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JOURNEYS TO JUDAISM :
THE CONVERT'S PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

This study consisted of twelve in person interviews with males and females that had converted and/or were going to convert to Conservative and Reform Judaism. They were asked twenty-seven questions from a questionnaire pertaining to their life experiences and the process that they engaged in that ultimately culminated in their conversion. An emphasis was placed on how they came to acquire a Jewish identity and think of themselves as Jews. In addition, they were asked about what attracted them to Judaism, how it was similar or different to their previous religion, what experiences made them feel authentically Jewish and in what situations they saw themselves as more or less Jewish. Their views on Israel, anti-Semitism and the Holocaust were explored as well as issues such as their family's reaction and the impact on their born and/or unborn children.

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I. INTRODUCTION

There are few studies that have been conducted on conversion to Judaism and those that have been done seem to be very narrow in their focus. They focus on the level of practice of converts compared with born Jews and extrapolate on their findings, making assumptions and inferences far too often about what the convert must be feeling. In addition, statistics seem to be an emphasis and studies focus on findings such as, approximately half of all conversions occur after an interfaith couple is married and females convert more frequently than males. The convert's voice is noticeably absent in these studies, with much attention focused on justifying and condoning conversion to Judaism rather than examining the conversion experience to further our understanding of the process. So many authors encourage proactive conversion in the Jewish community, but seek little information on how to improve the process and help converts grapple with the psychological and emotional aspects of their journey.

Based on these conclusions we strove to examine and thereby understand the convert's perspective of the process of conversion. We have always been interested in what motivates people to choose to convert to Judaism and the process by which converts come to think of themselves as being Jewish. Having grown up with strong Jewish identities we wanted to explore how converts are able to create strong and unique identities for themselves and are able to forge a sense of belonging.

Our study is comprised of twelve, qualitative in-person, interviews utilizing a twenty- seven-part questionnaire. The informants who participated in the study were converts or soon to be converts to Judaism. We chose to use the word "convert" as

opposed to numerous other labels used to describe people who have converted to Judaism, for no other reason than to simplify matters. Our intention was not to offend anyone. Our sample consisted of men and women from various ethnic and religious backgrounds. Of those interviewed seven are female and five are male. Eight Informants are Caucasian, two are African American, one is Indian and one is Filipino. Nine informants were born in North America and three are foreign born. Their pre-conversion religions included five Catholics, two Pentecostal, one Mormon, one Hindu, one United Methodist, one Lutheran, and one Christian-Various denominations. In addition, four of the twelve informants converted to Judaism before marrying a Jewish spouse, five converted to Judaism after marrying a Jewish spouse, two converted or will convert to Judaism without being in a relationship with a Jewish partner, and one converted after marrying a non-Jew. The interviews also revealed that half the informants; informants 1 through 6 were raised in religious homes where religion was an integral part of their upbringing. The other half, informants 7 through 12 were raised with religions that were predominantly just labels and more cultural than religious.

Our informants were acquired from two different sources, namely the Introduction to Judaism classes at the University of Judaism and Temple Akiba in Culver City, Los Angeles. We spoke with Rabbi Neal Weinberg, the Director and Instructor of the Louis and Judith Miller Introduction to Judaism class at the University of Judaism who informed us of all the requirements of the class. The class began in 1965 and Rabbi Weinberg assumed the position of Director in 1986. Each class consists of thirty to fifty people and over six hundred people per year complete the course. It attracts a myriad of people from varying walks of life including Jews who want to broaden their knowledge

base, children from mixed marriages, gentiles who want to acquire knowledge and those that want to convert. The eighteen- session course is not considered a conversion class although, many that take it and are not Jewish ultimately choose to convert. The students are required to attend at least seven specific synagogue services including a holiday, morning and evening service. They need to be community minded, observe the Sabbath for twenty-four hours, keep kosher for a week and attend an overnight Shabbaton. Written reports are required from the participants after they have fulfilled each component. They also have to attend three support groups offered that focus on the emotional and psychological aspects of Judaism. Four out of six experiential requirements need to be carried out including visiting a Jewish museum and bookstore, kosher market, restaurant or Jewish cultural event. Members of the class are also asked to meet twice with both the course instructor and a congregational Rabbi. Finally, they need to take and pass a final exam based on the course content. The class includes a Jewish home tour, a mentor program, and hotline that class members can call for information. Each class is three- and half-hours in duration and Weinberg covers Hebrew, Jewish history, life cycle events, and lectures given by Holocaust survivors. Essentially there are three components to the course: knowledge, emotional and experiential. Weinberg states that "when the program is completed, Jews will find they are more knowledgeable about their Jewish heritage, non-Jews will have a better understanding of Judaism and those who want to embrace Judaism can continue on to conversion". People have a full year in which to complete the course. Weinberg asserts that a number of trends have emerged over the years. He declares that more and more single people are converting and non-Jewish women with Jewish partners tend to seek out Judaism. In general there are more

women who marry non-Jewish men who are converting. In addition, there are more female than male converts: women seem to be more adaptable to change and don't have to endure the circumcision ritual that petrifies many men. He feels the term "conversion" is used inaccurately. Convert means to change and he feels converts are not changing, but being blessed with an opportunity to affirm what they already believe in. Of the six hundred people that participate in the course per year, one hundred and fifty to two hundred people convert, although it often takes them more than a year to complete the conversion.

Rabbi Allen Maller of Temple Akiba in Culver City teaches a Union of American Hebrew Congregations Introduction to Judaism course. Maller posits that 80-90% of those that marry out of the faith do not have a spouse who converts. He feels the impact of hexogamy is difficult to measure and the net loss to the Jewish community is unclear. Maller states that the problem is people possess many different definitions of conversion and there are many individuals that never convert but refer to themselves as Jews. The UAHC course is unable to offer any statistics on how many have participated in the class and ultimately converted but are coming to realize the importance of and the need for measurement and evaluation. The course was officially established as an outreach program and has a standard curriculum. In California it is an eighteen- week course and offers a basic foundation in Judaism. The course is required for persons considering conversion to Judaism, but is very helpful to Jews-by-birth who are seeking a refresher course in the principles and practices of Judaism. To earn a certificate of completion for the course, participants must attend all eighteen class sessions, at least one Shabbaton,

three Sabbath services and write a report, complete all homework assignments and journal entries assigned by the instructor and a take home open-book final exam.

Maller believes that the failure of the course is that there are no Chavurot and that the participants need something to feed into after the eighteen weeks are over. He is insistent that the students need to establish a relationship with a Rabbi whom they can engage in discussions with. The Rabbi usually sets the requirements for conversion such as whether the individual needs to go through the Tipat Dam ceremony if they are male as well as whether they need to visit a Mikvah. Usually participants are required to have some sort of knowledge of the Hebrew language. Kashrut is not taught in the class, but the ethnic component of Judaism is emphasized. The level of observance that the UAHC is hoping for is much lower than that of the University of Judaism. Maller states that the class participants are given the opportunity to watch a movie pertaining to the Holocaust and the curriculum emphasizes Judaism rather than Jewishness. It focuses on the emotional aspects of Judaism rather than the informational component. Maller posits that those who convert do so because of marriage but he does not rule out the possibility that they may have been on the path to conversion for many years. He states that the divorce rate is lower for exogamous marriages and when no conversion occurs, the divorce rate is 120-150% higher. Maller does not believe that this is just due to the religion being the same but that people who convert are more committed to the "we" as opposed to the "I". They are motivated to sacrifice and give. Maller points out that the feminist movement and the growing acceptance of mixed marriages may be reasons why the conversion rates have decreased. He states that two- thirds to three- quarters of converts to Judaism are women and that in all main line religions, women outnumber men in conversion with the

exception of cults. Maller is fascinated by the fact that people have started inviting guests to their conversion ceremonies. He states that 30-40% of converts engage in public conversions and send out formal invitations.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature on conversion is extensive. People have profiled converts by both legitimizing and rejecting them. The question that seems to remain unasked is what we have focused on in our research, that is the process by which the convert came to think of him or herself as Jewish. Converts literally have the challenging task of having to redefine who they are. Their perspective is so important and this is the very thing that seems to have been overlooked in the literature. We are specifically focusing on the convert's perspective and point of view and not at all on trying to legitimize or reject them or their decision to convert.

Rabbi Sanford Seltzer's book, Jews and Non-Jews: Falling in Love (1976) is essentially an informal guide to interfaith marriages for couples, their families, and the rabbis who counsel them. Before any studies were conducted on conversion, books like these were valuable tools for those that had intermarried and were curious about conversion. Included in the book is a section on conversion to Judaism including the history and evolution of Judaism and the requirements of the different denominations with regards to conversion. This book is written from a rabbi's perspective. Seltzer speculates what the potential convert may be feeling but has little data to back up his assumptions. Seltzer (1976) refers to the fact that most couples have had any number of prior conversations regarding the possibility of the non-Jewish partner's conversion to Judaism long before they reach the Rabbi's office. "In my opinion it is the Jewish partner who more often than not informs the Rabbi of the non-Jewish mate's intention to convert, adding that he or she would never consider converting to the faith of the non-Jewish partner, something the latter fully understands and accepts" (Seltzer, 1976, p. 19). Seltzer

focuses on the fact that the non-Jew is usually very quiet which may be indicative of the fact that they are ill at ease in the strange surroundings of the Rabbi's office. They may be masking a deep-seated resentment over the pressures being exerted by the Jewish partner and the Jewish family. Seltzer elaborates by exploring things like the Rabbi's relief that the non-Jewish member of the couple desires to convert. He asserts that the circumstances and tensions surrounding many mixed marriages and intermarriages prevent the addressing of the inner needs and concerns of both partners.

Seltzer (1976) introduces the fact that Jewish communities throughout the United States have conducted courses on Judaism designed for prospective converts and their Jewish partners and that the Reform and Conservative movements have pioneered in this endeavor. He explains that in Boston it became evident that the UAHC-sponsored "Introduction to Judaism" program, was not coming to grips with the emotional aspects of the conversion process, "and it was therefore an ineffective and even detrimental method of dealing with the subject" (Seltzer, 1976, p. 21). Careful investigation revealed that the convert's reluctance to speak up was an outgrowth of the knowledge that the Jewish family had equated the taking of the course of study with a guarantee of conversion. The family may already have informed friends and relatives that their future son or daughter-in-law would soon be Jewish. As a result trained social workers from Jewish Family and Children's Service of Boston staffed an experimental discussion group entitled "Issues in Intermarriage" as part of the program. They hoped that through it men and women enrolled in the course would share feelings in an atmosphere of mutual trust, respect, and support. Seltzer (1976) elaborates by stating that the "the course of study had been intentionally entitled "Introduction to Judaism", and not "Conversion

to Judaism", to emphasize that its goal was to enlighten and to educate so that non-Jewish participants could make intelligent decisions regarding conversion based upon a knowledge of Judaism" (p. 22). A rabbi co-led some of the groups and this proved to be very helpful. The end result was that not everyone in the group decided to convert and for some participants issues remained open and unresolved.

Seltzer (1976) also examines the resources that are available to converts and asserts that couples do not take advantage of them or reject them when what they are told conflicts with what they want to hear. Today this book seems quite archaic since so many in depth studies have been conducted on conversion and its effects. Nevertheless, it enlightens us how much this subject has evolved over the years and how differently it is approached today compared to how it was approached then. Today it is a facet of Jewish life and accepted as such whereas twenty years ago, Jews were very conflicted with regards to how to approach the topic and struggled to grapple with the effects conversion was having on the community.

Steven Huberman's dissertation from Brandeis University entitled New Jews: The Dynamics of Religious Conversion (1978) legitimized converts and proclaimed that they are equally as Jewish as those born into the faith. Huberman (1978) focused on the identity change among converts to Reform Judaism and examined the motives, processes, and effects of conversion. Huberman (1978) gathered data through the employment of a qualitative interview and a questionnaire consisting mainly of close-ended questions. Huberman (1978) concluded that the converts in his research population had a level of commitment that was at least equal to that of born Reform Jews. The respondents almost uniformly identified with the Jewish people and frequently tended to

have a high degree of religiosity. There was also a good deal of variation in their degree of participation in American Jewish life. Huberman (1978) divided the converts into categories. The first category was "Integral Converts" who regarded Jewishness as a central factor in their lives. Twelve percent of the respondents fell into this category. They observed all of the rituals appropriate to Reform Judaism and were intensely involved in Jewish matters. Huberman (1978) asserted that they live a "Jewish rhythm" (p. 199). That is, those converts and their spouses had common Jewish concerns, socialized almost exclusively with Jews and lived full Jewish lives. Huberman (1978) termed the second category, "Participants" and explained that they consisted of converts who had a distinctive Jewish lifestyle and took part in Jewish activities more than casually. However, they neither regarded Judaism as a central core of their lives nor lived a "Jewish rhythm". Participants viewed Judaism as an important advocational interest and were relatively active in synagogues, periodically took part in Jewish organizational activity, occasionally participated in Jewish adult education and helped raise money for Jewish philanthropy. This group comprised thirty-three percent of the research population. Huberman (1978) labeled the third group "Associated Converts" who were dues paying members of synagogues or other Jewish institutions that were primarily social and fraternal in nature, but were not actively involved in them. Such converts only attended temple on the High Holidays or to commemorate life cycle events. The converts who were "associationally committed" (Huberman, 1978, p. 201) to Jewish life amounted to about twelve percent of the study. Huberman's (1978) category of "Contributors and Consumers", were converts who were unaffiliated with any Jewish institution, sometimes donated to Jewish causes and periodically used a synagogue facility for the rites of

passage. Although these converts who made up twenty-three percent of the respondents identified as Jews, they had not developed formal or lasting Jewish associational linkages. Huberman's fifth category of converts, "Peripheral Converts" made up six percent of the study and aligned themselves with the Jewish people but were very detached from Jewish living. "Marginal Converts", the sixth category took no pride in being a convert to Judaism and many stated that they had converted in response to pressure from people such as a spouse or an in-law. They made up approximately seven percent of Huberman's study. His last category "Non-Jews" repudiated their conversion and actively denied their Jewishness. They stated that they no longer or never felt that they were members of the Jewish community and comprised seven percent of the study.

Huberman (1978) conceptualized the participation of the converts in terms of a series of uneven circles. At the center was the hard core of committed converts and at the fringes were the converts who now identify as non-Jews. Huberman posited that there was a "magnet" within the core that draws converts closer and closer to the center in accordance with their degree of Jewish content. He explored how converts defined being Jewish and what influences were responsible for drawing them closer to the core. Those who took Judaism seriously defined it as religiosity. Huberman also delved into influences on converts including that of the spouse, in-laws the rabbinate and the Jewish community.

