

***Becoming Jewish:***  
A LOS ANGELES AREA RESOURCE GUIDE  
FOR POTENTIAL CONVERTS TO JUDAISM

By

Abigail Fleishman

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A project presented to the Faculty of the School of Social Work of the University of Southern California in co-operation with Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, California School in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Public Administration

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HEBREW UNION COLLEGE-JEWISH INSTITUTE OF RELIGION  
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In co-operation with

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA  
SCHOOL OF POLICY, PLANNING AND DEVELOPMENT

*BECOMING JEWISH: A Los Angeles Area Resource Guide for Potential  
Converts to Judaism*

Thesis approved by:

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A Los Angeles area Resource Guide  
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**SYNOPSIS**

"Becoming Jewish" is a resource guide that was created to help potential converts to navigate the complex road that leads into the world of Judaism. The idea to create this guide came to me last year when three good friends of mine announced their interests in converting to Judaism. Knowing that I was getting a degree in Jewish Communal Service and seeing me as their closest link to Judaism, all three women called me separately for my advice about rabbis, books, classes and other resources. Having been born Jewish, I had given much thought to there being a lack of conversion resources. Although the topic of conversion had always interested me since my mother herself converted to Judaism before she married my father. Thinking I was too busy with school at the time to really devote the energy to helping them in their explorations, I sent my friends out with the information for a few contacts at local synagogues to do the research on their own. Although these women all began their conversion processes at different times of the year, I received similar stories from each of them when I checked back in during the first stages of their searches. I was appalled by the reports that I was given. Their descriptions included tales of unfriendly and unhelpful rabbis and synagogue secretaries who were too busy for my friend's questions, who wondered from where my friend's had received their numbers, who used the women's lack of knowledge about Judaism to intimidate them and make them feel stupid. I actually felt shame that this was how our Jewish institutions dealt with outreach.

My guide attempts take the mystery out of the exploration stage of conversion. I met with several local rabbis as well as individuals in various stages of the conversion process to get a clear idea of what kinds of questions potential converts are asking, what resources have been most useful to them, and what hurdles they have encountered along the way. Additionally, I compiled a list of "convert-friendly rabbis" in the Los Angeles area, local mikvaot and conversion classes; as well I suggested some informative websites and books. My hope is that this guide will help to simplify the first step towards conversion, to prepare individuals for the challenges they may encounter, and help them feel more comfortable with the rabbis that they might meet with during this process.

## ***Becoming Jewish:***

A Los Angeles area Resource Guide  
For Potential Converts to Judaism

Compiled by Abby Fleishman

## **Introduction**

Maybe you are thinking about becoming a Jew, but you are not sure where to begin your search. Maybe the thought of sitting down with a rabbi seems intimidating or you don't know what questions you should be asking him/her? Possibly you are interested in taking a class on Judaism but you do not know where to find one. The following list of resources has been compiled to help the potential convert to Judaism navigate this sometimes confusing road. The truth is that there are plenty of resources out there for potential converts to Judaism. My aim is to make the journey a little less intimidating and confusing.

## **Is conversion for you?**

There are many reasons why people convert to Judaism. Among the reasons that individuals often given are that Judaism makes “spiritual sense” to them, “they admire the closeness of the Jewish community and would like to be a part of that experience”, they have one or more influential and positive Jewish role models, others begin their journey towards Judaism when they fall in love with a person of the Jewish faith. This represents only a partial list.

Judaism has a long history of accepting converts; as we are reminded, the founders of Judaism: Abraham and Sarah, were both converts themselves. Perhaps the most famous of all biblical converts was Ruth, the great-grandmother of King David, and therefore according to tradition, the ancestor of the future messiah. In the time of Ruth, however, conversion was a much different process than it is today. All Ruth had to do to become Jewish was to marry an Israelite and then leave her family.

“Not until the Babylonian exile in the sixth century BCE did Judaism become portable, a matter of faith rather than turf” (McClain, 32). Today, conversion to Judaism is a much more formal process that generally includes a significant amount of study with a rabbi, approval by a rabbinic court (in Hebrew, a Beit Din), an ritual bath ceremony (the bath is called a Mikveh), and, for men, a

circumcision (in the Conservative, Reconstructionist and Reform movements usually require either a symbolic ceremony or none at all). After visiting the Beit Din and having ones conversion approved, converts are asked to pick a Hebrew name by which they will be able to be called up to the Torah.

Becoming a Jew is a commitment that takes time. It takes time not only to learn about Judaism and go through the process described above but also to adjust to a new lifestyle and to feel like you are truly part of the Jewish people. Converting to Judaism is a life-altering identity change that should not be taken lightly but does not need to be an intimidating experience. *Learning more about Judaism would be an excellent first step in your conversion process.* One can launch this process by meeting with one or more rabbis, reading one or more books on Judaism, taking an Introduction to Judaism class, or visiting an informative website.

## **Now that you have decided to make it official:**

After taking a class, spending some quality time speaking with one or more rabbis, and/ or reading one or more books, you may decide that you are ready to go through conversion. This is not always the case however, and that is also fine. *The idea is to go out into the Jewish world and learn what you can before making the decision.* In what he describes as typical, Rabbi Neal Weinberg at the University of Judaism, showed me a class attendance list from several semesters before. Only nine out of the original thirty-five participants in his Introduction to Judaism class actually went through with their conversions. There is no guarantee that what you learn will resonate with you intellectually, emotionally, or spiritually, and that too is fine. The hope is that you will still feel that learning more was essential in making this decision.

On the other hand, the learning and preparation might serve to reinforce that which you already knew, that you wanted to convert to Judaism. In that case, Mazel Tov! Making the decision is an important first step in this journey. This learning and decision making process of conversion is, in many cases, the most empowering component. For many, there may still be some difficult issues (if they haven't encountered some of these already). All of the psychological stages that follow should be dealt with and are perfectly normal accompaniments to the conversion process. Rabbi Jeffrey Marx describes the rabbi's role in the conversion of an individual as not only one of a teacher, giving the student requirements and educational tools with which to learn. He also believes that the rabbi must be attentive to the psychological process through which the student is going. These are some of the key issues: What is going on with their family? Have they told their friends? What are the reactions of loved ones? How does those reactions make the individual feel? All of this is important for an emotionally and spiritually healthy conversion to occur.

## **Telling one's family:**

Telling one's family and friends about their choice represents for many people a very difficult part of their conversion experience. Some parents will see their child's desire to convert as a rejection of their own traditions and heritage and therefore, as a rejection of the family itself. Rabbi Marx describes this type of family response as a betrayal, as though they (the family) are ultimately being left behind or deserted. The reality is that Judaism is something new in your life that your family and friends may not feel a part of it. Therefore, it is important to recognize this and try to incorporate them into your experience. Honoring one's mother and father is an important Jewish value. In fact, their own self-definitions will be altered as well. As Anita Diamant describes, "When you become a Jew, the redefinition does not end with you. You transform your family of origin into an interfaith family" (34).

Different families will respond in different ways. Many families are open and supportive of the idea, some made a conscience decision not to instill any faith in their children, and may in fact not approve of organized religion, and still others have strong religious values that cause them to fear for their child's immortal soul. The best approach seems to be an upfront conversation where an individual tells their family that conversion to Judaism is something about which they are considering. It will take your family time to get accustomed to the idea, so you do not want to tell them after you have already gone through all of the preparation. Let them know where you are so that they can become comfortable with this idea gradually (Diamant, 36). They will feel like they have been consulted and know that their opinion matters to you.



