logically only occur to individuals who have not successfully passed through the fourth stage of the conversion process ("emotional acceptance of being or feeling Jewish") as explained in Chapter Six of this thesis. Such converts fall within Gordon's category of marginality. We quote from one of Gordon's case studies to illustrate this problem in its extreme form:

> It was not an easy thing for me to make the decision to convert to Judaism. After all, I had lived all of my life as a Catholic. I had gone to Catholic schools and I had attended church regularly. Even though there were things in Catholicism that displeased me such as the authority of the Church, I was nevertheless a Catholic. When I finally converted to Judaism, I really did so in order to please my husband's family more than for any other reason. I thought I was doing the right thing. What could be more important than to begin my married life in the spirit of unity?
>
> But when my first son was born, I remember how I cried when my husband and his family took it for granted that the child should be circumcized according to Jewish rites. This, I knew, was not the Catholic practice . . . All through the years I was upset because my marriage had not been blessed by a priest. Of course I knew that a rabbi would officiate at my marriage, following my conversion. But it is one thing to know that this would happen and quite another thing to experience the sense of shock that it was a rabbi and not a priest who conducted the service. This bothered me so much that, after twenty or more years of marriage, I prevailed on my husband to be married once again in the Church where the priest could bless our marriage. It's a rather strange situation, I know, being converted to Judaism,

> belonging to a synagogue, and all that, and still feeling that I am really a Catholic.[1]

Even though the woman of this case has both the title "Jew", and membership in the official Jewish organization, the Temple, she has never honestly been able to say, "I feel Jewish." Instead, whenever a specific Jewish rite was performed, she was uncomfortable. She lives with two religious identities, neither of which is compatible with her lifestyle and her family's. The problem of marginality is often internal and private. It took more than twenty years for the woman to share the extent of the problem with her husband and ask that their marriage be blessed again by a priest.

The case we refer to cites the native lifestyle of Catholicism, and implies theological difficulties as well. Here we see a retention of the idea of Christian rites as opposed to Jewish "mitzvot" which comprise a different concept of religiosity. All these problems are internal, and suggest that the convert did not fully convert--her identity remains fundamentally Catholic.

Converts facing internal problems such as the one outlined here tend not to be fully converted. By this, we mean to suggest that although a formal conversion ceremony has occurred, the informal conversion and the change of religious identity have not.

Problems with the Native Family

Louis A. Berman cites studies done by J. E. Mayer to indicate Christian parents' negative reactions to intermarriage on religious grounds:

> . . . While social disapproval was occasionally anticipated by Gentile parents ("If he didn't look so Jewish, it wouldn't be so bad! What will our friends and neighbors think?"), it was the Jewish parents who seemed to feel deeply threatened by ostracism.
>
> Gentile parents expressed distress over more purely religious considerations: "My mother regarded my marrying a Jewish person as not taking religion seriously. To her, her religion was the only correct one."
>
> "My mother wept. She was upset because I wasn't marrying a Catholic girl. She was upset because there would not be a church ceremony with all its significances. The greatest shock of all was that my parents had to come to grips with reality: I wasn't still a Catholic." . . . "My mother didn't really believe I was an agnostic," remarked a Protestant daughter. "She felt that I would get more religious as I got older, and that this would be a problem. . . ."
>
> Gentile parents--particularly Catholics, it would seem--raised more purely religious objections to their child's intermarriage plans and expressed concern over the prospect that their grandchildren would belong to a disadvantaged class.[2]

The prospect of conversion and subsequent intermarriage is seen by Christian parents as a rejection of the faith which they have attempted to instill in their children. Insofar as this faith is a basis for the parents' own religious identity, the rejection of that faith is perceived as an insult to that identity. On one hand, this rejection is

denied with sentiments such as "You really don't know what you are doing, you will return to Christianity later," while on the other hand it is understood and interpreted as a direct reproach to the faith and lifestyle of the parents. As such, it is the most serious confrontation imaginable between generations.