Huberman (1978) concluded that most of the respondents took being Jewish seriously and were more intense in their Jewishness than the control group, born Reform Jews. Huberman (1978) declared that "identity cannot grow in a vacuum—it must be nourished by a supportive community" (p. 242). Most of the respondents reported a wide

variety of social and psychological problems that were seemingly inherent in religious conversion. He summed up his study by quoting an informant who stated, "Becoming a Jew has not been easy. I feel deep guilt and I do not feel like a complete Jew. Yet it has been an experience which I will never regret or reject" (p. 243). Huberman (1978) asserted that what this respondent and most others were suggesting was that being a Jew was hard but becoming one was even more difficult. However, the majority of the respondents insisted that becoming and being Jewish was worth the struggle. Huberman's study bears more resemblance to ours than any other in the literature. However, he too focuses a great deal on legitimizing the observance level of converts rather than the process of attaining a Jewish identity, the very focus of our study.

In her book Choosing Judaism Lydia Kukoff (1981), writes for those who have converted to Judaism, those who are considering conversion to Judaism and for born Jews to help them understand the challenges, the problems, the hopes, the dreams, and fulfillment of those who have come to Judaism through conversion. Kukoff relates her own personal conversion story and provides anecdotes from other people who converted. Kukoff advocates for and provides information and tips for Jews by Choice regarding the post-conversion period and shaping their Jewish identity. The main objective of the book is to help people who have converted, to own Judaism.

She tells people that they will need to take an active role in shaping their new reality. She informs them that it takes time to feel Jewish, but that eventually, they too will have a Jewish past to call their own. She writes that there is no Jewish mystique and that one does not have to be born Jewish to be a Jew and to feel and think Jewishly.

"You can build a Jewish identity..." (p.24). Kukoff goes on to tell Jews by Choice that

they need to find a Jewish model for themselves. She states that it is important to establish a Jewish environment in one's home. For example, by buying Shabbat candles, a mezuzah, a Jewish calendar and a library of Jewish books. She cautions Jews by Choice not to be discouraged if they do not know something. Rather the important thing is to start and not be impatient. The process is not easy and instantaneous. "What you are learning and doing will slowly become internalized. You will make Judaism your own, and you will feel authentic" (p.28).

Other sections of her book address helping the Jew by Choice deal with their family and their in-laws. She gives advice about how they can go about telling their family about their decision to convert. The anecdotes in these sections reveal for born Jews the way Jews by Choice are sometimes made to feel by born Jews. For example, Zina relates: "In the early years, I remember holidays with my Jewish family. Whenever it was my turn to participate, they would say: 'Oh give her something in English.' I was not permitted to participate in anything that was truly sacred. It really bothered me" (p.47). Also included are anecdotes about celebrating Christmas and Easter and incorporating their families into their new traditions. She addresses the issue of giving up one set of traditions and embracing a new one. Kukoff goes on to discuss issues surrounding the Jew by Choice and their Jewish born spouse. She addresses post-conversion realities and how to act. For example, "You may know more about Judaism than your spouse and his/her family." She tells people not to be obnoxious in these instances, rather the ideal solution is to grow together.

The book also deals with issues surrounding Jewish life-cycle events, for example the importance of including non-Jewish family members in all life-cycle events.

Regarding the subject of children, Kukoff suggests creating a home environment in which it is possible to have two religious traditions represented and respected and at the same time make it absolutely clear that Judaism is the child's religion. She outlines a six-step plan for doing this. Kukoff stresses the importance of the Jewish community in a Jew by Choice's life and suggests seeking out Jewish places to frequent in one's city.

The end of the book includes a congregational plan for synagogues to ensure a warm welcome to those who have chosen Judaism. It includes suggestions of outreach programs and projects that can be implemented in synagogues. For example, sensitizing temple staff and renaming conversion classes from "conversion classes" to introduction to Judaism" classes. Overall Kukoff provides Jews by Choice with words to match their feelings. She stresses that Jews by Choice should not feel alone in their journey and that they can draw from the experiences of others to gain strength and receive guidance. She also salutes born-Jews for reading the book and pleads with them not to let Jews by Choice down. She concluded by saying that all Jews are Jews by Choice. "All those who choose to live a Jewish life are Jews by Choice" (p.114).

While there are many guidebooks for converts, this book is unique for its time in that a convert wrote the book, with input from other converts. It therefore succeeds to some extent, to capture the experience of conversion first-hand and is not just dictating to converts, from a professional perspective, how they should or could feel while they take the journey to conversion.

In 1990 and 1991 Dennis Prager wrote two articles addressing the need to encourage seeking converts to Judaism. In "Jews must seek converts for their sake and for the world's" he offers six reasons why Jews should offer Judaism to non-Jews. He

notes that an untold number of non-Jews would love to be part of the Jewish people and to live a Jewish life. Prager points out that none of the Jewish denominations have really confronted the issue. He concedes that the Reform movement has come out, in theory, for encouraging unchurched non-Jews to convert to Judaism, but do little about it. He goes on to criticize, by pointing out that since the Reform movement's decision to count children of non-Jewish mothers and Jewish fathers as Jews, the number of Reform conversions has declined. In the second article, "Judaism seeks converts" Prager explores the history of conversion in Judaism and outlines how to seek converts. One of his main points is that Jews must change their attitude toward seeking converts. "This alone will lead to a profound shift in Jewish behavior" (p.7). He encourages the Jewish community to reach out and tell the world that Judaism too has something distinctive to offer troubled humanity.

The literature includes studies like that of Samuel Klausner (The Conversion of American Jewry, 1991) who explores apostasy, that is those people that are born Jewish in the United States that ultimately changed their religion. He extracted his data from the 1990 CJF National Jewish Population Study of 2,441 randomly selected households identified as having at least one Jewish member. Klausner's (1991) analysis of the data documents the cultural assimilation of the American Jewish community, reflecting a trend towards societal conversion. Klausner (1991) defines societal conversion as the assimilation of one group into another and cultural assimilation as involving accepting the symbols through which group identity is expressed. He also refers to "structural assimilation" as "the merging of social relationships, the institutions and organizations of the respective groups" (Klausner, 1991, p. 1). He explains that he feels that the person

moving toward apostasy should be vitally concerned with the faith they are abandoning but he uncovers that apostates are notoriously concerned with being misidentified as Jews. "The apostate consciously distances himself or herself from the old faith and, in attitude, reduces it to irrelevance as a determinant of his or her action" (Klausner, 1991, p. 5). Klausner (1991) concludes that the soaring rate of intermarriage leads to non-Jewish grandchildren. In addition he states that there are a million self-proclaimed secular Jews whose attitudes and practices differ little from those of surrounding Christian society and nearly one and a half million "ethnic" Jews of Jewish parentage or background, who identify with another religion.

This work is significant as it focuses on assimilation and is in direct contrast with the approaches of Prager and Tobin, who both focus on valuing the convert and what they can bring to Judaism, rather than the losses incurred through apostasy. It is interesting to discover a work of this nature that inadvertently echoes Tobin's sentiment of placing value on the convert by taking a shocking look at reality.

A study conducted by Medding, Tobin, Fishman and Rimor (1992) focuses on the qualitative aspects of Jewish intermarriage in the United States. "It presents a theory of Jewish identity which provides a framework for the systematic empirical analysis of Jewish identification and behavior in households representing three basic marriage types: inmarriage-between two born Jews; conversionary marriage-between a born Jew and a born non-Jew who converts to Judaism; and mixed marriage-between a born Jew and a born non- Jew who does not convert to Judaism" (Medding et al., 1992, p. 3-4). The study uncovered that with each passing generation, more Jews are marrying non-Jews and males are more likely than females to marry non-Jews. In addition, they found that

Jewish identification fared well in conversionary marrieds and was higher than that of their respective inmarrieds. However, while very few Conservative conversionary marriages resulted in dual-identity households, nearly a third of Reform conversionary marriages did. These findings indicate that conversion usually leads to the achievement of medium and high levels of Jewish identification, "and more often than not brings about a qualitative identity transformation that results in the acquisition of an unambiguous Jewish identity by the convert and the establishment of a single-identity household" (Medding et al., 1992, p. 39). Medding et al. (1992) emphasize that Jewish identity fares well in conversionary marriages, or at least as well as in inmarriages, if the identical proportions of both marriage types at each level of Jewish identification are the criterion. The Jewish identification of conversionary marrieds was even stronger when they were denominationally connected. In fact, the overall level of Jewish identification among Conservative and Reform conversionary marrieds and the existence of significant proportions of conversionary marrieds who remain at low levels of Jewish identification and those who maintain dual identity households suggests that conversion does not always work. This study also acknowledges that there are different types and levels of conversionary marriages and in differentiating among them greater attention needs to be paid to the content and character of the conversion process including when the person converted (pre or post marriage) and the denomination the person converted to.

In contrast, Medding et al. (1992) highlight the fact that Jewish identification is very low in mixed marriages and that mixed marriage can be regarded "as a virtual bar to the achievement of a high level of Jewish identification" (p. 39). Jewish identification in mixed marriage is accompanied by the presence of symbols of Christian identification.

resulting in dual identity households at all levels of Jewish identification. In these households, it is likely that eventual choices will have to be made with regards to being Christian, Jewish or neither. "Mixed marriages may prove to be terminal for Jewish identity... and if the rate of mixed marriages continues to increase and present trends continue, the already low overall level of Jewish identification is likely to fall further, and dual-identity households may eventually rival if not outnumber single-identity households" (Medding et. al. p. 40).

Medding et al. (1992) conclude by emphasizing the differences between conversionary and mixed marriage households. The study uncovered that a more activist approach to conversion including conversion after marriage could have a considerable impact on future developments. Medding et al. also assert that the ambiguous character of mixed-married households provides opportunities for activist policies aimed at encouraging a degree of identity transformation that might lead to conversion rather than result from it. It is evident that the authors of this study respect converts for their decision to convert and are concerned about those that intermarry and do not choose to convert. The fact that members of the Jewish community actually advocate for conversion is indicative of how much the community has evolved and been able to face the reality of the drastically high rate of intermarriage. The literature and studies of the nineties are significantly different what was published in the seventies and highlights how much the face of conversion has changed and how differently people view it.

Lawrence Epstein in his book Conversion to Judaism: A Guidebook (1994), is writing for those who are studying to become Jewish, for those thinking about converting, for those who have converted and for born Jews. He discusses why people

have chosen Judaism and describes the conversion process. The book also includes basic facts about Judaism and suggestions to ease the challenges of entering Jewish life.

The first half of the book includes stories about conversions. He draws the conclusion that while many conversions emerge from romantic involvement, it is often Judaism's values and beliefs, not the relationship, that is the impetus for conversion. In corroboration with what many of the informants in our study related, he further notes that many people who discover Judaism for the first time are shocked to discover that its beliefs and values are exactly the ones they hold. In addition many feel that they have always had a Jewish soul, that they were a Jew trapped in a Christian body, or that they were born to the wrong family. Epstein explores the different paths that lead people to conversion. He outlines the steps a person should take in order to convert and outlines the history of conversion from Biblical times until the present. He also looks at conversion in Jewish life today and its effects. Epstein draws the same conclusion as Kukoff in his statement that all Jews are Jews by Choice. "American Jewish life, because it is free, is at its heart a voluntary enterprise. That is, American Jews have the freedom to abandon Jewish life. There is no formal system to prevent their assimilation. American Jews voluntarily choose to retain their Jewish identity when they could choose not to do so. Such a decision makes all American Jews truly Jews by choice" (p.39). Both writers by their statements are trying to bridge the divide between converts and born Jews and make people more aware of their commonalities rather than their differences. They are trying to foster more harmony and eradicate the stigma and prejudice often encountered by or associated with conversion. Epstein stresses that converts are a source of inspiration for American Jews as they voluntarily choose to become Jewish. "Seeing

Gentiles wanting to become Jewish makes Jews see Judaism as more attractive, as a religious "product" that consumers are choosing to "purchase" (p.40). He quotes Neal Weinberg of the University of Judaism, someone whom many of the informants found very warm and inspirational. Weinberg once told him that the converts were so valuable that they are "a light unto the Jews, showing all of us who were born Jewish how much we should appreciate the beauty of the religion we were born into" (p.40).

Epstein also looks at the roles of the partner, parents, in-laws and friends. He corroborates our finding that many converts fear telling their parents about their conversion. He states that conversion can cause great pain among the family members of the convert. Converts can also experience problems in dealing with in-laws and stresses that in-laws need to fully accept the convert as authentically Jewish. The book outlines the conversion process, for example, finding a rabbi, learning about Judaism, the Bet Din, circumcision, and immersion. Epstein also examines the challenges of conversion. He acknowledges the loss of previous identity, the sense of being overwhelmed and the feelings of marginality. As many of the informants found out this latter feeling takes time to disappear and requires performing Jewish tasks, raising Jewish children, and thinking Jewishly, to name a few. Epstein also points out that Holidays are frequently a time of special tension. As with the informants, he points out that it is common for converts to recall with particular fondness decorating a Christmas tree or waking up early on Christmas morning to rush down to look at presents.

The book also contains a basic guide to Judaism, including Jewish beliefs, practices and texts. Another section deals with post conversion, with advice about choosing a synagogue and a convert's religious needs. Epstein also covers topics such as

continuing to study, raising Jewish children and travel. He stresses the importance of visiting Israel. "Very best travel experience is for the family to go together to Israel" (p.223). The end of the book outlines how the Jewish community is organized and includes guides on Jewish books and films. The last pages detail guidelines of conversions of the various denominations.

Gary Tobin's book Opening the Gates examines the role that conversion should play in the Jewish future. It looks at how the Jewish community currently handles issues of intermarriage and conversion and recommends strategies to incorporate conversion into a larger vision of building the next Jewish civilization. He outlines the barriers to proactive conversion and stresses there are better ways to think about intermarriage than prevention. Overall Tobin is making a case for conversion and the creation of unambiguous Jewish households. "I believe we need more Jews, and more connected Jews. I believe that the time is right to make the community grow through proactive conversion" (p.xvii).

He notes that the book is meant to stir things up. He wants it to spark a debate that leads the Jewish community to focus on and invest in conversion. He sees millions of Jewish lives unrealized. This seems to him to be an individual and common shame. He states that he wrote this book so that we can think about how to provide a gateway for all the millions who would be Jews.

Tobin is careful to point out that proactive conversion is not in his opinion, synonymous with the aggressive recruitment that characterizes proselytizing. "Opening the gates is not the same as charging out of them" (p.11). He advocates encouraging interfaith couples, children, and grandchildren of mixed families, and those non-Jews

who are looking for a religious faith, to consider Judaism as an option. Tobin outlines the barriers to proactive conversion, for example, fear of the outsider, fear of anti-Semitism, a feeling of exclusiveness, familial barriers, and the Jews do not proselytize argument. Other barriers include Jewish institutional barriers. For example, formal institutional involvement from the federation world to deal with intermarriage and conversion is rare. "Federations generally focus specifically on continuity and Jewish education to deal with the issue of intermarriage" (p.79).