## **The reluctant Jewish spouse:**

While most Jewish spouses are thrilled that their partner has decided to convert to Judaism, their behavior does not always demonstrate it. The reluctant Jewish spouse always seems a little inconsistent to the partner who is going through the conversion process. On the one hand, he/she is supportive of his/her spouse's conversion. On the other hand, they can be unwilling to attend Introduction to Judaism classes with their partners or to incorporate Jewish religious traditions and make spiritual changes in their lives. In the past, this paradox has been explained by the idea that the reason that the Jewish individual had picked their non-Jewish partner was to escape his or her own upbringing and family. However, there seems to be more to this question. In an article entitled "*From Wicked to Wise: A New Look at the Resistant Jewish Male in Outreach Classes*", Rabbi Jeffrey Marx and Dr. Norman B. Mirsky explain that this ambivalence might simply be an assertion of the born-Jewish spouse's own individual understanding of their Jewish Identity. After years of growing up in a Jewish home where they were told how to be a Jew, the individual has finally come to a point where he or she is free to make individual Jewish choices. This freedom may feel threatened when their partner begins going through a conversion process. The difficulty is that distinct aspects of Judaism resonate differently with each individual. Just as the conversion process is different for every convert, so is the practice of Judaism different for each Jew. The idea is not to get frustrated but to understand that these differences provide more tradition and variety for the Jewish family. Be patient. Through the years the goal will be to embrace Judaism together in a way that is comfortable for both partners.

## State of Limbo:

During your conversion process and even after you have converted, you may have trouble defining yourself. You have learned much about Judaism and the Jewish people but you may not yet feel that you are a part of this collective historical identity. "In a way, you are like a new immigrant in a foreign land. You are a first-generation Jew, staking your claim to a future in new territory" (Diamant, 210). There is no one type of way to be Jewish, and your contribution to the accumulated Jewish history is invaluable. In the August 1996 issue of *Moment* magazine, Ellen Jaffe McClain wrote: "Conversion, taken seriously and nurtured seriously, represents only gain for American Jewry. People currently signing up for classes in Judaism, trooping into rabbis' studies, and posting on the Internet are sincere and committed. They are bringing new fervor into stale Jewish institutions, and they are rekindling the *pintele yid*, the spark of Jewishness, in many born Jews, including, much of the time, their own partners."

With this having been addressed, it will most likely take a while to "feel" Jewish. One woman with whom I spoke who recently converted, described herself as feeling "like a fraud". She explained, "When I talk to a Jewish person who has grown up their entire lives with the experience of the Holocaust as a backdrop to their religious identity, I feel like a fraud pretending that I can identify with that feeling." While the feeling is very real, it is important to recognize that many born Jews have similar feelings of shame. Their families were untouched by the Holocaust or were able to escape or leave before Hitler's fury destroyed the Jews of Eastern Europe. They also cannot relate on the same level as those whose families lost everything. What is important, is that you can relate on a human level. Judaism is not a religion that is solely focused on its own people's death and destruction but rather on the miracle of our survival and the importance of "Tikkun Olam" (repairing the world of its flaws). Another way of addressing this issue is to realize that Jews of choice have always been a contributing factor to the continuing survival of the Jewish people in spite of the persecution.

Defining yourself to others can also be challenging. One woman that I spoke with has been practicing Judaism for years. She keeps a kosher home, attends synagogue regularly, has studied under several rabbis, works in a Jewish agency and has even made a trip to Israel. However, she has not yet officially converted. She feels herself to be Jewish and so do the people that she comes into contact with in her Jewish life. She does not introduce herself to new Jewish friends by saying that she is converting and does not believe that she should need to do so, either now or after her conversion. At the same time, she feels like she is hiding something. When people that she has known for a while through these Jewish community connections ask her about her Jewish upbringing, she often gets the feeling that they feel betrayed by her when she lets them know that she was not brought up Jewish. Yet, she feels that it is really nobody's business but her own, and she is right. What you chose to share about your experience of conversion, like any other personal matter in your life, is entirely up to you. This is your journey and you should only share that which you are comfortable..

## **Conversion Ceremony:**

The official act of conversion can be done without ceremony. All that is necessary is approval of the Beit Din (Rabbinic Court). However, without any ritualization of the event, the conversion can feel anti-climactic for some. For those individuals, a conversion ceremony is a necessary closure to this transformational experience. Having one's rabbi announce the conversion and welcome the convert to the Jewish people ceremoniously in front of the synagogue or even in an announcement can make the experience feel more official. It is appropriate that you should want to stand up and feel proud about what you have accomplished and let others know as well. The details of this should be discussed with your rabbi. The two of you can consider ways of announcing your conversion that feel right to you.

Not all converts feel that a conversion ceremony is necessary. Some even feel that a ceremony draws too much attention to the fact that they were not born Jewish. They would rather not have a ceremony or announcement because

they believe that their official conversion is something that should be of very little consequence to anyone other than himself or herself. This is understandable as well. The woman, who I mentioned earlier who had been practicing Judaism for years, felt that a conversion ceremony would be unnecessary. She cited several reasons. In the first place, she has been “feeling Jewish” for many years, so the announcement that she had just “become Jewish” felt for her like she was taking several steps backwards. Additionally, she was already self-conscious about the idea that she was not raised as a Jew and didn’t like the idea of drawing even more attention to herself as a Jew-by-choice. Conversion is a personal matter, and individuals should decide for themselves whether or not a ceremony announcing their experience is appropriate.

## **Summing Up:**

This introduction is only meant as a first step towards answering some of the very basic questions about converting to Judaism. By now, as you have probably noted, there is no blanket method of conversion, and each individual is able to make their own choices as to how they will approach this experience. They will be able to decide whether they will study with a group, or one on one, who will be their sponsoring rabbi, into which movement will they convert, and whether or not they will decide to celebrate their conversion with a ceremony. The following list of resources is meant to help you in discovering your questions, figuring out who will answer them for you, and deciding if, when and how you will become a Jew. B’Hatslacha (Good Luck)!

## RESOURCES:

Following is a list of rabbis, websites, readings, courses and other useful contacts that I believe might be helpful for the potential convert. Here you can find more information on the issues discussed above as well as on a variety of other related topics.

**LOS ANGELES AREA RABBIS:** A list of local rabbis who are happy to work with potential converts. (For a more comprehensive national list, see the Conversion to Judaism Resource Center's website at [www.convert.org](http://www.convert.org).)

### Conservative:

Rabbi Neal Weinberg

University of Judaism

15600 Mulholland Drive

Los Angeles, CA 91356

Tel: (310) 440-1273

Fax: (310) 472-3827

Length of Conversion Class: 18 weeks

Schedule of Classes: New classes begin monthly. Classes are also offered in outlying areas--Pasadena, Conejo/West Valley, South Bay, and Long Beach.

Cost of Conversion Class: Please call or fax for information or brochure.

Rabbi Perry Netter

Temple Beth Am

1039 South La Cienega

Los Angeles, CA, 90035

(310) 652-9353

Sherre Zwelling Hirsch

Sinai Temple

10400 Wilshire Blvd.,

Los Angeles, CA, 90024

Tel: (310) 481-3234

[shirsch@sinaitemple.org](mailto:shirsch@sinaitemple.org)

Rabbi William J. Gordon

Jewish Home for the Aging

18855 Victory Blvd.

Reseda, CA 91355

Tel: (818) 774-3018

Pager: (818) 757-8221

Home Tel and Fax: (626) 449-9194

Length of Conversion Class: 18 weeks

Schedule of Classes: Wednesdays 7:30 p.m.-9:00 p.m.

Cost of Conversion Class: \$200

Additional Comments: Classes are conducted at 3210 East Milton Street,  
Pasadena, CA 91107.

Additional Classes: Bar/Bat Mitzvah and Elementary and Advanced Hebrew.

Rabbi Dan Shevitz

Congregation Mishkon Tephilo

206 Main Street

Venice, CA 90291

Tel: (310) 392-3029

Fax: (310) 392-0420

Note: Rabbi Shevitz' Home Page is at [www.jps.net/shevitz](http://www.jps.net/shevitz).

## **Reform:**

### Rabbi Ron Stern

Stephen S. Wise Temple  
15500 Stephen S. Wise Drive  
Los Angeles, CA 90077  
Tel: (310) 869-2269

Note: Stephen S. Wise Temple also offers its own basic Judaism program called "Pathways to Judaism". It is open to all interested participants and for those who are interested; the course will enable them to be converted by one of our Temple rabbis or other rabbis around town.