Sharon's father is a Methodist minister. She tells of her parents' reaction to her announcement of her impending conversion:

> My mother took it with her habitual calm. It didn't seem to affect her very much. She just told me: "You know they'll never accept you, don't you?"
>
> My father took it a little harder, but he got over it. He said he thought I was making a mistake. He wrote me a letter, even though I was still living in his home. We don't always talk very well. It made him feel bad because he had spent his whole life preaching--teaching me something different. I guess what he basically said was that everything he had ever said to me was a lie.
>
> I panicked. I packed up and ran. (crying) It still upsets me a great deal.

Sharon's conversion was perceived by the parents as a theological change, a rejection of what her father taught and stood for. Yet combined with this objection is the sociological warning: "They (the Jews) will never accept you." There is expressed distrust of Jews, and there is distrust of the daughter's motives. All is summed up in the almost universal question of parents of converts, "Why are you doing this? Do you understand what you are doing to me? How could you do such a thing?"

Parents of converts present the convert the greatest degree of problems when they, for whatever reason, after a prolonged period, fail

to adjust to the child's new identity. Parents' denial of reality poses the question to the convert: How can I continue to relate to my parents? I love them and want them to accept me for what I am, but I am unable to penetrate. We don't communicate.

Problems with the Spouse

> . . . Moreover, since the Gentile bride may show far more interest in Judaism than either the husband or his parents, the rabbi may find himself counseling and protecting the convert, pleading to the Jews to accord her a decent and friendly reception.[3]

Berman refers in the above quote to those converts who take the title "Jew" more seriously than their spouses. Many converts interviewed for this thesis indicated that initially their husbands did not understand their reasons for wanting to convert, and certainly did not require such a conversion. It is apparent that often Jews who intermarry did so intentionally. When the partner converts and changes identity, this change influences the nature of the relationship.

Rabbis interviewed for this thesis indicated that through the formal conversion programs converts often learn more about Jewish tradition than is known by the spouse, and consequently they attempt whenever possible to make the conversion experience a process shared by the convert with the spouse. This tends to reduce the divergency in religious attitudes, and at a minimum, it encourages the verbalization of both religious views and practice. Such a practice appears to reduce religious tensions between spouses and foster better marriages.

Nonetheless, we must remember that the native Jew is a Jew by birth. His authenticity as a Jew is never questioned. The convert, on the other hand, has only religious actions as a means of expressing and living out the new-found identity. There is, then, a natural tendency for converts to become religiously active asa means of demonstrating their authenticity as members of the Jewish group. The greater the degree of difference in religious practice between the convert and the Jewish spouse, the greater degree of conflict is likely to occur. In such situations, converts are likely to make the following statements.

> I spent all this time learning about what it is to be Jewish, what I'm supposed to do, and my husband doesn't support me. He says you don't have to light Friday night candles or go to Temple to be Jewish, but I would really like to. It gives me a good feeling inside when I do, but I can never get him to do it. Instead we always wind up doing something else on Friday night. It's really very frustrating for me.

Converts cope with such dilemmas in a variety of ways. Some ultimately reduce the level of their religious observance to coincide with the level of their spouses. Others attempt to induce their spouses to come to some compromise level, while others tend to live with the wide range of diversity within the marriage.

In each case, however, the solution to this problem is reached along the same lines as solutions to others which exist within the marriage. Consequently, the religious practice of the couple will likely be a reflection of the relationship which the couple shares. In such a context, the religious issue becomes only one in the plethora which confronts every couple.

Problems with the Spouse's Family

Statistically converts are more likely to encounter problems of acceptance into the spouse's family than any other. We have seen above that Christian parents regard the conversion on religious grounds. They view the convert as sincerely rejecting Christian dogma. Conversely, Jewish parents distrust religious conversion. Converts about to marry a Jewish son or daughter are looked on from an entirely different perspective.