Tobin sees the religious divisions, and the disparity in quality of introduction to Judaism classes, as further barriers. The book also outlines what the Jewish community does in the realm of proactive conversion that works. He notes that there are more than two hundred thousand converts in America today. There are some rabbis and synagogues that are developing programs and procedures that encourage non-Jews to become Jewish. In addition, there is also more media coverage on the topic of the efforts of individuals and institutions to bring more non-Jews into the Jewish community.

The final section of the books outlines ways to open the gates. For example, support programs for mixed married couples, maintaining certain standards for the conversion process, changing ideology, creating new institutions, training rabbis etc. Tobin stresses that the successful models of proactive conversion must become the norm rather than the exception. "If Judaism is going to continue to maintain itself as one of the world's great religions, it must have new adherents" (p.187).

In this work Tobin is not discussing the process of conversion, but is rather advocating for conversion. Guidebooks, as referred to, are in abundance. They exist for those who have chosen conversion or are contemplating it as they embark on their

journey. Tobin's unique approach is to stress that conversion is not occurring enough and therefore the aim should be to concentrate on reaching more potential converts. Reading Kukoff's book and studies that deal directly with the convert's perspective could be tied to this process. It would be beneficial to understand what the convert goes through and how the experience could possibly be improved upon, thus encouraging or enticing more people to convert

Steve Cohen's Wertheimer Study of Conservative Jews uncovered that in terms of identity, converts have a weaker identity than born Jews and in general are less Jewish. He stated that converts have weaker ethnic ties including a point that was corroborated in our findings, namely that converts have a weaker attachment to Israel than born Jews. Cohen also found that children of converts in the Conservative movement were more likely than children of two born Jews to intermarry. Cohen's findings directly challenge those of Lydia Kukoff and Egon Mayer. All three of these studies are catered towards a Jewish audience and judge and rate converts.

Bethany Horowitz's unpublished study for the New York Federation namely, Connections and Journeys argues that Jewish identity is a process over the life course that changes for born Jews. In our study we are applying her perspective to conversion in that we have focused on the process by which people who are not Jewish come to think of themselves as Jewish.

III. FIELD NOTES

Interview #1:

- 1) Informant 1 is a thirty-three year old Caucasian female. She was raised Mormon in Riverside California. Her parents were very religious and she attended church every Sunday as a child. She attended a Mormon University, but stopped attending church as much when she was out of her parent's control. She describes her church attendance as sporadic after age eighteen.
- 2) Her sister, who converted one and a half years ago, played a large role in her decision to convert when she moved to Los Angeles. Both she and her sister have many Jewish friends and through her sister she started attending Jewish events like "Friday Night Live" at Sinai Temple. She claims she had always been interested in Judaism and had dated many Jewish men.
- 3) The process of conversion has mainly been a positive one and Rabbi Weinberg of the University of Judaism warmly received her.
- 4) She chose Conservative Judaism because she did not like the Reform Temple she attended or Orthodox Judaism that she encountered through Aish Hatorah.
- 5) She started taking the Introduction to Judaism classes on October 1, 1999 at the University of Judaism. She officially converted six months later. It took her a year before she enrolled in the classes because she wanted to think about her decision very carefully. She had to know she believed in it.
- 6) What was attractive about Judaism was that Judaism allows one to question and not just follow blindly like with Mormonism. It affords the opportunity to know why and understand what one is practicing. The values of Judaism are also attractive.

7) She told her friends who are all Jewish. Some thought it was great, some asked why she had decided to convert and could not understand her decision. Her family's response was "whatever makes you happy".

8) Mormonism is similar to Judaism in that Mormonism is based a lot on Judaism. They believe in the Law of Moses, but also in Christ.

9) Unanswered.

10) She has adopted various Jewish rituals and customs. She attends synagogue twice a month. She did not want to feel like she has to go to synagogue the way she had to with church. She observes all the Jewish holidays and tries to have Shabbat dinner as often as possible.

11) The experiences that make her feel authentically Jewish include attending temple, keeping some kind of kashrut (not eating pork and shellfish anymore).

12) She sees herself as less Jewish when her Jewish friends don't accept her as being Jewish. They insist that the mother has to be Jewish. She feels that this is ridiculous and her feelings are hurt, as she is more observant than they are.

13) She misses nothing about being Mormon. Christmas was fun when she was a kid, but now it is so commercialized. She sees it as a time for family to get together, but now she has Hannukah and she doesn't feel like she is missing out. In addition, Christmas is a pagan holiday.

14) If she had not chosen to convert she does not think she would be as happy. She felt like she was missing something in her life, but church was not the answer.

15) She started to think of herself as Jewish when prayers started popping into her mind and she found she knew the words to them.

- 16) She feels Jewish.
- 17) She is and always has been sensitive to anti-Semitic remarks.
- 18) She explains herself to non-Jews by answering any questions they may have.
- 19) She has never visited Israel, but has always wanted to, especially Masada.
- 20) She has no problems with Israel, only admiration, especially for the army.
- 21) She does not look to consult with Jewish professionals.
- 22) She has always identified with the tragedy of the Holocaust. In school she read the Diary of Anne Frank and was very touched by it.
- 23) Her closest friends are Jewish.
- 24) She has not told her whole family about her decision to convert because she knows how they talked about her sister behind her back when she converted. Those who do know have been nice to her.
- 25) N/A
- 26) Her children will be exposed to her prior religion to some extent because of her parents. She doesn't feel that they will have to get together with her family during the Christian holidays, but rather they can come together during other occasions. She wants to marry a Jew and raise her children Jewish.
- 27) She is happy with her decision to convert.

Interview # 2:

1) Informant 2 is a thirty-seven year old Caucasian female from Oregon. She was raised Pentecostal and attended church regularly from age 7 to 13. She met her Jewish fiancée at work.

- 2) She started thinking about conversion when she met her fiancée. She did not know much about Judaism before but religion has always been very important to her. She wanted some religion in her married life and she did not feel like Judaism was a big jump, but rather it fits her and she never felt a need to mourn. She felt like Judaism was like a "custom-made garment" for her.
- 3) She has had a very positive experience with conversion. She loves the classes she is taking at the University of Judaism. She also likes the fact that she is sharing the experience with her fiancée. She also loves Rabbi Weinberg, who has been wonderful and very accepting.
- 4) She chose a Conservative conversion because her husband's family is Conservative. She also feels that Conservative conversion is more widely recognized and that she is covering her bases.
- 5) She started taking courses at the University of Judaism. Rabbi Weinberg will officiate at her wedding.
- 6) She was attracted to the following aspects of Judaism: The whole idea of Shabbat, a day when you know you will be with your spouse, setting aside time to enjoy each other and grow spiritually.
- 7) She told everyone in her life about her decision to convert.
- 8) Judaism is similar to Pentecostalism in that the family is considered to be very important. They are different in that Judaism is a lot less judgmental about the way you should live, it is more "live and let live". Judaism also sets aside time for specific things and the blessings are beautiful.
- 9) One cultural similarity is the importance of family.

- 10) She has adopted the Jewish rituals of Shabbat, mezuzah on her front door post. attends synagogue, keeps kosher and says the Shema every night.
- 11) She still has trouble feeling authentically Jewish. She feels like others see her as the "Shiksa buying Shabbat candles". She feels more Jewish at home.
- 12) She sees herself as less Jewish in public.
- 13) She misses Christmas, but she will celebrate the Christian holidays with her parents. She sees them as a family tradition and not as religious.
- 14) If she had not chosen to convert her fiancée might not be marrying her. If they were married and she had not converted she feels their life would not be as whole. Right now their life is so full, without Judaism it would be empty. Judaism has given them a strong base for their future, without it she doesn't know how it would be.
- 15) She has started to think of herself as Jewish by the rituals she practices at home. She still wonders how others perceive her.
- 16) In terms of whether she feels she will ever feel Jewish, in time she will not care what people think.
- 17) She is sensitive to anti-Semitic remarks.
- 18) She has never had to explain herself to non-Jews. She has one Catholic friend who could not understand that she does not believe in Jesus.
- 19) She has never visited Israel.
- 20) She has no problems with Israel, but she also isn't very politically aware in general.
- 21) She doesn't specifically look to consult with Jewish professionals, but she is happy when they turn out to be Jewish.
- 22) She identifies with the tragedy of the Holocaust.

23) Her closest friends are Jewish and non-Jewish (50/50).

24) Her parents have been accepting of her decision to convert. They are fascinated and want to learn. Her mother is going to her fiancée's parents for Passover.

25) N/A

26) Her future children will be exposed to Christmas because of her parents, but she will explain to them that it isn't part of their religion.

27) She is very happy with her decision to convert.

Interview # 3:

1) Informant 3 is a fifty-nine year old African American male attorney who was born Catholic in St. Louis, Missouri. He was Catholic until age seven when his mother died and his father became Pentecostal. From 1951-2 he lived in Boyle Heights in Los Angeles which was a mixed neighborhood in those days. In junior high all his friends and girlfriends were Jewish and this marked the beginning of his attraction to Judaism.

2) As a young adult he didn't want to be Christian anymore. In college he befriended a group of people who had spent a year in Israel and they had a big influence on him. He met his wife who is Jewish in 1965 and they married the following year in a Unitarian Church as both were hostile to organized religion. Him and his wife joined a church called Subud (living in accordance with the will of God). The group became too cult-like for them and they left. They decided that they wanted to raise their children Jewish and joined a Reform synagogue in 1980. It was only when his son was about to have his Barmizvah that he decided to convert.

- 3) He had a very positive experience with Judaism and was received very well. He found the lack of racism in Judaism to be amazing. His wife's family consisted of many bigots but their attitude changed once he converted.
- 4) He chose a Reform conversion because they happened to be members of a Reform Temple. They had joined this particular temple because it was close to their home and many of their son's friends were members. He also did not realize the distinctions between the various branches of Judaism at the time.
- 5) The process of conversion unfolded very slowly. It was only when he saw his son learning for his Barmizvah that he realized his need to learn more about Judaism. The classes he took "lit a fire" under him. Everything made so much sense, spiritually and mentally.
- 6) He was attracted to the humility in Judaism.
- 7) He told everyone of his decision to convert.
- 8) Judaism is similar to Christianity in that there is devotion to God, belief in God, and the understanding that to live a holy life requires restrictions.
- 9) Unanswered.
- 10) He observes the Shabbat and all the Jewish holidays. He also keeps Kosher. He also fulfills the role of cantor for his temple.
- 11) He feels totally Jewish and doesn't need specific experiences to make him feel authentically Jewish.
- 12) He feels he knows more about Judaism than most Jews.
- 13) He misses nothing about being Christian. "I knew Christianity and I were finished."

- 14) If he had not chosen to convert he doesn't feel his life would be as rich and that he would feel lost. He knew as a result of his childhood that he needs religion in his life.
- 15) It was a long process.
- 16) As a non-born Jew he is still adjusting to the concept of being a Jew and not being religious.
- 17) He is very shocked by anti-Semitic remarks.
- 18) N/A
- 19) He has visited Israel 3 times.
- 20) He has no problems with Israel.
- 21) He does look to consult with Jewish professionals.
- 22) He identifies with the tragedy of the Holocaust, but not in the same way as Jews who were alive then. He was very moved by his visit to Yad Vashem and his realization that his children would have been killed. According to him many Africans died in the Holocaust.
- 23) Almost all his close friends are Jewish. He feels the most comfortable around them.
- 24) He had some problems with his family initially. They were upset that he had married a poor Jewish woman instead of a rich one. His stepmother asked him if he had to pick a Jewish girl why a poor one. He broke some ties with his family when his children were young because they tried to preach to them about Jesus. Ties were later restored, but his stepmother didn't attend the wedding. He felt that what he did was his business and didn't pay attention to his family.
- 25) N/A

26) His children were exposed to his prior religion to some extent. All three of his children practice Orthodox Judaism. His son is a Hassidic Jew living in Jerusalem and is married with two children, his daughter is married and living in Jerusalem and his 14 year old daughter attends a private Orthodox school in Cincinnati. As a result of his children being Orthodox he has become more observant. His home is completely kosher, he is learning more Hebrew, and he lays tefillin 3-4 times per week. Because he comes from a fundamentalist background it doesn't scare him. His children want him to have an Orthodox conversion and he doesn't rule it out.

27) He is happy with his decision to convert.

Interview # 4:

1) Informant 4 is a twenty-six year old Caucasian male who converted to Judaism from Christianity. He was born in Florida and raised in Indiana. His family first belonged to a Presbyterian Church, then a Congregational Church and when he was in high school he belonged to a "scary" congregation that brainwashed him. He met his Jewish fiancée in college.

2) He met his fiancée in 1994 and started dating in 1995. They had been dating a little over a year when he started to consider conversion. He was exposed to Judaism through his fiancée and started asking many questions. Initially he defended Christianity, but as he learned he started to locate differences and realized that deep down he already was Jewish. He then joined his fiancée when she was studying in Israel for a year and started studying formally with a rabbi. This point was a crossroads in their relationship and they

had begun to talk about where they were going with the relationship. They realized that they wanted to get married eventually.

3) His experience with conversion was a transformational one. He is a totally different person with different principles and outlook. He now has a purpose and sense of direction that he did not have before. The Rabbi and community received him with open arms. In the beginning everything about the services were alien. The only thing he could relate to was the music, yet he knew instinctively that it was good for him.

4) He chose Reform Judaism because his fiancée is a Reform Jew. Now that he has been exposed to other kinds of Judaism he feels that reform is the best choice for him. He doesn't feel like there should be labels.

5) The conversion process included a Tipat Dam, the Mikvah, the Bet Din and the conversion ceremony. Before these four things took place he met once a month with the Rabbi who challenged him a lot and had him write numerous reflection papers.

6) The fact that Judaism is an authentic religion is attractive to him.

7) He told his family about his decision to convert, but only told those friends and relatives whom he had the time to explain the process to.

8) With regards to similarities between Judaism and Christianity the ethics are the same, specifically regarding how human beings should act with one another.

9) The emphasis on the importance of family is similar in both Judaism and Christianity from a cultural perspective.

10) He has adopted the following Jewish rituals and customs: The blessing before meals, Havdalah, reading the portion of the week, and having Shabbat dinner. In order for the

process to work he knew he had to create things of his own and discover things for himself.

11) He feels authentically Jewish when he is fulfilling the mitzvot.

12) He did not wish to answer the question regarding which situations make him feel more or less Jewish. He does not worry about how others portray him.