### Rabbi Lisa Edwards

Beth Chayim Chadashim  
6000 West Pico Boulevard  
Los Angeles, CA 90035  
Tel: (323) 931-7023 ext. 2  
[lisaedwards@earthlink.net](mailto:lisaedwards@earthlink.net)

Note: Beth Chayim Chadashim is a Reform synagogue inclusive of lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, heterosexuals, our families and friends, with programs for all ages. Rabbi Edwards is happy to work with converts who are interested in becoming part of the BCC community.

### Rabbi Neil Comess-Daniels

Beth Shir Sholom  
1827 California Ave.  
Santa Monica, CA 90403  
Tel: (310) 453-3361  
Fax: (310) 453-6827

Rabbi Jeffrey Marx

Sha'arei Am

1448 18th Street

Santa Monica, CA 90404

Note: Rabbi Marx is trained as a family mediator. Readers can direct questions to him concerning conversion and prenuptial/postnuptial agreements, and divorce.

Rabbi Daniel J. Moskovitz

Temple Judea

5429 Lindley Avenue

Tarzana, CA 91356

Tel: (818) 758-3800

Fax: (818) 708-0644

**Orthodox:**

Beth Din of Los Angeles

c/o Rabbi David Rue

1462 S. Wooster #4

Los Angeles CA 90035

(310) 657-7438

This Beth Din serves over 50 Jewish communities from El Paso Texas to Hong Kong and from Canada to Mexico.

Rabbinical Council of California

617 South Olive Street, Suite 515

Los Angeles, CA 90036

Tel: (213) 489-8080



## **LOCAL MIKVAOT (Ritual Baths):**

Following are a list of some of the mikvaot in the Los Angeles area. Keep in mind that most of these are available for visit by appointment only. For further listings, go to <http://www.mikvah.org>

### **Pacific Southwest Region Mikvah**

The Rabbinical Assembly  
(located at the University of Judaism)  
15600 Mulholland Dr., #150  
Bel Air, CA, 90077  
310-471-4061

### **Mikvat Esther (Mikvah Society of Los Angeles)**

9548 West Pico Blvd  
Los Angeles, CA, 90035  
310-550-4511

### **Mikvah Sara U'baila**

360 N. La Brea Avenue  
Los Angeles, CA, 90036  
323-939-4297

### **Adas Yesurun Mikvah**

12405 Sylvan Street  
North Hollywood, CA, 91606  
818-766-4610  
818-505-9570

Teichman Mikvah Society

12800 Chandler Blvd.

North Hollywood, CA, 91607

818-760-4567

Mikvah Chana

1444 17th Street

Santa Monica, CA, 90404

310-829-3613

310-829-1324

## **CONVERSION CLASSES AND CENTERS OF JEWISH STUDY:**

University of Judaism: Department of Continuing Education:

Log on to <http://dce.uj.edu> for a complete listing of classes and for online registration. You will find classes in Hebrew, Israel and the Middle East, personal growth, even classes that are not specifically Jewish like yoga and tap dance. Perhaps, most important to the potential convert is the Introduction to Judaism class that teaches the fundamentals of the Jewish religion as well as counts as your preparation for conversion and appearance before a Beit Din.

Introduction to Judaism: The University of Judaism sponsors Introduction to Judaism classes in these other locations in the Los Angeles area (Conejo/West Valley - Temple Aliyah, 6025 Valley Circle Blvd., Woodland Hills

Pasadena - Pasadena Jewish Temple and Center, 1423 N. Altadena Drive, Pasadena

Santa Monica- Kehillat Ma'arav, 1715 21st Street, Santa Monica

South Bay/LAX Area- these two locations are run off and on in a cycle:

Bnai Tikvah Congregation, 5820 W. Manchester Ave, Westchester.

Congregation Tifereth Jacob, 1829 N. Sepulveda Blvd, Manhattan Beach

## **WEBSITES:**

Following is a list of what I believe are the most extensive and useful conversion websites:

<http://www.convert.org>- I believe this is the most comprehensive conversion site on the web. It lists the contact information for more than 290 Rabbis interested in helping potential converts to Judaism as well as includes sections to help potential converts with question about whether to convert to Judaism, how to discuss conversion to Judaism with friends and family, a guide For Jewish Parents, a description of the conversion process, the differences Between Judaism and Christianity, learning Jewish Culture, converting Infants and Children to Judaism, some real stories of others, the movements in Judaism , a Guide For the Conversion to Judaism Activist, a Guide to Jewish Books and Videos, a Brief List of Books About Conversion to Judaism, as well as a list of links to other helpful sites.

**Judaism 101:** <http://www.jewfaq.org>: This website is written from the orthodox perspective. There are extensive articles for the beginner, intermediate, and advanced Jewish learner. The various chapters include: **Ideas** (ranging from “What Is Judaism? “ and “What Do Jews Believe?” to the more advanced teachings on “Kabbalah and Jewish Mysticism”); **People** (“Who Is a Jew?”, “The Role of Women” and “Prophets and Prophecy” ); **Places** (“The Land of Israel” and “Synagogues, Shuls and Temples”); **Things:** (including a short glossary of Jewish foods and some recipes; **Words** (Hebrew alphabet, important blessings), **Deeds** (Tzedakah [charity] and a list of the 613 Mitzvot [commandments] and **Times** (including Jewish holidays and lifecycle events); as well as a list of references and links to other sites.

**Embracing the Covenant:** <http://geocities.com/Wellesley/5448/index.html>: This site is a list of resources categorized under the following topics: Conversion to Judaism, Jewish Culture, Women and Judaism, Women's Studies, Holocaust Links, Holidays

**Project Genesis: Torah.org:** <http://www.torah.org>: This is not a website devoted to conversion but rather to Jewish learning. There are thousands of articles related to Jewish holidays, Torah, Jewish Law as well as online classes taught by rabbis and other teachers.

**The UAHC outreach website:** <http://uahc.org/outreach/becom.shtml>: The website for the Reform movement's central body, the UAHC (The Union of American Hebrew Congregations), has an interesting question and answer section for individuals considering conversion. There are also links to "First-Person Perspectives on Becoming a Jew" and "Glossary - Words and Terms for Jewish Living".

## **Suggested Readings**

1. Diamant, Anita. *Choosing a Jewish Life: A Handbook for People Converting to Judaism and for Their Family and Friends*. New York: Schocken Books, 1997
2. Rosenblum, Joseph R. *Conversion to Judaism: From the Biblical Period to the Present*. Cincinnati, Ohio: Hebrew Union College Press, 1978
3. Einstein, Stephen J. and Kukoff, Lydia. *Introduction to Judaism: A course outline*. New York: Union of American Hebrew Congregations, 1983
4. Berkowitz, Rabbi Allan L. & Patti Moskovitz. *Embracing the Covenant: Converts to Judaism Talk About Why & How*. Woodstock, Vt.: Jewish Lights Publishing, 1996
5. Cowan, Paul and Rachel. *Mixed Blessings: Marriage Between Jews and Christians*. New York: Doubleday, 1987
6. Epstein, Lawrence J. *Questions and Answers on Conversion to Judaism*. Northvale, N.J.: Jason Aronson Inc., 1998
7. Kling, Simcha and Perkins, Carl M. *Embracing Judaism*. New York: Rabbinical Assembly, 1999
8. Myrowitz, Catherine Hall. *Finding a Home for the Soul: Interviews with Converts to Judaism*. Northvale, N.J.: Jason Aronson Inc., 1995

9. Romanoff, Lena with Lisa Hostein. *Your People, My People: Finding Acceptance and Fulfillment as a Jew by Choice*. Philadelphia, Jewish Publication Society, 1990
10. Weiss, Bernice K. with Sheryl Silverman. *Converting to Judaism: Choosing to be Chosen*. Deerfield Beach, Fl.: Simcha Press, 2000

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MAJCS project

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Telling one's family and friends about their choice represents for many people a very difficult part of their conversion experience. Some parents will see their child's desire to convert as a rejection of their own traditions and heritage and therefore, as a rejection of the family itself. Rabbi Marx describes this type of family response as a betrayal, as though they (the family) are ultimately being left behind or deserted. The reality is that Judaism is something new in your life that your family and friends may not feel a part of it. Therefore, it is important to recognize this and try to incorporate them into your experience. Honoring one's mother and father is an important Jewish value. In fact, their own self-definitions will be altered as well. As Anita Diamant describes, "When you become a Jew, the redefinition does not end with you. You transform your family of origin into an interfaith family" (34).