Berman reports,

> The Jewish parents' deeply "tribal" hostility toward their child's prospective mate has been noted with dismay by Rabbis Bamberger and Eichorn. "The non-Jewish fiancee," says Rabbi Bamberger, "is regarded by many a Jewish parent as an interloper, almost a kidnapper, who has trapped a precious and innocent lad." . . . Rabbi Eichorn voices regret that to many Jewish parents a convert to Judaism is still a "Gentile," and Jewish parents react to the convert according to their prejudices rather than in keeping with the teachings of Judaism . . .[4]

Often Jewish parents will require their child's spouse to convert in order to gain acceptance into the Jewish family, yet, like the spouse, will have a low level of observance and precipitate the same type of problem as we explored in the section above.

The demand of the parents-in-law that the intended spouse convert can be understood best as a conceptualization of Judaism as a tribal religion. Berman quotes Bohannan, a contemporary anthropologist:

> Judaism is still a tribal religion . . . because it demands--and gets--a specifically social allegiance that (with the possible exception of Mormonism) even the most strict sect of Christianity does not require.
>
> Various survey findings show that Jewish identity is bound up with family loyalty. As Heiss demonstrated, Jews who intermarry show a life history of alienation from their extended family (while Catholics who intermarry show a history of alienation from the Church). Likewise, Maier and Spinaad found that Jewish college students say they owe their greatest loyalty to their family or to "people" (in contrast to Catholics and Protestants who say they owe their greatest loyalty to God). In choosing a mate, the Jew takes a loyalty test--not to his religion, but to his people, his group, his tribe.[5]

This analysis leads us to the conclusion that the Jew who marries a convert has neither totally passed nor failed the test of loyalty to people. Rather, the convert is, in many instances, looked upon as being a Jew, but not a full Jew. The test of loyalty is passed on by the child to the child's spouse. The converted spouse is placed in a position of having to demonstrate loyalty to the Jewish group.

Yet this testing is not an unending phenomenon. Berman cites studies which show that the convert is soon welcomed into the Jewish family with open arms.

> Other observers confirm Levinson's impression that Jewish parents usually overcome the distress or shock of their child's intermarriage, and eventually establish friendly relations with the young couple. Says Lehrer: "It begins with serious distress and ends quickly in complete reconciliation and warm family relations. The 'strain on the family' is wiped out." Rabbi Kirshenbaum tells of parents who express a special pride in their convert daughter-in-law, and seem to become defenders of intermarriage in principle.[6]

Interviews conducted for this thesis confirm Lehrer's findings. Converts are generally welcomed into the family, within six months after the marriage.

The Jewish Community

If Bohannan's conception of Judaism as a tribal religion is correct, then the Jewish community would comprise the extended family, the tribe into which the convert comes. The conversion ceremony would be considered the "rite of passage" into the tribe. However, the "tribe" requires more than this relatively simple initiation ceremony to accord the convert a full sense of acceptance.

Almost every convert interviewed had at some time encountered a lack of acceptance on the part of Jews in the community. Sally, a convert interviewed for this thesis, explains,

> . . . they (Jews) aren't very open-minded about people who convert, and that is a disappointment to me. I don't think of them being conceited as such, but some of the Jews I have met are conceited and they think of themselves as being so much more open-minded than other people--that they have taken so much more than other people have. They figure that you have to suffer anti-Semitism in order to be Jewish. They seem to be saying to me, "No, you're not born a Jew, and you aren't one."

This convert senses a difference in attitude between generations:

> I think that young Jews are more open-minded than their parents. With Jews my own age (mid-twenties) I don't feel that I have to prove myself or my loyalty to Judaism.

Both Berman and Gordon illustrate cases of converts who have fully adapted to a Jewish lifestyle, yet who are not accorded full acceptance by the Jewish community.