13) He does not really miss anything about being Christian as he feels like he has always been a Jew deep down. He feels like he is letting go of certain rituals (Easter, Christmas etc...) and is saddened that they are over, yet there are things to look forward to.

14) If he had not chosen to convert, he might not be with his fiancée.

15) He started to think of himself as being Jewish over time and after participating in Jewish life.

16) He felt Jewish even before he formally converted. He felt the conversion was just a formal process that he had to go through to be accepted as a Jew.

17) He is sensitive to anti-Semitic remarks, but he doesn't dwell on them. He feels sorry for people who are anti-Semitic.

18) He explains himself only if he has the time to do so and then explains what Judaism means to him.

19) He lived in Israel for just under a year.

20) He had a hard time relating to Israeli culture and mentality. He sees the Israelis as illogical people and cited the example of narrow supermarket aisles as an example.

21) Unanswered.

22) He is starting to identify with the tragedy of the Holocaust more and more. He feels that Jews can get too caught up with the whole thing, yet it is important to identify and empathize with the tragedy.

23) His friends are both Jews and non-Jews.

24) At first his family was offended by his decision to convert and give up Christianity. However, over time and after many discussions they have come to an understanding. There are many cultural boundaries and it is often hard to explain ways of thinking. One problem area is their upcoming wedding.

25) N/A

26) His children will be exposed to Christianity, but in a way that will not allow them to lose their Jewish identity.

27) He is happy with his decision to convert.

Interview # 5:

1) Informant 5 is a forty-five year old African American male who was raised as a United Methodist in Los Angeles. His parents were not religious, but took him to church on a weekly basis "for insurance".

2) Informant 5 married a Catholic woman. He felt like he had always been trying to find where he fit in and he had many unanswered questions. He started church hopping. He also began listening to a radio show with a rabbi, a priest and a minister. He found that the rabbi had many answers. A major turning point was when the rabbi called his minister (who happened to be on the show) a coward for sticking to his pacifist beliefs and refusing to fight in World War II. After this he took a class at the University of

Judaism with Dennis Prager (whose radio show it was). One of the classes was held in the chapel and he thought it was very beautiful. He then signed up for the "Introduction to Judaism" classes and had already begun to read a lot about Judaism. His first service was at a Conservative synagogue for Rosh Hashanah services. Even though he did not understand the prayers he loved the service.

3) He was well received by the community and found the conversion process to be a very positive experience. He encountered some curiosity and some harsh, racist remarks based on race and his last name, "that isn't a yiddishe name!"

4) He chose a Conservative conversion because he happened to be taking the classes at the University of Judaism. He, however, chose a Reform rabbi to be his sponsoring rabbi and found the Reform Temple to be more to his liking. He prefers the fact that there is less Hebrew in the Reform services.

5) The process of conversion unfolded over a period of six months when he took the classes at the University of Judaism and culminated in his conversion in January of 1994.

6) He found the fact that Judaism stresses that not only believers are saved to be attractive. In addition, he liked the fact that Judaism is more accepting and stresses the importance of family and community.

7) He did not tell his children about his decision to convert right away. He wanted to "slip into it." He told everyone in the proper time. Most people were supportive and those that were not he is no longer friends with. The most shocking things he encountered were anti-Semitic remarks from people that he never knew were anti-Semites.

8) Judaism is similar to Christianity in that it also preaches "do unto others..."

9) Culturally Judaism is different in there is no complete acceptance of other faiths as there is in Judaism.

10) He adopted the rituals of lighting Shabbat candles, Hannukah candles, and sometimes lights the Havdalah candle. On the Sabbath he doesn't shop, but he does drive.

11) He feels spiritually Jewish and felt this way even before his formal conversion. He feels authentically Jewish, at public gatherings like the Israeli Festival or a Debbie Freidman concert, when surrounded by other Jews.

12) He did not wish to answer this question.

13) He does not miss anything about being Christian. He does still experience Christian holidays because of his wife and children. He does not push his rituals on his family, but they do participate 25% of the time.

14) If he had not chosen to convert he would still be looking. He still explores other religions to validate that he made the right choice.

15) He started to think of himself as Jewish after the ritual circumcision and Mikvah.

16) N/A

17) He is much more sensitive to anti-Semitic remarks than ever before. He wonders why he was not more sensitive before. He has realized how widespread the problem is.

18) He explains himself to non-Jews by going over the similarities and differences between Judaism and their religion. He doesn't criticize their choice.

19) He has never visited Israel, but it has always been his dream to do so.

20) He has no problems with Israel, but he is concerned with the Orthodox influence. He finds it hurtful that they do not accept his conversion. He feels that all Jews should be one big family.

- 21) He does not look to consult with Jewish professionals. It goes against his feeling of not wanting to put others down based on their religion.
- 22) He identifies with the tragedy of the Holocaust, but realizes he can never feel the full thrust of the pain of those who lost relatives.
- 23) His closest friends are both Jewish and non-Jewish (50-50).
- 24) His family relates well to his being Jewish. He does feel lonely sometimes when he has to attend services alone.
- 25) His children attend Catholic school and occasionally he attends church services with his family in order to be close to his children.
- 26) N/A
- 27) He is happy with his decision to convert.

Interview # 6:

- 1) Informant 6 is a twenty-eight year old Canadian female. She was raised Italian Catholic and attended church every Sunday. Her grandparents lived with the family and they were very religious. She met her Jewish fiancée at work.
- 2) Initially she did not want to convert. As the relationship developed she realized the significance of religion in her life and her fiancée decided that he wanted his children to be Jewish. They understood that in order for them to be Jewish, she would need to convert. She started questioning her religion and starting reading about Judaism. She realized that she was religious, but not necessarily Catholic. She started to realize that one religion is not more important than another.

- 3) Her experience with conversion was amazing. The rabbi who taught her played a big role and she developed a strong connection with him.
- 4) She chose a Conservative conversion because it fit with her fiancée's upbringing. She also likes the Hebrew and the ritual in Conservative services.
- 5) She started taking classes at the University of Judaism one and a half years ago. She then started going to shul regularly and tried to integrate into the community. By the beginning of this year she knew she was ready to convert. She also knew she wasn't converting just to marry her fiancée and that she would be going through with it anyway.
- 6) She found the traditions and discipline of Judaism to be attractive. In addition, the combination of culture and religion was attractive. In addition, the emphasis on family, the communal aspect, the emphasis on the here and now and the idea of questioning were attractive.
- 7) She did not tell her grandmother who passed away recently. She told everyone else and they respected her decision. Some friends questioned her switch from Catholicism to Judaism. Many people in her hometown did not have any prior knowledge about Jews.
- 8) Catholicism is different from Judaism in the following ways: belief in Jesus, idea of needing to believe in Jesus in order to be saved, the way services are conducted, the less serious nature of rituals.
- 9) Culturally the emphasis on family is the same in Judaism and Catholicism.
- 10) Her and her fiancée have included the following rituals and customs: Shabbat dinner, Hebrew, synagogue, major holidays, some Kashrut.
- 11) The following experiences make her feel authentically Jewish: knowing the prayers and being able to walk into a service and know what is going on, and reading Hebrew.

- 12) She feels less Jewish when she is surrounded by a lack of spirituality. When she is in her hometown she feels very Jewish.
- 13) She misses the Catholic holidays, but feels that new ones will substitute. She also misses the element of spirituality and forgiveness.
- 14) If she had not chosen to convert she would not be with her fiancée.
- 15) Unanswered.
- 16) She feels Jewish.
- 17) She is sensitive to anti-Semitic remarks.
- 18) She explains herself to non-Jews by saying that she believes in God and that is the most important thing and does not matter how you get there.
- 19) She has never visited Israel.
- 20) She has no problems with Israel, but does not know much about the situation.
- 21) She does not look to consult with Jewish professionals.
- 22) She identifies with the tragedy of the Holocaust.
- 23) Half her closest friends are Jewish and most of the people she socializes with are Jewish. Her old, very close friends are Catholic.
- 24) Her family (her parents) has been great. Initially they were confused, but when they realized that she had put much thought into it, they respected her decision. They believe that children need a strong religious foundation, no matter what the religion.
- 23) Her children will be raised Jewish.
- 24) Her children will "absolutely" be exposed to her prior religion.
- 25) She is happy with her decision to convert.

Interview # 7:

1) Informant 7 is a thirty-three year old Caucasian female who converted from Catholicism. Her father is Canadian and her mother English. She was raised in Texas and relocated to Los Angeles nine years ago to pursue a career in acting. Presently she is a piano teacher by profession and is single.

2) She first started thinking of conversion a year and a half ago and a year ago it became a possibility. She likened the process to a "journey". She always wanted to give Catholicism a chance so read a book but did not feel comfortable with the philosophies and knew she would never feel comfortable someday teaching them to her children. She then read the book "Jews, God and History" and started to feel like Judaism was "an inevitable choice". She then took the Introduction to Judaism class at the University of Judaism and felt all she was learning was "wonderful".

3) She felt the Rabbis were very open and encouraging of her decision to convert. They were eager to welcome her into the fold. Informant 7 is a member of Sinai Temple and she stated the Rabbi as well the congregation have been very accepting and supportive. She believes conversion has had an impact on her congregation because of the younger blood it is attracting. The Rabbi has incorporated the subject of conversion into his sermons and although they have been met with mixed reactions, overall the response has been positive.

4) Initially Informant 7 thought about converting to Orthodoxy but decided she couldn't commit to Orthodox philosophies. She decided the Conservative movement fit into her philosophical realm and therefore converted to Conservative Judaism.

5) Informant 7 stated that the process of conversion felt similar to "falling in love". The conversion process itself felt like a transformation especially since the ceremony was so "incredibly spiritual". Her mother and a close friend were present at her ceremony and she explicated that it is imperative to be surrounded by the right people.

6) There were many things that were attractive to Informant 7. She fell in love with the history and was intrigued by the fact that the Jews had been the initial monotheists. Although she had always known this, it really hit home. She loved the Jews abstract conception of God and the fact that they had always stuck to their belief in one God. In addition Tzedakah, Jewish holidays especially Yom Kippur and the "thousands of years of wisdom" contained in the Talmud were all aspects of Judaism that made it attractive.

7) Informant 7 told both friends and family of her decision to convert. Her mother was very accepting. Her father was born Jewish but had rejected the religion during the war. Her friends, both Jewish and non-Jewish were very happy for her. Her friends who are secular Jews expressed concern that she would become Jewish than they were. She was careful about who she told but expressed that many people were informed by others at her temple.

8) Because Informant 7 was not observant growing up it was hard for her to do an accurate comparison between Judaism and Catholicism. She felt the basic beliefs were very different. Catholics believe in Jesus as their savior while in Judaism she asserted you don't have to believe in God on some level as you follow the laws and interact with the community. She saw some similarities especially the fact that both religions want to manifest morality and ethics.

9) Informant 7 felt there was a definite culture to Judaism and there are different cultures within Judaism as evidenced by the Ashkenazi and Sephardic communities. She did not believe that Christianity has any definite culture and that Christians adopt the culture of the country in which they live.

10) Informant 7 observes Shabbat to the degree that makes it separate from the rest of the week. She performs the rituals on Friday evening but still drives and spends money. She observes all the holidays and works hard on her Hebrew

11) Observing the holidays and Shabbat make Informant 7 feel authentically Jewish. She is getting Batmitzvah in June and is on a "continual quest to keep feeling Jewish". She loves to learn more about Judaism by reading books. Attending synagogue on the Sabbath makes her feel "part of an organism"

12) There are never situations where Informant 7 feels more or less Jewish although she does get comments that she doesn't look Jewish to which she responds "so many of us don't".

13) Informant 7 does not miss anything specific about being Catholic because she was never observant. Sometimes she misses Christmas and Easter. She feels people get hooked into symbols of events in order to get warm feelings and feels that the warm feelings the Christmas tree gave her have been replaced by warm feelings she now gets at the Seder table.

14) Informant 7 feels that if she never converted she would have been a "loner". She has found community and friends through her decision to convert.

15) Informant 7 started to think about herself as Jewish very gradually by involving herself in the rituals. Rabbi Weinberg was very encouraging in this respect. She also

created a fantasy Jewish life for herself that included Jewish roots such as family members who were Holocaust victims and a Jewish childhood. She takes events in her life now and regresses them to her childhood such as the Batmitzvah she will have in a few months.

16) Not Applicable.

17) Informant 7 is sensitive to anti-Semitic remarks more so since converting. Before converting she had an acquaintance that was anti-Semitic and when she told a Jewish friend this they became angry and she never understood their reaction. Now she understands his concern. Growing up in Texas her family made anti-Semitic remarks, which she always felt were benign. She felt she made the decision to convert with the idea of anti-Semitism in mind as people questioned her need to group herself and eventually her children with a community whom had so many violent acts committed against it.

18) When she told her non-Jewish friends of her decision to convert, some told her they were worried for her and challenged her decision to convert saying she was giving up Jesus as a savior and she doesn't speak to these people anymore. Others questioned her to ensure she was making the right decision and ultimately supported her. She gives friends logical reasons for converting including the sense of community she feels among the Jews and the different laws like Tzedakah that she loves to uphold. Many of her friends were perturbed by this answer as they were looking to hear an emotional answer rather than a logical one.

19) Informant 7 has never visited Israel but would like to.

20) Informant 7 has started to research the political situation in Israel but has not done enough study to have a problem with it or make a decision as to how she feels about the interactions between the neighboring states.

21) Informant 7 does not look to consult with Jewish professionals.

22) Informant 7 feels more able to identify with the tragedy of the Holocaust since converting.

23) The closest friends of Informant 7 are Jews but she has many non-Jewish friends too. She is currently dating a Jewish man. The majority of her clients are Jewish.

24) Her family is trying to relate to her being Jewish. Informant 7 has taught her mother some of the rituals which she has responded positively to. Her siblings don't discuss the conversion with her and she believes them to be reticent of the idea although they would never admit to it. She does not feel like it challenges their religious values, as they are not observant. Her ninety-two year old grandmother who is very observant has been very accepting and encouraging.

25) Informant 7 has no children but when she does have children will raise them as Jews. She does not want to tell them early on and wants them to have pure reactions to their faith. She wants them to be secure enough in their upbringing that learning she was a convert will not negatively affect them. She feels they will have a different upbringing to hers, as they will be part of an observant family. They will be able to enjoy the benefits and the disadvantages of being Jewish.

26) Informant 7 does not want her children to be exposed to their prior religion through grandparents.

27) Informant 7 is very happy with her decision to convert. Now she just wants to assimilate and not have people bring up the fact that she is a convert anymore as it becomes annoying.