Different families will respond in different ways. Many families are open and supportive of the idea, some made a conscience decision not to instill any faith in their children, and may in fact not approve of organized religion, and still others have strong religious values that cause them to fear for their child's immortal soul. The best approach seems to be an upfront conversation where an individual tells their family that conversion to Judaism is something about which they are considering. It will take your family time to get accustomed to the idea, so you do not want to tell them after you have already gone through all of the preparation. Let them know where you are so that they can become comfortable with this idea gradually (Diamant, 36). They will feel like they have been consulted and know that their opinion matters to you.

## **The reluctant Jewish spouse:**

While most Jewish spouses are thrilled that their partner has decided to convert to Judaism, their behavior does not always demonstrate it. The reluctant Jewish spouse always seems a little inconsistent to the partner who is going through the conversion process. On the one hand, he/she is supportive of his/her spouse's conversion. On the other hand, they can be unwilling to attend Introduction to Judaism classes with their partners or to incorporate Jewish religious traditions and make spiritual changes in their lives. In the past, this paradox has been explained by the idea that the reason that the Jewish individual had picked their non-Jewish partner was to escape his or her own upbringing and family. However, there seems to be more to this question. In an article entitled "*From Wicked to Wise: A New Look at the Resistant Jewish Male in Outreach Classes*", Rabbi Jeffrey Marx and Dr. Norman B. Mirsky explain that this ambivalence might simply be an assertion of the born-Jewish spouse's own individual understanding of their Jewish Identity. After years of growing up in a Jewish home where they were told how to be a Jew, the individual has finally come to a point where he or she is free to make individual Jewish choices. This freedom may feel threatened when their partner begins going through a conversion process. The difficulty is that distinct aspects of Judaism resonate differently with each individual. Just as the conversion process is different for every convert, so is the practice of Judaism different for each Jew. The idea is not to get frustrated but to understand that these differences provide more tradition and variety for the Jewish family. Be patient. Through the years the goal will be to embrace Judaism together in a way that is comfortable for both partners.

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During your conversion process and even after you have converted, you may have trouble defining yourself. You have learned much about Judaism and the Jewish people but you may not yet feel that you are a part of this collective historical identity. "In a way, you are like a new immigrant in a foreign land. You are a first-generation Jew, staking your claim to a future in new territory" (Diamant, 210). There is no one type of way to be Jewish, and your contribution to the accumulated Jewish history is invaluable. In the August 1996 issue of *Moment* magazine, Ellen Jaffe McClain wrote: "Conversion, taken seriously and nurtured seriously, represents only gain for American Jewry. People currently signing up for classes in Judaism, trooping into rabbis' studies, and posting on the Internet are sincere and committed. They are bringing new fervor into stale Jewish institutions, and they are rekindling the *pintele yid*, the spark of Jewishness, in many born Jews, including, much of the time, their own partners."

With this having been addressed, it will most likely take a while to "feel" Jewish. One woman with whom I spoke who recently converted, described herself as feeling "like a fraud". She explained, "When I talk to a Jewish person who has grown up their entire lives with the experience of the Holocaust as a backdrop to their religious identity, I feel like a fraud pretending that I can identify with that feeling." While the feeling is very real, it is important to recognize that many born Jews have similar feelings of shame. Their families were untouched by the Holocaust or were able to escape or leave before Hitler's fury destroyed the Jews of Eastern Europe. They also cannot relate on the same level as those whose families lost everything. What is important, is that you can relate on a human level. Judaism is not a religion that is solely focused on its own people's death and destruction but rather on the miracle of our survival and the importance of "Tikkun Olam" (repairing the world of its flaws). Another way of addressing this issue is to realize that Jews of choice have always been a contributing factor to the continuing survival of the Jewish people in spite of the persecution.

Defining yourself to others can also be challenging. One woman that I spoke with has been practicing Judaism for years. She keeps a kosher home, attends synagogue regularly, has studied under several rabbis, works in a Jewish agency and has even made a trip to Israel. However, she has not yet officially converted. She feels herself to be Jewish and so do the people that she comes into contact with in her Jewish life. She does not introduce herself to new Jewish friends by saying that she is converting and does not believe that she should need to do so, either now or after her conversion. At the same time, she feels like she is hiding something. When people that she has known for a while through these Jewish community connections ask her about her Jewish upbringing, she often gets the feeling that they feel betrayed by her when she lets them know that she was not brought up Jewish. Yet, she feels that it is really nobody's business but her own, and she is right. What you chose to share about your experience of conversion, like any other personal matter in your life, is entirely up to you. This is your journey and you should only share that which you are comfortable..

## **Conversion Ceremony:**

The official act of conversion can be done without ceremony. All that is necessary is approval of the Beit Din (Rabbinic Court). However, without any ritualization of the event, the conversion can feel anti-climactic for some. For those individuals, a conversion ceremony is a necessary closure to this transformational experience. Having one's rabbi announce the conversion and welcome the convert to the Jewish people ceremoniously in front of the synagogue or even in an announcement can make the experience feel more official. It is appropriate that you should want to stand up and feel proud about what you have accomplished and let others know as well. The details of this should be discussed with your rabbi. The two of you can consider ways of announcing your conversion that feel right to you.

Not all converts feel that a conversion ceremony is necessary. Some even feel that a ceremony draws too much attention to the fact that they were not born Jewish. They would rather not have a ceremony or announcement because



they believe that their official conversion is something that should be of very little consequence to anyone other than himself or herself. This is understandable as well. The woman, who I mentioned earlier who had been practicing Judaism for years, felt that a conversion ceremony would be unnecessary. She cited several reasons. In the first place, she has been “feeling Jewish” for many years, so the announcement that she had just “become Jewish” felt for her like she was taking several steps backwards. Additionally, she was already self-conscious about the idea that she was not raised as a Jew and didn’t like the idea of drawing even more attention to herself as a Jew-by-choice. Conversion is a personal matter, and individuals should decide for themselves whether or not a ceremony announcing their experience is appropriate.

## **Summing Up:**

This introduction is only meant as a first step towards answering some of the very basic questions about converting to Judaism. By now, as you have probably noted, there is no blanket method of conversion, and each individual is able to make their own choices as to how they will approach this experience. They will be able to decide whether they will study with a group, or one on one, who will be their sponsoring rabbi, into which movement will they convert, and whether or not they will decide to celebrate their conversion with a ceremony. The following list of resources is meant to help you in discovering your questions, figuring out who will answer them for you, and deciding if, when and how you will become a Jew. B’Hatslacha (Good Luck)!

## RESOURCES:

Following is a list of rabbis, websites, readings, courses and other useful contacts that I believe might be helpful for the potential convert. Here you can find more information on the issues discussed above as well as on a variety of other related topics.

**LOS ANGELES AREA RABBIS:** A list of local rabbis who are happy to work with potential converts. (For a more comprehensive national list, see the Conversion to Judaism Resource Center's website at [www.convert.org](http://www.convert.org).)

### Conservative:

Rabbi Neal Weinberg

University of Judaism

15600 Mulholland Drive

Los Angeles, CA 91356

Tel: (310) 440-1273

Fax: (310) 472-3827

Length of Conversion Class: 18 weeks

Schedule of Classes: New classes begin monthly. Classes are also offered in outlying areas--Pasadena, Conejo/West Valley, South Bay, and Long Beach.