> The reluctance of Jews to accept the convert as a full member of the Jewish community can burden the convert with a deep sense of disappointment. Thus, Carlotta laments that though she has tried to live a good Jewish life, and observes the rituals of Judaism, and participates in the organizational life of the Jewish community, Jewish women still regard her as a Catholic, an outsider, someone who doesn't really belong.[7]

Reactions on the part of Jews to individuals about to convert are often negative. Suzanne Kalish writes in the periodical Sh'ma,

> Comments like "Why would you want to do a thing like that?" or "You are what?" were frequent. Many Jews were incredulous that I should be converting, and this lack of welcome surprised and hurt me. I still get this negative reaction quite often. Many Jews seem to feel that because I was not born of a Jewish mother, because I chose to become Jewish at the age of 31, I am not a full Jew . . . I feel to them I may be different; in fact, I may not be considered a Jew. I am sometimes guarded and feel I must immediately state I am a convert before anyone unknowingly insults me.[8]

That Jews often do not regard converts as genuine Jews is by now clear. The question becomes: to what extent does this pose a serious problem for converts, and how do converts cope with such attitudes? Edward Olshaker and Gary Rosenblatt, writing in the Baltimore Jewish Times suggest, "It would seem that converts must learn to live on indefinite probation, and withstand the skepticism and hostility of some segments of their adopted community."[9]

Converts interviewed by this author report that non-acceptance on the part of the Jewish community is longer-lasting than problems with either the spouse or in-laws. Each convert reacts in a unique fashion, but three main types of responses appear to exist.

The first response is to label oneself as a Jew who converted in every new social contact. This attitude is one of pride, suggesting, "I'm a convert and proud of it." Such a stance tends to minimize the likelihood of anti-convert remarks by Jews. This attitude is one of force and aggressiveness.

The second response is no response at all. Converts, when confronted by individuals making anti-convert or anti-conversion statements make no forceful reply. Instead, they internalize the remark, and either cope with it by brushing it aside, or they let it accumulate through time to the point where it will elicit a strong reply.

The third convert denies the conversion in the first place, and masquerades as a native Jew. Norman Wright, a convert, writes of this type of convert in Davka:

> I know a young man in New Mexico who met with so many negative reactions during the process of his conversion that he will not admit to being a convert; he'll swear that he was born Jewish. This man, who is one of the most concerned Jewish young people I have met, should not feel forced to alienate part of his identity. The negative reactions create the phenomenon of the hidden convert, and the invisibility of the convert contributes to the ignorance that brings about such damaging reactions. Somehow the circle must be broken.[10]

Summary

This chapter has explored major problems confronting the convert to Judaism today. Non-acceptance by spouse, in-laws, and Jewish society challenge the validity of any conversion. We have seen, however, that the skepticism toward the convert is initially expressed in the strongest terms by those closest to the convert, and less strongly by the community. Yet, through time and a period of adjustment, families tend to accept the convert into the social structure, while Jewish community at large tends to place all converts in Gordon's "pro forma" category. All these areas we label as "external" to the convert. The acceptance or rejection is of others not necessarily analogous to what occurs internally.

Inwardly, converts confront problems of dual identity, half-conversion, which we label as "marginality." The conversion is made with seeming sincerity, but the convert has never truly been able to say "I feel 100 percent Jewish." Although the convert accepts Jewish ritual, observance, and outward identification, inward ties remain with the former religious identity.

CHAPTER EIGHT

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

This thesis studies the conversion phenomenon within the Reform movement in contemporary America. In the first chapter we explored relevant texts of the Jewish tradition, believing that the major attitudes existing within the Reform movement today find their roots in the historic sources of our religion. We saw texts both favorable and antithetical toward conversion, and we noted the requirements of conversion in traditional and reform circles.