Interview # 8:

1) Informant 8 is a thirty-seven year old Caucasian female who converted from Catholicism. She was born and raised in Malta and moved to Los Angeles nine years ago. She is a massage therapist by profession. She is divorced and has a son from her first marriage. Currently she is engaged to a Jewish man whom she met on a blind date.

2) Six years ago, Informant 8 was in another Jewish relationship but it was not important to her partner at the time whether she became Jewish or not. She contemplated converting but his family was very unembracing and did not encourage conversion and she shelved the idea. She did not like their attitude and whatever she did, did not seem to be good enough. She desperately wanted to be part of a family and part of a tradition and so consequently the relationship ended. She had always gravitated towards Jewish men because of their culture and European background. She felt she had more in common with them than American men. Two years ago Informant 8 became involved with her current partner and was up front with him in her decision that she would not convert for him which he did not contest as his first wife had been Catholic. Her partner's family is Orthodox. As she became more involved with her partner, she became more interested in Judaism. They had lots of Jewish friends who invited them over for the High Holidays. Her husband expressed that he wanted their children to be raised Jewish and she realized she felt the same way. This motivated her to enroll in the class at University of Judaism.

- 3) Informant 8 met a few Rabbis before picking a sponsoring Rabbi at the University Synagogue. It felt very strange for her to have such young rabbis as she was used to older priests but she is very happy with the Rabbi she has chosen. She has found the community there to be very welcoming and embracing. Those that know she is converting help her with finding the page number in the prayer book and are very caring.
- 4) Although Informant 8 plans to go through a Conservative conversion, she is happy at the Reform synagogue she has chosen because of the Rabbi there. Her husband initially wanted a Conservative Rabbi too but is happy at the Reform synagogue. She feels Reform and Conservative Judaism are both appealing but the most important factor is where she feels comfortable.
- 5) After immersing herself in the class at the University of Judaism, she realized how much Judaism was her "philosophy". She did not believe in Catholicism despite her Catholic school education and really enjoyed the fact that Judaic beliefs were congruent with the manner in which she thought. She therefore pursued her interests and decided to convert. She has not yet gone through the official conversion.
- 6) There are many aspects of Judaism that Informant 8 resonated with including the philosophy, traditions, family unity and the Friday and Saturday Shabbat meals.
- 7) Informant 8 has not yet told her family she plans to convert because of her son. She wants to do it after the conversion in order to avoid any negativity especially from her father. She is not worried about the negative reaction towards her, but towards her soon because they don't understand the philosophy of the religion. She informed all of her friends about her decision who were very supportive and weren't surprised, stating "You're so Jewish anyway".

8) Informant 8 feels there are a number of similarities between Christianity and Judaism including the strong family ties and the Old Testament. Christianity is based on Judaism and the rituals in church are adapted from the Old Testament. She asserts that there are also many differences between the two religions including the fact that in Judaism you can speak to God directly and in Catholicism you have to do so through priests. In addition in Judaism Christ is not the messiah and there is no such thing as confession. Christianity focuses on the after life while in Judaism it is important how you treat your neighbor and how people feel about you while you are on earth. Informant 8 likes the fact that in Judaism you are not born with original sin like you are in Catholicism, but can question the dogma.

9) She feels that Maltese people are similar to Jews culturally as both peoples stick together, help one another out and are hospitable. She does not see any big cultural differences between the Jews and the Catholics in Malta.

10) Informant 8 lights the Shabbat candles every Friday night, her family blesses one another and they eat the Shabbat meal together. They attend services once a week and she particularly enjoys the family service at the synagogue that is held on the first Friday of every month. Although she does not eat pork or shellfish she does not keep a kosher kitchen. For one week they kept completely kosher but currently keeping completely kosher is "too difficult". "Later on we might want to be more observant". Up until now she has observed the main holidays but intends on observing them all once she has converted. She has observed holidays like Sukkot by going to shul, building a Sukkah and eating appropriate foods, as well as Hannukah. She would like to try and fast on Yom Kippur.

11) Going to the Jewish market every Friday night and wishing everyone "Shabbat Shalom" makes her feel authentically Jewish. For awhile this didn't feel natural but now it does. Lighting candles and torah study also make her feel authentically Jewish. "The more you participate the more Jewish you will feel".

12) She feels less Jewish in synagogue as she does not feel 100% comfortable in this arena and is still learning the routine.

13) She sometimes finds herself unconsciously doing the Christian cross. She misses the festive part of Christmas, not the religious significance of it. "Not having Christmas was hard-my son still believes in Santa". She misses "Christmas stockings and cookies for reindeers". This year she celebrated Christmas somewhat but didn't have anything in the house. She will still buy Easter eggs for her son but will no longer hide them for him as she used to.

14) She would have continued not feeling fulfilled and spiritual about her religion. "I was destined to convert and it would have happened sooner or later".

15) Feeling Jewish has been a gradual process for her. She has started to think of herself as feeling Jewish by performing rituals and going to synagogue. Since these things have become part of her everyday life, she slowly starts to feel more Jewish everyday.

16) She feels Jewish-"I feel like I always had a Jewish soul".

17) She is and has always been sensitive to anti-Semitic remarks.

18) She has not yet been in the situation where she has to explain herself to non-Jews but probably will be when she informs her father of her decision. If she had to explain herself she would state what Judaism does for her and how she feels about it.

19) She has never visited Israel but would like to.

20) She does not have any problems with Israel.

21) She does not consciously look to consult with Jewish professionals but all her doctors are Jewish.

22) She does and always has identified with the tragedy of the Holocaust. "The Holocaust left an impression even as a little girl. I never understood how Jews could be persecuted". She has visited the Museum of Tolerance twice and has heard Holocaust survivors speak- "They were hard to listen to".

23) All of her closest friends are Jewish.

24) She does not know how her family relates to her being Jewish, as they are unaware of her decision to convert.

25) Her son who is eight and a half attends Catholic school presently but she would like to ultimately send him to a public or a Jewish school. She has researched Jewish day schools but finds them to be very expensive and the school her son attends is not. Her son goes to temple and enjoys the services. She hopes he will eventually convert too and want to be Barmitzvahed.

26) Yes, her son will be exposed through his grandparents to Catholicism, to a certain extent.

27) She is very happy with her decision to convert and would never do something that she did not want to do. "Even if I didn't convert, my relationship would still be the same. It is easier to have one unit (family) than to have two separate religions".

Interview # 9:

1) Informant 9 is a thirty-two year old Caucasian female who converted from Lutheranism. She grew up in the mid-west and her parents are from Wisconsin. She moved to Los Angeles nine years ago where she is working as a Client Services Manager of a Management Consulting Firm. She is presently divorced from a Jewish man.

2) She had a difficult childhood. Her family paid lip service to Christianity but it was never played out in the home. She started to become curious and took philosophy classes and became existentialist, Marxist and atheist at different times in her life. She felt her religion was without content and also became agnostic for a few years. She went to a school that was 80% Jewish and her two favorite teachers were Jewish. "I always had a big attraction to Jewish people". She then attended Washington University in St. Louis and all her friends and professors there were very Jewish. Everyone she dated throughout her twenties were Jewish and she realized she was going to marry a Jew. "I felt the right thing to do was to convert if I married a Jew". She then met her ex-husband and converted after they were married. One of the reasons she converted was to strengthen her relationship with her husband as they had been separated for a period of time.

3) She feels very fortunate that she had such a wonderful sponsoring Rabbi at Sinai Temple. The members of the congregation were "enthralled" by her and "loved" her. Sinai Temple took time for her to get used to as she felt so young and was the only blonde and felt she didn't look one bit Jewish. The congregation was very welcoming and in addition she has made her own efforts to meet those people that didn't reach out and embrace her. "I felt it was my community and that I belonged there".

4) She chose Conservative conversion as it resonated with her. "Reform didn't click with me. I wanted the tradition and knowledge that Conservative Judaism afforded me".

5) One of the reasons she converted was to strengthen her relationship with her husband as they had been separated for a period of time. She decided to undertake the program at the University of Judaism. "I always looked at it as something I would do for my family and not for myself". Rabbi Weinberg was a great teacher and she was inspired to read everything and complete all her homework. "I was the least religious person and I loved the class!" She was married by a Reform Rabbi but hadn't converted at that point. Her wedding was comprised of "mixed elements" and was very much like a Jewish wedding but they didn't do everything. When she converted, she went to the Mikvah and before the Bet Din and wasn't nervous at all but instead found it fun. "I loved the process. Every time I say the Shema, it takes me back to that moment in the Mikvah. I feel privileged that I was able to convert". After converting she got divorced from her husband. There was conflict, as he didn't want to do as much as she wanted. "I tried to keep kosher but he messed it up. He saw it as an identity and I wanted to practice it". She now feels unhampered by someone else's values. "I feel very centered and not lonely and disconnected since my divorce".

6) "For any person who is an intellectual and grapples with ideas, Judaism is for you". She feels Judaism is "magical" and "mystical", elements that make it attractive. She likes the fact that it is not about God's ego but that God wants us to realize the divine spark. She feels Judaism gives us permission to enjoy life and that the Jewish God is a laughing God. "In Judaism you go as high as you can and you have permission to enjoy life. The

Jewish faith is about gratitude and I am a very grateful person, and I like having the opportunity to do that frequently”.

7) She has never had a lot of friends and so she didn't have anyone to tell. She told her parents who were initially supportive but then later on when she told her mother she was about to convert, she had a strong negative reaction as she thought she was just taking classes and didn't realize she was going to officially convert. She promised her father she would not tell his family, as they are anti-Semitic on that side of the family. She told her parents that she wanted to give them Christmas gifts but that she didn't want any in return. “My mother freaked out and was shocked that I was turning my back on Christ”. She does not see her parents often and her mother sees her conversion her personal failure and does not want to learn about Judaism.

8) “The Catholic faith is preposterous, I don't know how it could have survived”. She feels Gentiles are fed a formula and Christianity, unlike Judaism is about God and God's ego. “Judaism is about us. We are given permission to enjoy life whereas I was raised not to laugh or have fun too much and then I would be rewarded in the after life”. She asserts that she was raised to answer for all her sins but in Judaism you have to answer for the life you didn't enjoy. In Christianity, “the model of prayer is that you are continuously ask for forgiveness and favors while in Judaism you express your gratitude in prayer”.

9) She has not mixed with Jewish families enough to really see cultural similarities or differences. She feels the emphasis on family and “creating solid, good kids” is similar. Her family dynamics has skewed her perception. She feels like the Jewish culture in Los Angeles is the dominant one although in another city, she may feel differently.

10) Her current level of observance is "reasonably high". She observes Shabbat on a Friday night and Saturday. She does what she is supposed to and doesn't spend money or watch television, stays at home and has a nice meal on Saturday. She does drive to synagogue on a Saturday morning. She performs the blessings on Friday night and Saturday. "I engage in special Shabbat reading to further my understanding of Judaism". She keeps 100% kosher in the home which she views as a "sanctified place" but not outside of the home. She observes Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur and goes to services on all the holidays.

11) "I feel authentically Jewish twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week". She feels authentically Jewish by keeping kosher and going to services. "As a convert you have to do more things to feel part of the tradition". She tries to bring her thinking into alignment with the values of the religion, such as not using profanities while in traffic. "I never used to think about this".

12) There are no situations in which she feels less Jewish. "I feel more Jewish when doing Jewish things, for example being at synagogue. It feels like my community".

13) She does not miss anything about being Lutheran.

14) If she had not converted, she feels she wouldn't have had the strength to leave the marriage. "I felt personally empowered and it gave me the nerve and the faith that I was going to be alright. It increased my self esteem".

15) She started to think about herself as Jewish gradually. When she first started the course, she didn't feel Jewish. "When I felt the ideas were mine, I felt more and more connected and this contributed to my sense of identity".

16) Not Applicable.

17) Anti-Semitic remarks bother her more now that she feels it is her heritage. She was always sensitive but now it's at a new level and she feels protective of Jews. She would openly defend Jews but feels you never really hear anti-Semitic remarks in Los Angeles.

18) She explains herself to non-Jews by saying "I am Jewish!" She never bothers to tell anyone that she was not always a Jew. She had a friend who was a born again Christian and she ended the friendship, as she did not feel like having to explain herself.

19) She has never been to Israel but would like to go.

20) She does not have any problems with Israel but is sad about the political situation there.

21) She has always looked to consult with Jewish professionals. "I want to see doctors, dentists and lawyers that are Jewish. I always assumed they would be smarter and better."

22) She does identify with the tragedy of the Holocaust and her feelings are more powerful since converting. She feels empathic to people who are marginalized by culture and is outraged from a humanitarian standpoint. "I am angry about the situation as Judaism is so pure and beautiful".

23) She does not have friends and has always been a "loner". She gave up the friends her and her husband shared when they got divorced. She used to date a lot but no longer does.

24) She does not talk to her family about her conversion ever since the Christmas incident.

25) She probably will not have children as she does not want to marry again and therefore they won't be impacted by her decision to convert. She feels guilty that she won't procreate but asserts she will contribute to the religion in other ways to make up for it.

26) Not Applicable

26) She is happy with her decision to convert.

Interview # 10:

1) Informant 10 is a fifty-four year old Filipino female who converted from Catholicism. She was born in the Philippines and moved to the United States when she was twenty-one years old. She married a Jewish doctor twenty-five years ago and they have two sons, aged seventeen and twenty. She is a nurse but works in the management arena of the field.

2) She first started to think about conversion ten and a half years ago when her children were growing up. Her husband was a secular Jew and she was not connected to Catholicism. She attended church on Easter and Christmas because she thought the services were beautiful and not because of the religious significance of them for the first fifteen years of her marriage. She was religious growing up in the Philippines but when she moved to America she stopped being observant. Her husband never asked her to convert. They are both strong individuals who have never imposed their religions on one another. However, her husband asked her that they raise their kids as Jews. They were invited over to friend's homes for Passover and they always lit the Hannukah candles as a family, but that was the extent of their observance. Her husband felt uncomfortable with observant Jews. She started to read a little about Judaism. "My kids were nine and seven at the time and needed a religious foundation. I wanted to do something". When nothing eventuated, she informed her husband that something had to be done or she would start exposing the kids to Catholicism. Her husband was very conflicted but together they went

to look at synagogues. In July 1988, they joined the Ner Tamid Congregation in Palos Verdes, which was comprised mainly of unobservant Jews. They enrolled their children in the Hebrew School there. "I started looking at the religion and reading a lot. I wanted to learn and be involved". She started to look at Hebrew and took a class on Jewish home observance. In the class they taught her about the Megillah. "I wanted more and started going to synagogue". During the high holidays that year, her and her husband attended synagogue and he bought himself a Machzor. "I felt bad, I didn't know what was going on so I tried to figure it out for myself as my husband didn't explain it to me". She read the Hebrew using the transliteration. Later on, her husband explained to her that he was trying to sort out his feelings. "I started to light Shabbat candles after that and in late 1989, I went to the Rabbi and said I wanted to convert".