Cost of Conversion Class: Please call or fax for information or brochure.

Rabbi Perry Netter

Temple Beth Am

1039 South La Cienega

Los Angeles, CA, 90035

(310) 652-9353

Sherre Zwelling Hirsch

Sinai Temple

10400 Wilshire Blvd.,

Los Angeles, CA, 90024

Tel: (310) 481-3234

[shirsch@sinaitemple.org](mailto:shirsch@sinaitemple.org)

Rabbi William J. Gordon

Jewish Home for the Aging

18855 Victory Blvd.

Reseda, CA 91355

Tel: (818) 774-3018

Pager: (818) 757-8221

Home Tel and Fax: (626) 449-9194

Length of Conversion Class: 18 weeks

Schedule of Classes: Wednesdays 7:30 p.m.-9:00 p.m.

Cost of Conversion Class: \$200

Additional Comments: Classes are conducted at 3210 East Milton Street,  
Pasadena, CA 91107.

Additional Classes: Bar/Bat Mitzvah and Elementary and Advanced Hebrew.

Rabbi Dan Shevitz

Congregation Mishkon Tephilo

206 Main Street

Venice, CA 90291

Tel: (310) 392-3029

Fax: (310) 392-0420

Note: Rabbi Shevitz' Home Page is at [www.jps.net/shevitz](http://www.jps.net/shevitz).

## **Reform:**

### Rabbi Ron Stern

Stephen S. Wise Temple  
15500 Stephen S. Wise Drive  
Los Angeles, CA 90077  
Tel: (310) 869-2269

Note: Stephen S. Wise Temple also offers its own basic Judaism program called "Pathways to Judaism". It is open to all interested participants and for those who are interested; the course will enable them to be converted by one of our Temple rabbis or other rabbis around town.

### Rabbi Lisa Edwards

Beth Chayim Chadashim  
6000 West Pico Boulevard  
Los Angeles, CA 90035  
Tel: (323) 931-7023 ext. 2  
[lisaedwards@earthlink.net](mailto:lisaedwards@earthlink.net)

Note: Beth Chayim Chadashim is a Reform synagogue inclusive of lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, heterosexuals, our families and friends, with programs for all ages. Rabbi Edwards is happy to work with converts who are interested in becoming part of the BCC community.

### Rabbi Neil Comess-Daniels

Beth Shir Sholom  
1827 California Ave.  
Santa Monica, CA 90403  
Tel: (310) 453-3361  
Fax: (310) 453-6827

Rabbi Jeffrey Marx

Sha'arei Am

1448 18th Street

Santa Monica, CA 90404

Note: Rabbi Marx is trained as a family mediator. Readers can direct questions to him concerning conversion and prenuptial/postnuptial agreements, and divorce.

Rabbi Daniel J. Moskovitz

Temple Judea

5429 Lindley Avenue

Tarzana, CA 91356

Tel: (818) 758-3800

Fax: (818) 708-0644

**Orthodox:**

Beth Din of Los Angeles

c/o Rabbi David Rue

1462 S. Wooster #4

Los Angeles CA 90035

(310) 657-7438

This Beth Din serves over 50 Jewish communities from El Paso Texas to Hong Kong and from Canada to Mexico.

Rabbinical Council of California

617 South Olive Street, Suite 515

Los Angeles, CA 90036

Tel: (213) 489-8080

## **LOCAL MIKVAOT (Ritual Baths):**

Following are a list of some of the mikvaot in the Los Angeles area. Keep in mind that most of these are available for visit by appointment only. For further listings, go to <http://www.mikvah.org>

### **Pacific Southwest Region Mikvah**

The Rabbinical Assembly  
(located at the University of Judaism)  
15600 Mulholland Dr., #150  
Bel Air, CA, 90077  
310-471-4061

### **Mikvat Esther (Mikvah Society of Los Angeles)**

9548 West Pico Blvd  
Los Angeles, CA, 90035  
310-550-4511

### **Mikvah Sara U'baila**

360 N. La Brea Avenue  
Los Angeles, CA, 90036  
323-939-4297

### **Adas Yesurun Mikvah**

12405 Sylvan Street  
North Hollywood, CA, 91606  
818-766-4610  
818-505-9570

Teichman Mikvah Society

12800 Chandler Blvd.

North Hollywood, CA, 91607

818-760-4567

Mikvah Chana

1444 17th Street

Santa Monica, CA, 90404

310-829-3613

310-829-1324

## **CONVERSION CLASSES AND CENTERS OF JEWISH STUDY:**

University of Judaism: Department of Continuing Education:

Log on to <http://dce.uj.edu> for a complete listing of classes and for online registration. You will find classes in Hebrew, Israel and the Middle East, personal growth, even classes that are not specifically Jewish like yoga and tap dance. Perhaps, most important to the potential convert is the Introduction to Judaism class that teaches the fundamentals of the Jewish religion as well as counts as your preparation for conversion and appearance before a Beit Din.

Introduction to Judaism: The University of Judaism sponsors Introduction to Judaism classes in these other locations in the Los Angeles area (Conejo/West Valley - Temple Aliyah, 6025 Valley Circle Blvd., Woodland Hills

Pasadena - Pasadena Jewish Temple and Center, 1423 N. Altadena Drive, Pasadena

Santa Monica- Kehillat Ma'arav, 1715 21st Street, Santa Monica

South Bay/LAX Area- these two locations are run off and on in a cycle:

Bnai Tikvah Congregation, 5820 W. Manchester Ave, Westchester.

Congregation Tifereth Jacob, 1829 N. Sepulveda Blvd, Manhattan Beach



## **WEBSITES:**

Following is a list of what I believe are the most extensive and useful conversion websites:

<http://www.convert.org>- I believe this is the most comprehensive conversion site on the web. It lists the contact information for more than 290 Rabbis interested in helping potential converts to Judaism as well as includes sections to help potential converts with question about whether to convert to Judaism, how to discuss conversion to Judaism with friends and family, a guide For Jewish Parents, a description of the conversion process, the differences Between Judaism and Christianity, learning Jewish Culture, converting Infants and Children to Judaism, some real stories of others, the movements in Judaism , a Guide For the Conversion to Judaism Activist, a Guide to Jewish Books and Videos, a Brief List of Books About Conversion to Judaism, as well as a list of links to other helpful sites.

**Judaism 101:** <http://www.jewfaq.org>: This website is written from the orthodox perspective. There are extensive articles for the beginner, intermediate, and advanced Jewish learner. The various chapters include: **Ideas** (ranging from "What Is Judaism? " and "What Do Jews Believe?" to the more advanced teachings on "Kabbalah and Jewish Mysticism"); **People** ("Who Is a Jew?", "The Role of Women" and "Prophets and Prophecy" ); **Places** ("The Land of Israel" and "Synagogues, Shuls and Temples"); **Things:** (including a short glossary of Jewish foods and some recipes; **Words** (Hebrew alphabet, important blessings), **Deeds** (Tzedakah [charity] and a list of the 613 Mitzvot [commandments] and **Times** (including Jewish holidays and lifecycle events); as well as a list of references and links to other sites.

**Embracing the Covenant:** <http://geocities.com/Wellesley/5448/index.html>: This site is a list of resources categorized under the following topics: Conversion to Judaism, Jewish Culture, Women and Judaism, Women's Studies, Holocaust Links, Holidays

**Project Genesis: Torah.org:** <http://www.torah.org>: This is not a website devoted to conversion but rather to Jewish learning. There are thousands of articles related to Jewish holidays, Torah, Jewish Law as well as online classes taught by rabbis and other teachers.

**The UAHC outreach website:** <http://uahc.org/outreach/becom.shtml>: The website for the Reform movement's central body, the UAHC (The Union of American Hebrew Congregations), has an interesting question and answer section for individuals considering conversion. There are also links to "First-Person Perspectives on Becoming a Jew" and "Glossary - Words and Terms for Jewish Living".