Chapters Two through Five present case studies of converts with four differing motivations. While striving toward family religious unity is a theme which prevails throughout, the characteristic motivations are more intrinsic to the individual. The religious experience, the seeking of emotional security, and the search for an acceptable theology all combine with a quest for family unity to provide the necessary spur toward conversion to Judaism. Each of our case studies represents one of these approaches to Judaism, and therefore they supply us answers to the critical question: why convert?

We see that Judaism represents a solution to generally longstanding problems which confront converts. More significantly than simply clearing the way for a wedding performed by a rabbi, conversion is sought alternatively as a means of expressing religiosity, of finding group acceptance, of finding emotional and intellectual security. These various motivations bring the convert into the rabbi's study and prepare him for the formal conversion process.

Chapter Six compares this typology of converts based on motivation with Gordon's which is based on sincerity. We conclude that one scheme is based on the convert's subjective attitudes, while the other has at its core the concern of the Jewish community that converts convert for no "ulterior" reason. Because both the convert and the Jewish people interact and thereby create complex attitudes, both typologies are necessary for a complete understanding of conversion phenomena.

The author then outlined the major hypothesis of this thesis, namely, the six stages of the conversion process. We saw that for conversion in its fullest sense to occur, there are six stages through which the convert must pass. He must reject his original religious identity, explore for a replacement identity, informally learn a feeling of "Jewishness," emotionally accept for himself the feeling of "being Jewish," enroll in a conversion program, and partake in a conversion ritual.

The seventh chapter deals with problems facing the convert to Judaism today. Here we see that the convert is faced with a potential problem with almost every individual he has contact: his spouse, parents, in-laws, and the general Jewish community, to say nothing of the internal struggle over his identity which may continue. Generally, problems are confined to acceptance and rejection of the convert. We observed that the higher the convert and his in-laws are on the socio-economic spectrum, the less likely he is to encounter such a problem.

Implications of the Six-Stage Theory

If we accept as a realistic description of conversion our six-stage conversion theory, we may realize that it contains certain implications for the rabbi, the convert, and the structure and aims of conversion programs. First, we now must view the rabbi not as a "converter," who can by uttering the correct words as a conversion ritual suddenly change the identity of an individual. Rather, he is to be the facilitator of progress between stages for the potential convert. He must recognize that significant changes have occurred within the convert prior to the time the convert first enters the rabbi's study. The convert will have already experienced a motivation to convert; he will most likely have made primary identifications with one specific Jew and perhaps know something about the Jewish tradition. The role of the Reform rabbi, then, is to deepen the commitment toward Judaism which already exists. Moreover, the rabbi becomes the primary example of the ideal Jew.

In planning the conversion program, 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 series 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 Act Jewish," and the convert could be presented with a wide range of Jewish alternatives to specific life situations. We observed

earlier that converts interviewed invariably felt close to the rabbi who converted them, and only rarely would suggest alternatives or improvements in the conversion programs which they experienced. This speaks well of the Reform rabbis, yet says more about the likelihood of the convert to accept from their rabbis a firm direction and perspective about their lives and religious response.

We see, then, the formal conversion program as the deepening of an already existing commitment to Judaism. The rabbi may utilize this time period to develop a personal relationship with each convert, and ascertain that the individual has completed the requisite five stages prior to initiating the convert formally into the Jewish ranks by means of a conversion ritual.

We recognize that converts whose motivations differ from what rabbis or lay Jews might deem "proper" do exist. At the same time, the author of this thesis found it close to impossible to identify any convert of this type among those sampled and interviewed. We make no claim to having surveyed a random sample. Yet, we suggest that the converts interviewed do possess enough diversity to suggest trends among larger groups of converts. Each convert interviewed regards his conversion as a time of major change in his life, and universally this is thought to be a change for the better. The author suggests that this speaks highly of the individuals who convert, their rabbis, and the Judaism to which they convert.