3) "I felt very loved and welcomed by the Jewish community which is why I chose the Hebrew name Chaviva meaning beloved". Initially the Ner Tamid congregation was not welcoming but she was very outgoing and so they opened up towards her.

4) She chose Conservative conversion "because during the conversion I became more observant. After I did the Shabbat assignment, I continued observing Shabbat". It was more in line with her beliefs and she felt more comfortable with it.

5) She took the class at the University of Judaism and her husband took the class with her and consequently his level of interest increased. She enjoyed Rabbi Weinberg's compassion. She had her conversion ceremony at Temple Beth Am during Shavuot and went in the Mikvah and before the Bet Din.

6) She found the fact that Judaism allows you to participate and constantly learn, attractive. She enjoys constantly striving to broaden her knowledge base and she feels Judaism affords her this opportunity.

7) Initially she just told her husband about her decision to convert and he was very happy. He confessed that when he married her, he had accepted that he would have to say goodbye to Judaism. She did not tell her friends until she was certain of her decision and then the few she told she invited to her conversion. She told her mother and two out of her five sisters. Her mother didn't respond much. "I was forty-three years old and married to a Jewish American, what could she say?"

8) She feels Judaism is very different from Catholicism because of things like priests, nuns and confession, all aspects of the religion she did not care for.

9) She sees cultural similarities between the two religions in that they both put an emphasis on family, food, children and togetherness. Differences she sees is that in Judaism there are holidays all year round and in Catholicism there is only Christmas and Easter.

10) She observes Shabbat but they are not Shomer Shabbat. "When you live in the outside world, it is hard to be strict. My husband is a doctor and works on a Saturday and Sunday every third weekend and has to answer the phone. In addition, one of my boys is an artist and the other is a musician and if they have a function on the weekend, we cannot not attend". At home they are strictly kosher. They are active in synagogue life and volunteer a lot. At one point they were members of a Chavura. "My level of knowledge is constantly increasing. I like to know more and do more". They recently moved to Temple Beth Am as they were not satisfied with Ner Tamid and Beth Am suits

their current level of observance more. She reads Torah, studies Hebrew and is currently taking her fifth trope class.

11) "Jewishness is everything I do". She feels authentically Jewish by lighting Shabbat candles, Hannukah candles, making latkas, sitting in the Sukkah, reading and learning Torah, keeping Shabbat and kashrut.

12) "I never really feel more or less Jewish. I feel Jewish all the time".

13) She does not miss anything about Catholicism.

14) "I am more comfortable telling people about myself. I used to feel like I didn't want to express myself and was paranoid about what people thought". She feels she is able to be more open with others and is more confident since converting. She does not become upset if people question her because in Catholicism you are not supposed to question and she never liked that. She has no problem sitting on panels and speaking openly of her decision to convert.

15) She first started to think of herself as Jewish when taking the course at the University of Judaism.

16) Not Applicable

17) Since converting she is more aware of anti-Semitism and takes anti-Semitic remarks more personally. She had a friend who used to make anti-Semitic comments. When they heard she was serious about converting, she asked them to refrain from making those remarks. "It is similar with being Asian. There have always been things I have to be aware of. After all being Asian shows and being Jewish doesn't". She does not like Jewish jokes either.

18) If non-Jews question her, she informs them that she converted. Non-Jews often question her food preference and if she has time she will explain why she does not eat certain things, otherwise she will not.

19) She has never visited Israel and has no close connection to Israel. Her sons have both visited and she would like to go there in the next two years.

20) She has no real opinion about the situation in Israel but hates the idea that Jews by Choice who convert conservative or reform aren't accepted there.

21) She does not really look to consult with Jewish professionals but this may change later.

22) Before she got married she never knew about the Holocaust. Now that she is Jewish she is much more aware and can identify with the tragedy.

23) Most of her closest friends are Jewish. She has some non-Jewish friends and lots of friends in different realms of her life. "I want to be with people that have the same level of observance and won't pursue a friendship if the person is not Jewish". She does not see much of her Filipino friends. She feels they may feel uncomfortable, as when they invited her over she never ate their food so they stopped inviting her. This did not bother her at all.

24) Her family is much more comfortable with her conversion today than they were initially. They had to get used to her eating habits and she started inviting them over for Hannukah and Pesach and explained the holidays to them.

25) Her children have had much more of a Jewish upbringing because of the fact that she converted. If she hadn't converted, they probably would have left Hebrew school after their Barmitzvah classes. Her sons were both Barmitzvahed and were confirmed in the

tenth grade. They attended Camp Ramah in the summers and Los Angeles Hebrew High at the University of Judaism during the school year. Because she filled the home with Jewish paraphernalia and Jewish books, they became much more knowledgeable. They also questioned rituals like Shabbat when they became older and it restricted their ability to go out with their non-Jewish friends. Presently, she feels because they are older, she is less able to control them and so lets them make their own choices.

26) "My children were never told they were Catholic even though initially our Jewish observance was minimal". Her children were never exposed to her prior religion even though some of her family lives close by.

27) She is very happy and comfortable with her decision to convert. She feels lucky that when she converted her husband joined her in the level of observance she chose and became her study partner. "My husband and I became much closer".

Interview # 11:

1) Informant 11 is a forty-eight year old Indian male who converted from Hinduism. He moved from India to Los Angeles in 1981. He has been married to a Jewish woman for twenty years and they have two children. He works as a financial controller for a film company.

2) When he got married, his wife requested that their children be raised as Jews. "She never pressured me to convert. We had a Jewish wedding but I did not convert". Informant 11 used to attend temple with his wife's parents who are today Orthodox but at that point were not. "I liked Judaism and found it very similar to Hinduism". He first thought about converting when his wife became pregnant in 1987. "I didn't want my

child to have a religion crisis and so started to explore Judaism" He enrolled in the course at the University of Judaism and liked Rabbi Weinberg.

3) "I felt welcomed by the Rabbi and the community". After the conversion, he joined Temple Beth Am-"I never felt alienated". Often congregation members are surprised to encounter an Indian that is a Jew. He finds the congregation is more interested to learn about him because he is Indian as he sheds a new perspective on Judaism for them.

4) He chose to convert to Conservative Judaism as he had always liked Conservative and his wife was raised as a Conservative Jew. "I was familiar with it".

5) He went to the Mikvah and before the Bet Din. "I was questioned and had to renounce my previous religion. It was very nice and I was ready".

6) Judaism was attractive to Informant 11 because it was an "ancient religion of the world". He liked the fact that it is a humanistic religion and feels Jewish people overall are making major differences in the world, whether it be in the medical or the political arena. "Judaism is appealing and the fact that they do convert people is attractive. It is a very welcoming religion".

7) He told his friends at the time and they were very happy for him. "None of my family live in Los Angeles. They don't know much about it as I never officially told them".

8) He saw quite a few similarities between Judaism and Hinduism including the religious holidays especially Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur which are similar in the sense that they are family oriented. He explicated that Hindus like Jews go to temple and pray. "Hinduism is both tolerant of and welcomes other religions and opinions and Judaism is similar in that way". Informant 11 also sees quite a few differences between the two religions such as the fact that Hinduism is a very individualistic religion where you go

and pray to God by yourself and in Judaism a minyan is required. He also pointed out that there are numerous Gods in Hinduism and only one God in Judaism.

9) Informant 11 explicated that he felt there were cultural similarities between Judaism and Hinduism such as the wedding ceremonies which both contain a lot of dancing and are officiated by either a rabbi or a priest. He added that Judaism used to have a dowry system like Hinduism. The differences he stated was the fact that Hindus express their beliefs by wearing dots on their forehead and distinctive clothing like saris. "Judaism doesn't have this distinction. You can tell when someone is Hindu but you can't identify if someone is Jewish".

10) Informant 11 is a member of Temple Akiba and observes all the holidays. His children attend Hebrew school at the temple three times per week. His family observes Shabbat and all the rituals and they maintain a Jewish household but are not kosher. "My in-laws became Orthodox in the last ten years which has created a rift between my wife and her parents. My wife's family invites us over for all the holidays".

11) Experiences like his daughter's upcoming Batmitzvah make Informant 11 feel authentically Jewish. "I started to learn Hebrew as my daughter being batmitzvah created a need for me to learn Hebrew." He made the decision to become Barmitzvah himself and will do so in June--"The decision comes from the heart. Life cycles make you change". He really feels like he has evolved over the years and feels more Jewish with new and different experiences. He feels more authentically Jewish on holidays such as Yom Kippur when he is fasting than other days.

12) Informant 11 feels less Jewish when he goes to services and cannot follow what is occurring. "For me it's a struggle to keep up. I feel left out because of it". In Reform the

situation is a little different because there is a lot of English yet he finds Conservative Judaism more appealing. "It is a process I will go through in my life".

13) He misses the Hindu holidays including the New Year and participates when he travels to India, as there is no religious connotation to them- "They are part of the culture".

14) "It would have disappointed my wife and created a rift and an identity problem within the family unit" if he had not chosen to convert. If he had not converted he does not believe he would have been as observant of Hinduism as there are no temples in Los Angeles and no central community of Indians.

15) He first started thinking of himself as Jewish when he converted and especially when his children arrived and they started to observe Shabbat and the holidays as a family which they had not done before.

16) Not Applicable.

17) He is very sensitive to anti-Semitic remarks and reads a lot including the *Los Angeles Times*, *The Jewish Journal* and is a member of Jewish museums. He is very familiar with the goings on in the Jewish community.

18) He explains himself to non-Jews by giving them reasons why he is Jewish. He explicates that his wife is Jewish and he wanted to raise his children as Jews and adds that it is a very challenging religion.

19) He visited Israel in 1982 and had a great time there and traveled all over the country.

20) He does not have any problems with Israel although he feels it has become more polarized because of the right and left wings. Although he feels this is disturbing, he

asserts that it happens in most countries. Israel's' view of what constitutes a Jew does bother him.

21) He does make an effort to consult with Jewish professionals especially doctors and states it is "natural".

22) He does identify with the tragedy of the Holocaust and wants his children to know about it. Because his children are three generations removed from the event, he wants to educate them when they are older. "I want them to have a religious as well as a historical background". Because of this Informant 11 ensures his children are educated at school and in the home.

23) His closest friends are Jewish but he does have some Indian friends.

24) Although his sister is not antagonistic, she does not understand what it means to be Jewish. He is planning a visit to India this year so he may inform them that he converted at that point. "It feels natural for my wife and kids-we are like any other Jewish family".

25) "My kids feel Jewish. They are proud of it and have no negative feelings about themselves". Most of his children's friends are Christian as they attend a secular school and he would like his children to be exposed to other religions. He enjoys educating them that there are different kinds of people with different religions as he feels it gives them an identity. They do not question him about his previous religion which is what he wanted.

26) He does expose his children to Hinduism at events like a cousin's wedding and explains, "This is what daddy's religion used to be". Because the family is traveling to India, this year they will be exposed to the religion.

27) "I am very happy with my decision to convert and have no regrets".

Interview # 12:

1) Informant 12 is a forty-three year old Caucasian male who converted from Catholicism. His father was Mormon and his mother, Catholic. He was born in Montana and has lived in Los Angeles for the past twenty years. He is an attorney by profession and met his wife who is Jewish in law school. He has two children, aged six and twelve.

2) He married his wife in 1985 and her family advised them to seek counseling at the University of Judaism. The Rabbi explained to them that he wanted couples to think about conversion and elaborated by saying he felt marriages where one partner does not convert were unsuccessful. Informant 12 was "dead set" against conversion- "The Rabbi rubbed me the wrong way". His own parents never agreed on religion and he was raised Catholic because of his father's inaction. His wife asked that if they had children that they be raised Jewish. He believed "children need guidance" and so he agreed. They also promised his wife's grandmother, who has since passed away that they would ultimately be married by a Rabbi. "I did not have a sense of what conversion involved". His first son was born in 1987 and there were guidelines that they followed in the home including celebrating Jewish holidays and no Christmas trees. When his son turned seven, they enrolled him in religious school at Temple Akiba. His son started asking him questions which he did not know the answers to. "I remember being in temple and looking around and everyone knowing what was going on except me and so thought I would try and fake it". His wife reminded him of his promise to her grandmother and so they asked Rabbi Maller of Temple Akiba, where they were members, to marry them. He refused to marry them unless he took the Introduction to Judaism class. He took the first ten classes and still was not thinking about conversion.

3) He asserted that the Rabbi and the community reacted well. "I can't think of any instance where anyone was bent out of shape because I was a convert. The Rabbis say when you convert you don't have to tell anyone about it but it always comes up. "Rabbi Maller is interested in outreach to people who are interested in Judaism".

4) He chose Conservative conversion and complied with the requirements of the conservative movement except he did not go before the Bet Din. He chose Conservative conversion because if he moved and there was only a conservative synagogue he wants to have the option of joining that synagogue.

5) He took the first ten classes of the course with his wife as she did not have a Jewish education or a Batmitzvah and they both enjoyed them. After the tenth class, a class member asked him if he was going to convert and he said yes-"My wife was floored. It felt like it was the right thing to do". He felt like he had no other religion to fall back on, as he was not raised Catholic and all he had ever heard was "the bad stuff" about Catholicism. He finished the course-"I got deeper and deeper into it and learned more and more". The actual conversion was "a very nice event" which he really enjoyed and found it to be "more solemn and awe-inspiring" than he had imagined. He did feel "unprepared and ashamed" in one instance when he did not know how to say the Shechianu. There are aspects of the Reform movement he respects but the class taught how to read the prayers and not what they meant. He and his wife were ultimately married for a second time by Rabbi Maller.

6) He finds the fact that Judaism is a "clear-sighted religion" not unduly focused on the world to come but on the world we live in, attractive. He likes the intellectual part of Judaism and the fact that you can argue with God by reinterpreting the Torah.

7) His mom was not alive at the time but if she was she was, she would have been the last person he would have told. He told his wife's parents who were neither in favor or opposed. They thought he was converting because his wife was pressuring him. He also told the people he worked with and his siblings. His siblings were supportive and told him they thought he had already converted. His colleagues responded by saying, "I thought you were Jewish". The last person he told was his father who was restrained. He never told his Mormon aunts and uncles.

8) The only similarities he sees are the Old Testament and praying as a congregation. The differences are that the Hebrew bible says good things and bad things happen and we are not perfect. Christianity espouses that everything is for the good and that people get killed for a reason which angers him. He believes Christians give forgiveness too easily and he does not believe Jews are this way inclined. Judaism is more focused on performing good deeds in your current life.