## **Suggested Readings**

1. Diamant, Anita. *Choosing a Jewish Life: A Handbook for People Converting to Judaism and for Their Family and Friends*. New York: Schocken Books, 1997
2. Rosenblum, Joseph R. *Conversion to Judaism: From the Biblical Period to the Present*. Cincinnati, Ohio: Hebrew Union College Press, 1978
3. Einstein, Stephen J. and Kukoff, Lydia. *Introduction to Judaism: A course outline*. New York: Union of American Hebrew Congregations, 1983
4. Berkowitz, Rabbi Allan L. & Patti Moskovitz. *Embracing the Covenant: Converts to Judaism Talk About Why & How*. Woodstock, Vt.: Jewish Lights Publishing, 1996
5. Cowan, Paul and Rachel. *Mixed Blessings: Marriage Between Jews and Christians*. New York: Doubleday, 1987
6. Epstein, Lawrence J. *Questions and Answers on Conversion to Judaism*. Northvale, N.J.: Jason Aronson Inc., 1998
7. Kling, Simcha and Perkins, Carl M. *Embracing Judaism*. New York: Rabbinical Assembly, 1999
8. Myrowitz, Catherine Hall. *Finding a Home for the Soul: Interviews with Converts to Judaism*. Northvale, N.J.: Jason Aronson Inc., 1995

9. Romanoff, Lena with Lisa Hostein. *Your People, My People: Finding Acceptance and Fulfillment as a Jew by Choice*. Philadelphia, Jewish Publication Society, 1990
10. Weiss, Bernice K. with Sheryl Silverman. *Converting to Judaism: Choosing to be Chosen*. Deerfield Beach, Fl.: Simcha Press, 2000

**Becoming Jewish:  
A Los Angeles area Resource Guide  
For Potential Converts to Judaism**

**SYNOPSIS**

"Becoming Jewish" is a resource guide that was created to help potential converts to navigate the complex road that leads into the world of Judaism. The idea to create this guide came to me last year when three good friends of mine announced their interests in converting to Judaism. Knowing that I was getting a degree in Jewish Communal Service and seeing me as their closest link to Judaism, all three women called me separately for my advice about rabbis, books, classes and other resources. Having been born Jewish, I had given much thought to there being a lack of conversion resources. Although the topic of conversion had always interested me since my mother herself converted to Judaism before she married my father. Thinking I was too busy with school at the time to really devote the energy to helping them in their explorations, I sent my friends out with the information for a few contacts at local synagogues to do the research on their own. Although these women all began their conversion processes at different times of the year, I received similar stories from each of them when I checked back in during the first stages of their searches. I was appalled by the reports that I was given. Their descriptions included tales of unfriendly and unhelpful rabbis and synagogue secretaries who were too busy for my friend's questions, who wondered from where my friend's had received their numbers, who used the women's lack of knowledge about Judaism to intimidate them and make them feel stupid. I actually felt shame that this was how our Jewish institutions dealt with outreach.

My guide attempts take the mystery out of the exploration stage of conversion. I met with several local rabbis as well as individuals in various stages of the conversion process to get a clear idea of what kinds of questions potential converts are asking, what resources have been most useful to them, and what hurdles they have encountered along the way. Additionally, I compiled a list of "convert-friendly rabbis" in the Los Angeles area, local mikvaot and conversion classes; as well I suggested some informative websites and books. My hope is that this guide will help to simplify the first step towards conversion, to prepare individuals for the challenges they may encounter, and help them feel more comfortable with the rabbis that they might meet with during this process.

## ***Becoming Jewish:***

A Los Angeles area Resource Guide  
For Potential Converts to Judaism

Compiled by Abby Fleishman

## **Introduction**

Maybe you are thinking about becoming a Jew, but you are not sure where to begin your search. Maybe the thought of sitting down with a rabbi seems intimidating or you don't know what questions you should be asking him/her? Possibly you are interested in taking a class on Judaism but you do not know where to find one. The following list of resources has been compiled to help the potential convert to Judaism navigate this sometimes confusing road. The truth is that there are plenty of resources out there for potential converts to Judaism. My aim is to make the journey a little less intimidating and confusing.

## **Is conversion for you?**

There are many reasons why people convert to Judaism. Among the reasons that individuals often given are that Judaism makes “spiritual sense” to them, “they admire the closeness of the Jewish community and would like to be a part of that experience”, they have one or more influential and positive Jewish role models, others begin their journey towards Judaism when they fall in love with a person of the Jewish faith. This represents only a partial list.

Judaism has a long history of accepting converts; as we are reminded, the founders of Judaism: Abraham and Sarah, were both converts themselves. Perhaps the most famous of all biblical converts was Ruth, the great-grandmother of King David, and therefore according to tradition, the ancestor of the future messiah. In the time of Ruth, however, conversion was a much different process than it is today. All Ruth had to do to become Jewish was to marry an Israelite and then leave her family.

“Not until the Babylonian exile in the sixth century BCE did Judaism become portable, a matter of faith rather than turf” (McClain, 32). Today, conversion to Judaism is a much more formal process that generally includes a significant amount of study with a rabbi, approval by a rabbinic court (in Hebrew, a Beit Din), an ritual bath ceremony (the bath is called a Mikveh), and, for men, a

circumcision (in the Conservative, Reconstructionist and Reform movements usually require either a symbolic ceremony or none at all). After visiting the Beit Din and having ones conversion approved, converts are asked to pick a Hebrew name by which they will be able to be called up to the Torah.

Becoming a Jew is a commitment that takes time. It takes time not only to learn about Judaism and go through the process described above but also to adjust to a new lifestyle and to feel like you are truly part of the Jewish people. Converting to Judaism is a life-altering identity change that should not be taken lightly but does not need to be an intimidating experience. *Learning more about Judaism would be an excellent first step in your conversion process.* One can launch this process by meeting with one or more rabbis, reading one or more books on Judaism, taking an Introduction to Judaism class, or visiting an informative website.



## **Now that you have decided to make it official:**

After taking a class, spending some quality time speaking with one or more rabbis, and/ or reading one or more books, you may decide that you are ready to go through conversion. This is not always the case however, and that is also fine. *The idea is to go out into the Jewish world and learn what you can before making the decision.* In what he describes as typical, Rabbi Neal Weinberg at the University of Judaism, showed me a class attendance list from several semesters before. Only nine out of the original thirty-five participants in his Introduction to Judaism class actually went through with their conversions. There is no guarantee that what you learn will resonate with you intellectually, emotionally, or spiritually, and that too is fine. The hope is that you will still feel that learning more was essential in making this decision.

On the other hand, the learning and preparation might serve to reinforce that which you already knew, that you wanted to convert to Judaism. In that case, Mazel Tov! Making the decision is an important first step in this journey. This learning and decision making process of conversion is, in many cases, the most empowering component. For many, there may still be some difficult issues (if they haven't encountered some of these already). All of the psychological stages that follow should be dealt with and are perfectly normal accompaniments to the conversion process. Rabbi Jeffrey Marx describes the rabbi's role in the conversion of an individual as not only one of a teacher, giving the student requirements and educational tools with which to learn. He also believes that the rabbi must be attentive to the psychological process through which the student is going. These are some of the key issues: What is going on with their family? Have they told their friends? What are the reactions of loved ones? How does those reactions make the individual feel? All of this is important for an emotionally and spiritually healthy conversion to occur.

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Telling one's family and friends about their choice represents for many people a very difficult part of their conversion experience. Some parents will see their child's desire to convert as a rejection of their own traditions and heritage and therefore, as a rejection of the family itself. Rabbi Marx describes this type of family response as a betrayal, as though they (the family) are ultimately being left behind or deserted. The reality is that Judaism is something new in your life that your family and friends may not feel a part of it. Therefore, it is important to recognize this and try to incorporate them into your experience. Honoring one's mother and father is an important Jewish value. In fact, their own self-definitions will be altered as well. As Anita Diamant describes, "When you become a Jew, the redefinition does not end with you. You transform your family of origin into an interfaith family" (34).