List of Footnotes--Chapter One

1. Genesis 23:4
2. Exodus 2:22; 18:3.
3. Exodus 12:43-45.
4. Albert S. Goldstein, "Conversion to Judaism in Bible Times," in Conversion to Judaism: A History and Analysis, David Max Eichhorn, ed. (New York: Ktav Publishing House, 1965) p. 9.
5. Leviticus 24:22.
6. Numbers 15:14-16.
7. Leviticus 24:15-16 (new JPS translation).
8. Deuteronomy 16:11.
9. Exodus 12:19. (cf. Exodus 12:43-45, 47-49 and Numbers 9:14).
10. Exodus 12:48.
11. Exodus 23:12.
12. Leviticus 16:29.
13. Exodus 22:20-22.
14. Exodus 20:20, 23:9; Leviticus 19:34; Deuteronomy 10:19 et al.
15. Leviticus 19:34.
16. Deuteronomy 24:17.
17. Deuteronomy 10:18-19.
18. Psalm 94:6.
19. Ezekiel 22:29.
20. Bernard J. Bamberger, Proselytism in the Talmudic Period (Cincinnati: HUC Press, 1939) p. 13.
21. Ibid.
22. Ibid., p. 14.

23. Isaiah 14:1.

24. Bamberger, p. 14-15.

25. Genesis 12:5.

26. Genesis Rabba 39.14.

27. Genesis Rabba 46.2.

28. Numbers Rabba 13.15.

29. Leviticus Rabba 2.9.

30. Pesahim 87b.

31. Bamberger, p. 247.

32. Exodus Rabba 30.12.

33. Yebamoth 97b.

34. Leviticus Rabba 1.2.

35. Numbers Rabba 8.2.

36. Bamberger, p. 163.

37. Niddah 13b.

38. Bamberger, p. 162.

39. Yebamoth 47b, 109b; Kiddûshin 70b; and Niddah 13b.

40. Yebamoth 61b.

41. Niddah 13b.

42. Exodus Rabba 42.6. See also Leviticus Rabba 27.8.

43. Ecclesiastes Rabba 3.11.

44. Ruth Rabba 2.22.

45. Yebamoth 47b.

46. Ibid.

47. Ruth Rabba 2.16.

48. Ibid.

49. Yebamoth 47 a-b.

50. Yebamoth 46b.

51. Yoreh Deah 268:12.

52. Yoreh Deah 268:2.

53. Ibid.

54. Ibid.

55. Ibid.

56. Yoreh Deah 268:1.

57. Yoreh Deah 268:3.

58. Yoreh Deah 268:4.

59. Yoreh Deah 268:5.

60. Yoreh Deah 268:10.

61. Ibid.

62. Yoreh Deah 268:6.

63. Yoreh Deah 268:7.

List of Footnotes--Chapter Six

1. Albert I. Gordon, The Nature of Conversion: A Case Study of Forty-five Men and Women Who Changed Their Religion, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967) p. 218.

2. Ibid., p. 220.

3. Ibid., pp. 222-223.

4. Ibid., p. 224.

5. Ibid., p. 225.

6. Ibid.

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1. Albert Gordon, The Nature of Conversion: A Case Study of Forty-five Men and Women Who Changed Their Religion, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967), p. 223.

2. Louis A. Berman, Jews and Intermarriage: A Study in Personality and Culture, (New York: Thomas Yoselaff, 1968) pp. 257-258.

3. Ibid., p. 251.

4. Berman, p. 248.

5. Ibid., p. 237.

6. Ibid., p. 182.

7. Ibid., p. 152.

8. Suzanne Kalish, "Converted But Not Quite Accepted," Sh'ma--A Journal of Jewish Responsibility (February 6, 1976) p. 53.

9. Edward Olshaker and Gary Rosenblatt, "The Conversion Dilemma--A Mixed Blessing for American Jewry?", Baltimore Jewish Times (August 20, 1976) p. 33.

10. Norman Wright, "A Convert Speaks Out," Davka (Winter 1975/5735) p. 15.

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