9) He struggles with whether there are cultural differences between Judaism and Catholicism. He recognizes that Judaism accepts and encourages people to think on their own which Catholicism does not. He feels Jewish people are less reserved. "I guess there are no real cultural similarities. Jewish food is different".

10) They are Reform. They do not work on Shabbat but don't observe it in the Orthodox way. They light candles and sometimes have Shabbat meals. They attend services once a month. He does not eat shellfish or mix milk and meat but doesn't observe the rules of Kashrut. They observe Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur and Passover. "As time has gone on, we have gotten more observant".

11) Going to synagogue and knowing the prayers better than most people make him feel authentically Jewish. Being the Vice President of Membership of Temple Akiba and encouraging others to join the temple also make him feel this way.

12) When he is with people who are more observant, he recognizes how much he does not know and feels less Jewish. He also feels less Jewish in situations when he is reminded that he wasn't raised Jewish or when people speak Hebrew and he does not understand it. Learning Hebrew and reading the prayers makes him feel more Jewish. He had an adult Barmizvah at Temple Akiba. He has spent a lot of time figuring out what Hebrew words mean. He plans to teach a class in May on what the Shema and Amidah mean as well as the significance of Torah services.

13) He misses turkey and cheese sandwiches, as he liked to mix milk and cheese and no longer does so. Although he misses certain foods, he does not miss the religious side of Catholicism.

14) If he had not chosen to convert, he feels he would be a lot less happy. Since he made the decision to convert he feels a lot happier with his lot in life. "I feel content and a sense of peace". The Rabbi is encouraging him to go to rabbinical school, which at this point he can afford financially so he is seriously considering it.

15) After converting he thought of himself as a convert and then took a Bnai Mitzvah course and learned enough to say the prayers. He learned the meaning of Hebrew words and started to feel Jewish. "I learned enough so that I did not feel ashamed. I felt Jewish".

16) Not Applicable.

17) He is not as sensitive as his wife to anti-Semitic remarks. He dislikes how some converts are self righteous and does not think they should pretend that they have had the

same life experience as someone who was born Jewish. He does not remember hearing many anti-Semitic remarks although his mother used to make anti-Semitic comments towards his wife.

18) He usually does not mention to non-Jews that he converted but at the same time he would not hide the fact that he is Jewish. He tells his colleagues that he will not be at work due to a Jewish holiday.

19) He has never visited Israel but would like to.

20) He feels Israel does not live up to its principles.

21) He does not look to consult with Jewish professionals but feels a sense of kinship with them.

22) He does identify with the tragedy of the Holocaust and views it as the great tragedy of the twentieth century. He does not feel it the same way his wife and many of her family do as they have family members who perished. He is offended when people deny its existence but cannot pretend it was a tragedy that happened to him.

23) Half of his closest friends are Jewish and half of them are not.

24) His sons and his family are very pleased that he converted. His siblings are accepting and his father, tolerant. His stepfather is not understanding and his aunts and uncles disapprove.

25) As a result of his conversion, his older son has become quite interested in Judaism and is the top student in his Hebrew school class. He makes speeches in the synagogue often and his children express their pride in him.

26) His children will not be exposed to their prior religion. He would not object if they wanted to learn about Catholicism.

27) He is very happy with his decision to convert.

IV. ANALYSIS OF QUESTIONNAIRE

Tell me a little about your background (demographic, age, sex, ethnicity, where you met your partner)?

The informants who participated in this study are from a wide range of racial, religious and ethnic backgrounds.

Informant 1 is a thirty-three year old single, Caucasian female who works in the Entertainment Industry. She was raised Mormon in Riverside California. Her parents were very religious and they went to church every Sunday. She attended a Mormon University, but by then had stopped going to church. Informant 1 converted to Judaism on April 1, 2000. Informant 2 is a thirty-seven year old Caucasian female who works in the Entertainment Industry. She was raised Pentecostal in Oregon and attended Church regularly as a child. Informant 2 is engaged to a Jewish man she met at work. She converted to Judaism prior to her wedding in April 2000. Informant 3 is a fifty-nine year old African American male attorney. He was born Catholic in St. Louis Missouri, but after his mother died when he was 7 his father converted to Pentecostal. From 1951-52 he lived in Boyle Heights in Los Angeles which was a mixed neighborhood at the time. In junior high school all his friends and girlfriends were Jewish. He met his wife who is Jewish in college and converted to Judaism 15 years after they were married. Informant 4 is a twenty-six year old Caucasian male, graduate student. He was raised in a Christian home in Florida and Indiana. His family belonged to various denominations, including Presbyterian, Congregational, and in high school he belonged to a "scary" congregation

that tried to "brain-wash" him. He met his Jewish fiancée in college. Informant 4 converted to Judaism in 1999. Informant 5 is a forty-five year old African American male who works in Human Resources. He was raised as a United Methodist in Los Angeles. His parents were not religious, but took him to church on a weekly basis for "insurance." Informant 5 is married to a Catholic woman and converted to Judaism in 1994. Informant 6 is a twenty-eight year old Caucasian female aspiring actress who works in the garment industry. She was raised Italian-Catholic in Canada. She attended church every Sunday and grew up with her religious grandparents living in the home. She met her Jewish fiancée at work. Informant 6 converted to Judaism at the beginning of 2000. Informant 7 is a thirty-three year old single Caucasian female, piano teacher. She was born Catholic in Texas, but was not observant. Informant 7 converted to Judaism recently. Informant 8 is a thirty-seven year old Caucasian female, massage therapist. She was raised Catholic in Malta and attended Catholic school, but did not believe in Catholicism. She is divorced and currently engaged to a Jewish man whom she met on a blind date. Informant 8 will convert to Judaism this year. Informant 9 is a thirty-two year old Caucasian female who works for a management consulting firm. She was raised Lutheran in the mid-west and her parents paid lip service to Christianity without it being played out in the home. Informant 9 converted to Judaism after her marriage to a Jewish man whom she is currently divorced from. Informant 10 is a forty-four year old Filipino female who works in the nursing field. She was raised as a Catholic in the Philippines and was observant until she moved to the United States in her twenties. She is married to a Jewish man and converted to Judaism after her children were born. Informant 11 is a forty-eight year old Indian male who works as a financial

controller. He was raised Hindu, but was never very religious. Informant 11 is married to a Jewish woman and converted to Judaism 13 years ago after they were married and had started a family. Informant 12 is a forty-three year old Caucasian male attorney. He was raised Catholic in Montana. His father was Mormon, but he was raised Catholic because of his father's inaction. Informant 12 met his Jewish wife in law school and converted to Judaism after they were married and had started to raise a family.

When did you first think about conversion and when did it become a possibility?

Many of the informants chose to convert for similar reasons. Nine of the informants referred to the fact that their Jewish partner had influenced their decision to convert. Some of the conversions took place before the marriage occurred while others converted after they had been married for a number of years. In many of these cases, the informants became increasingly aware of their passion for the Jewish religion, above and beyond their love for their fiancée or spouse. This group of people can be divided up as informants who felt Jewish internally and others who pursued Judaism because they were members of a Jewish family. In other words there were those informants who were on a personal journey to find a suitable religion and others who because of the context they were immersed in, that is having a Jewish partner and/or Jewish children, became involved in the religion and started to perceive themselves differently. Many of the informants refer to the fact that they read books on Judaism and attempted to equip themselves with as much knowledge as possible before converting. Many of them identify all the reading they did as the motivating factor behind their decision to convert. They thrived on all the information they were gleaning from the literature and really

resonated with the philosophies of the religion. Informant 3, a fifty-nine year old African American Pentecostal male was ultimately motivated by his son's Barmitzvah. Informant 6, a twenty-nine year old Caucasian Catholic female was initially going to convert for her fiancée so that their children could be raised as Jews and came to discover the importance of religion in her life and what a perfect fit Judaism was for her. She read and questioned a lot and realized that she was religious but not necessarily Catholic and one religion is not more important than another. Informant 2, a thirty-seven year old Caucasian Pentecostal female started thinking about Judaism when she met her fiancée. She did not know much about Judaism but religion was very important to her. She wanted some religion in her married life and did not feel like Judaism was a big jump but rather a "custom-made garment" for her. Informant 4, a twenty-six year old Caucasian Christian male had been dating his fiancée for over a year when he started to consider conversion. He was exposed to Judaism through his fiancée and started asking many questions. Initially he defended Christianity but as he learned he started to locate differences and realized that deep down he already was Jewish. He then joined his fiancée when she was studying in Israel for the year and started studying formally with a Rabbi. This point was a crossroads in their relationship and they had begun to talk about where they were going with the relationship and realized they wanted to get married. Informant 8, a thirty-seven year old Caucasian Catholic female stated she almost converted for another Jewish man but then that relationship ended. She did not plan on converting for her current fiancée but her interest in Judaism peaked as she was exposed to more and more aspects of the religion. She had always wanted to be part of a tradition. Informant 9, a thirty-two year old Lutheran female converted after her marriage to a Jewish man which ended up in

divorce for a number of reasons including the fact that she was more observant of Judaism than he cared to be. She reported that one of the reasons she converted was to strengthen her relationship with her husband as they had been separated for a period of time. Informant 10, a fifty-four year old Catholic Filipino had been married to a Jewish man for almost fifteen years when she began to learn as much as possible about Judaism, a step that lead her to the path of conversion.

Four of the subjects refer to the fact that they had a tendency throughout their lives to solidify relationships with Jewish people and/or Jewish men. They were attracted to Jewish people for a variety of reasons. Informant 1, a thirty-three year old Caucasian Mormon female stated that her sister played a large role in her conversion, as she had converted to Judaism. Both her and her sister had many Jewish friends and attended Jewish events. She claimed she had always been attracted to Judaism and had dated many Jewish men. Informant 8 had always been attracted to Jewish men because of their culture and background. Informant 9 attended a high school and Washington University in St. Louis, both of which had large Jewish populations that precipitated her attraction to Jews. Six of the subjects were motivated by the fact that they or their partner wanted their children to be raised as Jews. Informant 7, a thirty-three year old Caucasian Catholic female expressed that even though she is unmarried and yet to have children, she would not feel comfortable teaching Christian philosophies to them. Informant 8 wants her children to be raised as Jews and is currently dealing with the fact that she has an eight and a half year old that has been raised Catholic. Informant 10 pressured her husband to become more committed to Judaism for their children's sake and then she converted as a result of this need to have one definite religion in her children's lives. Her husband was

secular and was forced to deal with his feelings about religion, because of the pressure his wife put on him. Subsequently, he discovered his need for an increased level of observance. Informant 11, a forty-eight year old Indian Hindu male decided to convert when his wife became pregnant with their first child-"I didn't want my child to have a religion crisis and so started to explore Judaism". Informant 12, a forty-three year old Caucasian Catholic male agreed to raise his children as Jews before he began to contemplate conversion. When his son turned seven and entered religious school, he began to ask a lot of questions that he found himself unable to answer. "I remember being in temple and looking around and everyone knowing what was going on except me and so I thought I would try and fake it". His feelings of inadequacy around being stumped by son's questions, was part of the driving force behind his eventual conversion. Informant 5, a forty-five year old African American United Methodist male can be described as a religion seeker. He married a Catholic woman and had spent his life trying to discover where he fit in from a religious point of view. He had many unanswered questions and went "church hopping" which led him to a class at the University of Judaism and ultimately to signing up for the Introduction to Judaism course.

There are three definite themes that seem to emerge from the answers to this question. There is one group of converts that were aware early on in their lives that they felt alienated from their religions. This prompted them to start questioning the religion they were a member of and begin studying other religions. A second group are those who somehow found themselves in a Jewish context. They married a Jew and had children who were going to be raised Jewish and naturally they felt, "If I am any religion, I am Jewish" and so pursued conversion. The third group comprises those that met a Jewish

partner and decide to convert prior to marriage and in the process of studying they became so moved by all they were learning that they actually started to feel Jewish. This group actually converted because they fell in love with Judaism in addition to wanting to convert for their spouse. Many of the informants fit into more than one of these groups.

What was your experience of conversion (how were you received by the Rabbi and the community)?

The majority of the informants had a very positive experience with conversion. Informant 1 stated that the process has mainly been a positive one and that Rabbi Weinberg warmly received her. Informant 2 had a very positive experience. She loved the classes she took at the University of Judaism. She loved Rabbi Weinberg, who was wonderful and accepting. Informant 3 had a very positive experience with Judaism and was received very well. He found the lack of racism in Judaism to be amazing. Informant 4 described the conversion process as a "transformational process". The Rabbi and community received him with open arms. Informant 5 was also well received by the community. He found the process to be very positive. He encountered some curiosity and harsh, racist remarks about his name and race, for example, "that isn't a Yiddishe name". Informant 6 had an "amazing" experience with conversion. The rabbi who taught her played a big role and she made a strong connection to him. Informant 7 felt the rabbis were open and encouraging. They were eager to welcome her. The process itself felt like a "transformation", especially because the ceremony was incredibly spiritual. The congregation she joined is very accepting and supportive. Conversion has had an impact on her congregation because of the young blood it is attracting. Informant

8 felt strange to have young rabbis as she was used to older priests, but is happy with the rabbi she has chosen. Her synagogue is welcoming and embracing. They help her find the page numbers in the prayer book. Informant 9 had a wonderful sponsoring rabbi. "The members of the congregation were enthralled by me and loved me." It took time for her to get used to the services and she felt she stood out because she didn't look Jewish and that she looked young. The congregation was very welcoming and she made her own effort to reach out. Informant 10 felt very loved and welcomed by the community, which was why she chose the name Haviva. Initially the congregation was not welcoming, but she was outgoing so they opened up to her. Informant 11 felt welcomed by the rabbi and community and never felt alienated. They were surprised to encounter an Indian who is a Jew and were more interested to learn about him because of his background because it sheds light on Judaism. Informant 12 felt the rabbi and community reacted well. He could not think of any negative experiences where anyone was bent out of shape because he converted. The rabbi told him that you don't have to tell anyone you converted, but it always comes up. Informants 1, 2, 3 and 5 used the word "positive" to describe their conversion experience. Informants 1, 2, 4, 6, 7, 8, 9, 11 and 12 all mentioned that their sponsoring rabbi played a role in their positive conversion experience. Informants 4 and 7 used the word "open" to describe their rabbis. All the informants felt they were well received by their congregations or communities and informants 8, 9, 10 and 11 used the word "welcoming" to describe their respective communities. Informants 4 and 7 both described the conversion process as a "transformation". Only one informant, informant 5 had some negative experiences in his

conversion process. As an African American he encountered some racism, in the form of derogatory comments about his name and race.

What kind of conversion did you choose and why?