Different families will respond in different ways. Many families are open and supportive of the idea, some made a conscience decision not to instill any faith in their children, and may in fact not approve of organized religion, and still others have strong religious values that cause them to fear for their child's immortal soul. The best approach seems to be an upfront conversation where an individual tells their family that conversion to Judaism is something about which they are considering. It will take your family time to get accustomed to the idea, so you do not want to tell them after you have already gone through all of the preparation. Let them know where you are so that they can become comfortable with this idea gradually (Diamant, 36). They will feel like they have been consulted and know that their opinion matters to you.

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While most Jewish spouses are thrilled that their partner has decided to convert to Judaism, their behavior does not always demonstrate it. The reluctant Jewish spouse always seems a little inconsistent to the partner who is going through the conversion process. On the one hand, he/she is supportive of his/her spouse's conversion. On the other hand, they can be unwilling to attend Introduction to Judaism classes with their partners or to incorporate Jewish religious traditions and make spiritual changes in their lives. In the past, this paradox has been explained by the idea that the reason that the Jewish individual had picked their non-Jewish partner was to escape his or her own upbringing and family. However, there seems to be more to this question. In an article entitled "*From Wicked to Wise: A New Look at the Resistant Jewish Male in Outreach Classes*", Rabbi Jeffrey Marx and Dr. Norman B. Mirsky explain that this ambivalence might simply be an assertion of the born-Jewish spouse's own individual understanding of their Jewish Identity. After years of growing up in a Jewish home where they were told how to be a Jew, the individual has finally come to a point where he or she is free to make individual Jewish choices. This freedom may feel threatened when their partner begins going through a conversion process. The difficulty is that distinct aspects of Judaism resonate differently with each individual. Just as the conversion process is different for every convert, so is the practice of Judaism different for each Jew. The idea is not to get frustrated but to understand that these differences provide more tradition and variety for the Jewish family. Be patient. Through the years the goal will be to embrace Judaism together in a way that is comfortable for both partners.

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During your conversion process and even after you have converted, you may have trouble defining yourself. You have learned much about Judaism and the Jewish people but you may not yet feel that you are a part of this collective historical identity. “In a way, you are like a new immigrant in a foreign land. You are a first-generation Jew, staking your claim to a future in new territory” (Diamant, 210). There is no one type of way to be Jewish, and your contribution to the accumulated Jewish history is invaluable. In the August 1996 issue of *Moment* magazine, Ellen Jaffe McClain wrote: “Conversion, taken seriously and nurtured seriously, represents only gain for American Jewry. People currently signing up for classes in Judaism, trooping into rabbis’ studies, and posting on the Internet are sincere and committed. They are bringing new fervor into stale Jewish institutions, and they are rekindling the *pintele yid*, the spark of Jewishness, in many born Jews, including, much of the time, their own partners.”

With this having been addressed, it will most likely take a while to “feel” Jewish. One woman with whom I spoke who recently converted, described herself as feeling “like a fraud”. She explained, “When I talk to a Jewish person who has grown up their entire lives with the experience of the Holocaust as a backdrop to their religious identity, I feel like a fraud pretending that I can identify with that feeling.” While the feeling is very real, it is important to recognize that many born Jews have similar feelings of shame. Their families were untouched by the Holocaust or were able to escape or leave before Hitler’s fury destroyed the Jews of Eastern Europe. They also cannot relate on the same level as those whose families lost everything. What is important, is that you can relate on a human level. Judaism is not a religion that is solely focused on its own people’s death and destruction but rather on the miracle of our survival and the importance of “Tikkun Olam” (repairing the world of its flaws). Another way of addressing this issue is to realize that Jews of choice have always been a contributing factor to the continuing survival of the Jewish people in spite of the persecution.

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## **Conversion Ceremony:**

The official act of conversion can be done without ceremony. All that is necessary is approval of the Beit Din (Rabbinic Court). However, without any ritualization of the event, the conversion can feel anti-climactic for some. For those individuals, a conversion ceremony is a necessary closure to this transformational experience. Having one's rabbi announce the conversion and welcome the convert to the Jewish people ceremoniously in front of the synagogue or even in an announcement can make the experience feel more official. It is appropriate that you should want to stand up and feel proud about what you have accomplished and let others know as well. The details of this should be discussed with your rabbi. The two of you can consider ways of announcing your conversion that feel right to you.

Not all converts feel that a conversion ceremony is necessary. Some even feel that a ceremony draws too much attention to the fact that they were not born Jewish. They would rather not have a ceremony or announcement because

they believe that their official conversion is something that should be of very little consequence to anyone other than himself or herself. This is understandable as well. The woman, who I mentioned earlier who had been practicing Judaism for years, felt that a conversion ceremony would be unnecessary. She cited several reasons. In the first place, she has been “feeling Jewish” for many years, so the announcement that she had just “become Jewish” felt for her like she was taking several steps backwards. Additionally, she was already self-conscious about the idea that she was not raised as a Jew and didn’t like the idea of drawing even more attention to herself as a Jew-by-choice. Conversion is a personal matter, and individuals should decide for themselves whether or not a ceremony announcing their experience is appropriate.

## **Summing Up:**

This introduction is only meant as a first step towards answering some of the very basic questions about converting to Judaism. By now, as you have probably noted, there is no blanket method of conversion, and each individual is able to make their own choices as to how they will approach this experience. They will be able to decide whether they will study with a group, or one on one, who will be their sponsoring rabbi, into which movement will they convert, and whether or not they will decide to celebrate their conversion with a ceremony. The following list of resources is meant to help you in discovering your questions, figuring out who will answer them for you, and deciding if, when and how you will become a Jew. B’Hatslacha (Good Luck)!

## RESOURCES:

Following is a list of rabbis, websites, readings, courses and other useful contacts that I believe might be helpful for the potential convert. Here you can find more information on the issues discussed above as well as on a variety of other related topics.

**LOS ANGELES AREA RABBIS:** A list of local rabbis who are happy to work with potential converts. (For a more comprehensive national list, see the Conversion to Judaism Resource Center's website at [www.convert.org](http://www.convert.org).)

### Conservative:

Rabbi Neal Weinberg

University of Judaism

15600 Mulholland Drive

Los Angeles, CA 91356

Tel: (310) 440-1273

Fax: (310) 472-3827

Length of Conversion Class: 18 weeks

Schedule of Classes: New classes begin monthly. Classes are also offered in outlying areas--Pasadena, Conejo/West Valley, South Bay, and Long Beach.

Cost of Conversion Class: Please call or fax for information or brochure.

Rabbi Perry Netter

Temple Beth Am

1039 South La Cienega

Los Angeles, CA, 90035

(310) 652-9353

Sherre Zwelling Hirsch

Sinai Temple

10400 Wilshire Blvd.,

Los Angeles, CA, 90024

Tel: (310) 481-3234

[shirsch@sinaitemple.org](mailto:shirsch@sinaitemple.org)

Rabbi William J. Gordon

Jewish Home for the Aging

18855 Victory Blvd.

Reseda, CA 91355

Tel: (818) 774-3018

Pager: (818) 757-8221

Home Tel and Fax: (626) 449-9194

Length of Conversion Class: 18 weeks

Schedule of Classes: Wednesdays 7:30 p.m.-9:00 p.m.

Cost of Conversion Class: \$200

Additional Comments: Classes are conducted at 3210 East Milton Street,  
Pasadena, CA 91107.

Additional Classes: Bar/Bat Mitzvah and Elementary and Advanced Hebrew.

Rabbi Dan Shevitz

Congregation Mishkon Tephilo

206 Main Street

Venice, CA 90291

Tel: (310) 392-3029

Fax: (310) 392-0420

Note: Rabbi Shevitz' Home Page is at [www.jps.net/shevitz](http://www.jps.net/shevitz).



## **Reform:**

### Rabbi Ron Stern

Stephen S. Wise Temple  
15500 Stephen S. Wise Drive  
Los Angeles, CA 90077  
Tel: (310) 869-2269

Note: Stephen S. Wise Temple also offers its own basic Judaism program called "Pathways to Judaism". It is open to all interested participants and for those who are interested; the course will enable them to be converted by one of our Temple rabbis or other rabbis around town.

### Rabbi Lisa Edwards

Beth Chayim Chadashim  
6000 West Pico Boulevard  
Los Angeles, CA 90035  
Tel: (323) 931-7023 ext. 2  
[lisaedwards@earthlink.net](mailto:lisaedwards@earthlink.net)

Note: Beth Chayim Chadashim is a Reform synagogue inclusive of lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, heterosexuals, our families and friends, with programs for all ages. Rabbi Edwards is happy to work with converts who are interested in becoming part of the BCC community.

### Rabbi Neil Comess-Daniels

Beth Shir Sholom  
1827 California Ave.  
Santa Monica, CA 90403  
Tel: (310) 453-3361  
Fax: (310) 453-6827

Rabbi Jeffrey Marx

Sha'arei Am

1448 18th Street

Santa Monica, CA 90404

Note: Rabbi Marx is trained as a family mediator. Readers can direct questions to him concerning conversion and prenuptial/postnuptial agreements, and divorce.

Rabbi Daniel J. Moskowitz

Temple Judea

5429 Lindley Avenue

Tarzana, CA 91356

Tel: (818) 758-3800

Fax: (818) 708-0644

**Orthodox:**

Beth Din of Los Angeles

c/o Rabbi David Rue

1462 S. Wooster #4

Los Angeles CA 90035

(310) 657-7438

This Beth Din serves over 50 Jewish communities from El Paso Texas to Hong Kong and from Canada to Mexico.

Rabbinical Council of California

617 South Olive Street, Suite 515

Los Angeles, CA 90036

Tel: (213) 489-8080

## **LOCAL MIKVAOT (Ritual Baths):**

Following are a list of some of the mikvaot in the Los Angeles area. Keep in mind that most of these are available for visit by appointment only. For further listings, go to <http://www.mikvah.org>

### **Pacific Southwest Region Mikvah**

The Rabbinical Assembly  
(located at the University of Judaism)  
15600 Mulholland Dr., #150  
Bel Air, CA, 90077  
310-471-4061

### **Mikvat Esther (Mikvah Society of Los Angeles)**

9548 West Pico Blvd  
Los Angeles, CA, 90035  
310-550-4511

### **Mikvah Sara U'baila**

360 N. La Brea Avenue  
Los Angeles, CA, 90036  
323-939-4297

### **Adas Yesurun Mikvah**

12405 Sylvan Street  
North Hollywood, CA, 91606  
818-766-4610  
818-505-9570

## **CONVERSION CLASSES AND CENTERS OF JEWISH STUDY:**

University of Judaism: Department of Continuing Education:

Log on to <http://dce.uj.edu> for a complete listing of classes and for online registration. You will find classes in Hebrew, Israel and the Middle East, personal growth, even classes that are not specifically Jewish like yoga and tap dance. Perhaps, most important to the potential convert is the Introduction to Judaism class that teaches the fundamentals of the Jewish religion as well as counts as your preparation for conversion and appearance before a Beit Din.

Introduction to Judaism: The University of Judaism sponsors Introduction to Judaism classes in these other locations in the Los Angeles area (Conejo/West Valley - Temple Aliyah, 6025 Valley Circle Blvd., Woodland Hills

Pasadena - Pasadena Jewish Temple and Center, 1423 N. Altadena Drive, Pasadena

Santa Monica- Kehillat Ma'arav, 1715 21st Street, Santa Monica

South Bay/LAX Area- these two locations are run off and on in a cycle:

Bnai Tikvah Congregation, 5820 W. Manchester Ave, Westchester.

Congregation Tifereth Jacob, 1829 N. Sepulveda Blvd, Manhattan Beach

## **WEBSITES:**

Following is a list of what I believe are the most extensive and useful conversion websites:

<http://www.convert.org>- I believe this is the most comprehensive conversion site on the web. It lists the contact information for more than 290 Rabbis interested in helping potential converts to Judaism as well as includes sections to help potential converts with question about whether to convert to Judaism, how to discuss conversion to Judaism with friends and family, a guide For Jewish Parents, a description of the conversion process, the differences Between Judaism and Christianity, learning Jewish Culture, converting Infants and Children to Judaism, some real stories of others, the movements in Judaism , a Guide For the Conversion to Judaism Activist, a Guide to Jewish Books and Videos, a Brief List of Books About Conversion to Judaism, as well as a list of links to other helpful sites.

**Judaism 101:** <http://www.jewfaq.org>: This website is written from the orthodox perspective. There are extensive articles for the beginner, intermediate, and advanced Jewish learner. The various chapters include: **Ideas** (ranging from “What Is Judaism? “ and “What Do Jews Believe?” to the more advanced teachings on “Kabbalah and Jewish Mysticism”); **People** (“Who Is a Jew?”, “The Role of Women” and “Prophets and Prophecy” ); **Places** (“The Land of Israel” and “Synagogues, Shuls and Temples”); **Things:** (including a short glossary of Jewish foods and some recipes; **Words** (Hebrew alphabet, important blessings), **Deeds** (Tzedakah [charity] and a list of the 613 Mitzvot [commandments] and **Times** (including Jewish holidays and lifecycle events); as well as a list of references and links to other sites.

**Embracing the Covenant:** <http://geocities.com/Wellesley/5448/index.html>: This site is a list of resources categorized under the following topics: Conversion to Judaism, Jewish Culture, Women and Judaism, Women's Studies, Holocaust Links, Holidays

**Project Genesis: Torah.org:** <http://www.torah.org>: This is not a website devoted to conversion but rather to Jewish learning. There are thousands of articles related to Jewish holidays, Torah, Jewish Law as well as online classes taught by rabbis and other teachers.

**The UAHC outreach website:** <http://uahc.org/outreach/becom.shtml>: The website for the Reform movement's central body, the UAHC (The Union of American Hebrew Congregations), has an interesting question and answer section for individuals considering conversion. There are also links to "First-Person Perspectives on Becoming a Jew" and "Glossary - Words and Terms for Jewish Living".

## **Suggested Readings**

1. Diamant, Anita. *Choosing a Jewish Life: A Handbook for People Converting to Judaism and for Their Family and Friends*. New York: Schocken Books, 1997
2. Rosenblum, Joseph R. *Conversion to Judaism: From the Biblical Period to the Present*. Cincinnati, Ohio: Hebrew Union College Press, 1978
3. Einstein, Stephen J. and Kukoff, Lydia. *Introduction to Judaism: A course outline*. New York: Union of American Hebrew Congregations, 1983
4. Berkowitz, Rabbi Allan L. & Patti Moskovitz. *Embracing the Covenant: Converts to Judaism Talk About Why & How*. Woodstock, Vt.: Jewish Lights Publishing, 1996
5. Cowan, Paul and Rachel. *Mixed Blessings: Marriage Between Jews and Christians*. New York: Doubleday, 1987
6. Epstein, Lawrence J. *Questions and Answers on Conversion to Judaism*. Northvale, N.J.: Jason Aronson Inc., 1998
7. Kling, Simcha and Perkins, Carl M. *Embracing Judaism*. New York: Rabbinical Assembly, 1999
8. Myrowitz, Catherine Hall. *Finding a Home for the Soul: Interviews with Converts to Judaism*. Northvale, N.J.: Jason Aronson Inc., 1995

9. Romanoff, Lena with Lisa Hostein. *Your People, My People: Finding Acceptance and Fulfillment as a Jew by Choice*. Philadelphia, Jewish Publication Society, 1990
10. Weiss, Bernice K. with Sheryl Silverman. *Converting to Judaism: Choosing to be Chosen*. Deerfield Beach, Fl.: Simcha Press, 2000