When people choose to convert they have the additional choice of what denomination they wish to convert to. Ten of the informants reported that they had chosen to convert to Conservative Judaism while two chose a Reform conversion. The informants chose their specific denomination for a number of reasons. Informant 1 chose Conservative because she did not like the Reform synagogues she had attended nor did she like Orthodox Judaism. Informants 2 and 11 also chose Conservative because their spouse's family was Conservative. Informant 2 also felt Conservative conversion was more widely recognized and wanted to cover her bases. Similarly, Informant 6 chose Conservative conversion because it fit with her fiancée's upbringing as well as the fact that she liked the Hebrew and ritual in Conservative services. Informant 12 also chose a Conservative conversion, despite the fact that he is a member of a Reform synagogue and prefers Reform, to cover his bases. He wanted to ensure that if he moved to a town that had no Reform synagogues he would be accepted into a Conservative congregation. Informant 5 chose Conservative Judaism purely because he happened to be taking classes at the University of Judaism and like Informant 12 found the Reform movement to be more to his liking because of the reduced amount of Hebrew in the services. Informant 8 also stated that although she is converting Conservative and both denominations are appealing, she feels more comfortable in a Reform setting. This is especially the case because she chose a sponsoring Rabbi at a Reform synagogue. Informant 7, 9 and 10

chose Conservative conversion because they resonated with its philosophies. Informant 10 reported that she did not choose Reform because she became more observant as the process unfolded and similarly Informant 9 felt that Reform Judaism did not offer as much tradition and knowledge as Conservative Judaism did. This indicates that when people like the tradition they are privy to, they tend to want to incorporate it as part of their lives. In addition, it seems that a number of the informants chose Conservative Judaism because they were taking into account other Jew's perceptions of them.

Informants 3 and 4 chose Reform Judaism for different reasons. Informant 3 was a member of a Reform synagogue at the time because it was close to his home and many of his son's friends were members. He did not realize the distinctions of the various branches at the time. It seems that because other Jews did and felt certain things, he felt the need to do and feel them too. Informant 4 like three of the other informants chose Reform because his fiancée was a Reform Jew but now that he has had exposure to the various denominations he feels validated in his decision. He did add that he doesn't like the labels assigned to the denominations and feels all Jews should be united.

Like born Jews, converts tend to choose a denomination that they are most comfortable with based on things like how much Hebrew is used in services. Many born Jews are raised as a member of one denomination and as an adult switch to a different denomination. It must be quite an overwhelming experience for converts to not only be changing religions entirely but then to have to choose a denomination within that religion.

How did the process of conversion unfold? (who officiated at your wedding?)

The process of conversion for the informants was similar in that all of them who had gone through conversion had some form of conversion ceremony. Their conversions included Tipat Dam for the men, the Mikvah and going before the Bet Din. All of the informants except Informant 4 who learned with a Rabbi took the introduction to Judaism classes. Informants 3, 5 and 12 took the class at Temple Akiba while the rest participated in the class at the University of Judaism. All of the informants desired a feeling of mastery. They were determined to learn what the religion was all about. The Introduction to Judaism classes all seemed to impact the informants and allowed them to start thinking of themselves as being Jewish. Informant 1 took the class at the University of Judaism after a year of contemplating whether to do so as she had to know that she believed in it. Informant 2 took courses at the University of Judaism and read books about Judaism. Rabbi Weinberg will officiate at her wedding. Informant 3 stated that the process unfolded slowly. When he witnessed his son learning for his Barmizvah and rejecting Hebrew school, he realized he needed to do something and learn more about Judaism for himself. The classes he subsequently took "lit a fire" under him. Everything made so much sense to him spiritually and mentally. Informant 4 met with a rabbi in Israel and started learning. He then moved to Los Angeles and secured a job working at a temple Hebrew school and started learning with a Rabbi there. The Rabbi challenged him a lot and he was asked to write numerous reflection papers. His conversion consisted of Tipat Dam, Mikvah, going before the Bet Din and the official conversion ceremony. Informant 5 stated that the process took six months from the time he took the classes till the time he converted. Informant 6 started taking classes one and a half years ago but didn't convert

at the end, as she wasn't ready. Then she started going to synagogue regularly and tried to integrate into the community. This is an example of actually taking active steps to ensure that the Jewish religion is what you desire for yourself. By the beginning of this year she knew she was ready and she knew she was not just converting to marry her fiancée but that she would be going through it anyway. Informant 7 stated that the process of conversion felt similar to "falling in love". The conversion process itself felt like a transformation especially since the ceremony was so "incredibly spiritual". Her mother and a close friend were present at her ceremony and she explicated that it is imperative to be surrounded by the right people. Informant 8 stated that after immersing herself in the class at the University of Judaism, she realized how much Judaism was her "philosophy". She did not believe in Catholicism despite her Catholic school education and really enjoyed the fact that Judaic beliefs were congruent with the manner in which she thought. She therefore pursued her interests and decided to convert. She has not yet gone through the official conversion. Informant 9 decided to undertake the program at the University of Judaism. "I always looked at it as something I would do for my family and not for myself". Rabbi Weinberg was a great teacher and she was inspired to read everything and complete all her homework. "I was the least religious person and I loved the class!" She was married by a Reform Rabbi but hadn't converted at that point. Her wedding was comprised of "mixed elements" and was very much like a Jewish wedding but they didn't do everything. When she converted, she went to the Mikvah and before the Bet Din and wasn't nervous at all but instead found it fun. "I loved the process. Every time I say the Shema, it takes me back to that moment in the Mikvah. I feel privileged that I was able to convert". After converting she got divorced from her husband. There was conflict, as he

didn't want to do as much as she wanted. "I tried to keep kosher but he messed it up. He saw it as an identity and I wanted to practice it". She now feels unhampered by someone else's values. "I feel very centered and not lonely and disconnected since my divorce". Informant 10 reported that she took the class at the University of Judaism and her husband took the class with her and consequently his level of interest increased. She enjoyed Rabbi Weinberg's compassion. She had her conversion ceremony at Temple Beth Am during Shavuot and went in the Mikvah and before the Bet Din. Informant 11 stated that he went to the Mikvah and before the Bet Din. "I was questioned and had to renounce my previous religion. It was very nice and I was ready". Informant 12 took the first ten classes of the course with his wife as she did not have a Jewish education or a Batmizvah and they both enjoyed them. After the tenth class, a class member asked him if he was going to convert and he said yes-"My wife was floored. It felt like it was the right thing to do". He felt like he had no other religion to fall back on, as he was not raised Catholic and all he had ever heard was "the bad stuff" about Catholicism. He finished the course-"I got deeper and deeper into it and learned more and more". The actual conversion was "a very nice event" which he really enjoyed and found it to be "more solemn and awe-inspiring" than he had imagined. He felt "unprepared and ashamed" in one instance when he did not know how to say the Shechianu. There are aspects of the Reform movement he respects but the class taught him how to read the prayers and not what they meant. He and his wife were ultimately married for a second time by Rabbi Maller.

The learning process that each of the informants engaged in seemed to lead to conversion. The process of becoming knowledgeable appeared to lead to feelings of being Jewish because their knowledge bases had increased significantly.

What was attractive about Judaism?

The informants were primarily attracted to three core elements of Judaism. Namely, the openness of Judaism, living in a Jewish world with all its customs and rituals and the values that Judaism upholds. Those who were attracted to the openness of Judaism stressed the fact that Judaism allows one to question and not just follow blindly. Informant 3 was attracted to the humility in Judaism. Informant 6 liked the idea of questioning, and Informant 11 was attracted to the fact that Judaism is open and a welcoming religion. Informant 12 liked the intellectual part of Judaism that allows one to argue with God and the focus on the here and now. Informant 1 was attracted to the fact that Judaism allows one to question and not just follow blindly like with Mormonism. "Judaism affords the opportunity to know why and understand what one is practicing." Of those informants who were attracted to living in a Jewish world, Informant 2 specifically mentioned Shabbat as an attraction. She sees it as a day when she can be with her spouse, setting aside time to enjoy each other and grow spiritually. Informant 4 was attracted to the mitzvot, Informant 6 was attracted to the traditions of Judaism, and Informant 7 sighted the Jewish holidays and Jewish history. Informant 8 mentioned the traditions, like Shabbat meals, Informant 9 was attracted to the absence of God's ego in the religion and Informant 11 saw the humanistic element of Judaism as attractive. Many of the informants found the values of Judaism to be attractive, including

informant 1. Informant 5 specifically sighted the Jewish value of the importance of family and community as being an attractive element. Informant 7 was drawn to the value of philosophy.

Who did you tell and not tell and how did they react to your decision to convert?

The informants made varying decisions with regards to whom in their lives to share their decision to convert. Informant 1 told her friends who are all Jewish. Some thought it was great and others could not understand her decision while her family's response was "whatever makes you happy". Informants 2 and 3 told everyone in their lives. Informant 4 told his family but only told the friends and relatives whom he had the time to explain the process to. This is indicative of the fact that he felt the need to explain himself. Informant 5 did not tell his children right away. He wanted to "slip into it" and told everyone in the proper time. Most people were supportive and those who were not he is no longer friends with. The most shocking situation he encountered were anti-Semitic remarks from people that he never knew were anti-Semites. Informant 6 did not tell her grandmother who died recently but she knew that her fiancée attended "church" and was happy about that. She told everyone else and they respected her decision. Some friends questioned her switching from believing in Catholicism to having a strong belief in Judaism. Many people in her town had never been exposed to Jews. Informant 7 told both friends and family of her decision to convert. Her mother was very accepting. Her father was born Jewish but had rejected the religion during the war. Her friends, both Jewish and non-Jewish were very happy for her. Her friends who are secular Jews expressed concern that she would become more Jewish than they were. This is a common

phenomenon and many born-Jews do have feelings of inadequacy when a friend converts and becomes more observant than they are. Informant 7 was careful about who she told but expressed that many people were informed by others at her temple. Informant 8 had not yet told her family she plans to convert because of her son. She wanted to do it after the conversion in order to avoid any negativity especially from her father. She was not worried about the negative reaction towards her but towards her son because they don't understand the philosophy of the religion. She did inform all of her friends about her decision and they were very supportive and weren't surprised, stating "You're so Jewish anyway". Informant 9 never had a lot of friends and so she didn't have anyone to tell. She told her parents who were initially supportive but then later on when she told her mother she was about to convert, she had a strong negative reaction as she thought she was just taking classes and didn't realize she was going to officially convert. She promised her father she would not tell his family, as they are anti-Semitic on that side of the family. She told her parents that she wanted to give them Christmas gifts but that she didn't want any in return. "My mother freaked out and was shocked that I was turning my back on Christ". She does not see her parents often and her mother sees her conversion as her personal failure and does not want to learn about Judaism. Informant 10 initially told her husband about her decision to convert and he was very happy. He confessed that when he married her, he had accepted that he would have to say goodbye to Judaism. She did not tell her friends until she was certain of her decision and then the few she told she invited to her conversion. She told her mother and two out of her five sisters. Her mother didn't respond much. "I was forty-three years old and married to a Jewish American, what could she say?" Informant 11 told his friends at the time and they were very happy

for him. "None of my family live in Los Angeles. They don't know much about it as I never officially told them". Informant 12 reported that his mother was not alive at the time but if she was she would have been the last person he would have told. He told his wife's parents who were neither in favor or opposed. They thought he was converting because his wife was pressuring him. He also told the people he worked with and his siblings. His siblings were supportive and told him they thought he had already converted. His colleagues responded by saying, "I thought you were Jewish". The last person he told was his father who was restrained. He never told his Mormon aunts and uncles.

In a sense the process of telling friends and family that you have converted can be likened to homosexuals "coming out" to those closest to them. Most of the informants didn't refer directly to their anxiety but it is obvious that many of them were very nervous as evidenced by the fact that they chose not to tell significant people in their lives including parents, siblings, grandparents, aunts, uncles and close friends. Many converts do not tell their parents of their decision to convert in the fear that they will be rejected as their parents will be deeply hurt by their decision. This certainly sheds light on why people don't convert. The anticipation of the harsh reactions of others including anti-Semitic comments such as those Informant 5 referred to is reason enough to deter people from going through with the conversion. There is a significant contrast between the individuals own intense feelings around conversion and the reactions of those around them.

How is Judaism similar or different from the religion you were raised?

All the informants identified many similarities and differences between Judaism and their religions of origin. Informant 1 saw Mormonism as similar to Judaism in that Mormonism is based on Judaism. Informant 3 saw a similarity between the devotion to and belief in God as similar to Christianity and Judaism. Many of the informants saw the morals and values of their religions of origin and Judaism to be similar. For example, informants 2, 4, 8, and 11 identified the importance of family as common to Judaism and their prior religions. Informants 8 and 12 mentioned the belief in the Old Testament as common to Judaism and Catholicism. One of the differences sighted by many of the informants was the lack of belief in Jesus in Judaism. Informant 1, a Mormon and informants 6, 7, and 8 all Catholic pointed out this difference. Informants 8 and 12, both Catholic pointed to the Jewish emphasis on the here and now as different from Christianity's emphasis on the after-life and original sin. Along the same lines, Informant 2 also pointed out the lack of judgment in Judaism versus Christianity. Informants 2, 6, 8, 9, and 10 identified the differences in the rituals in Judaism and their prior religions. Informants 6 and 9 saw the services to be very different and Catholic informants 8 and 10 noted the absence of confession in Judaism. Informant 11, a Hindu identified the Jewish belief in one God to be different from the Hindu belief in many gods. In addition, he also sees Hinduism as a more individualistic religion compared to Judaism

Are there cultural similarities or differences?

Most of the informants found a similarity between Judaism and their previous religion especially the importance of family that both religions espouse. Informants 2, 4, 9 and 10 all stressed how their religion was culturally similar to Judaism in that both religions placed a large emphasis on family closeness. It is interesting to note that among these informants, there is a Pentecostal, a mixed Christian, a Lutheran and a Catholic indicating how vastly different branches of religions are culturally very similar in certain respects. Informant 6 stated that Judaism was culturally different to other faiths in that it is completely accepting of other religions, a facet of Judaism that many of the informants labeled as being attractive about the religion. Informant 9 also felt the emphasis on family and "creating solid, good kids" was similar to Lutheranism but stated that her family dynamics had skewed her perception. Informant 7 felt there was a definite culture to Judaism and there were different cultures within Judaism as evidenced by the Ashkenazi and Sephardic communities. She did not believe that Christianity has any definite culture and that Christians adopt the culture of the country in which they live. Informant 8 felt that Maltese people were similar to Jews culturally as both peoples stick together, help one another out and are hospitable. She did not see any big cultural differences between the Jews and the Catholics in Malta. Informant 9 had not mixed with Jewish families enough to really see cultural similarities or differences between Lutheranism and Judaism. She felt like the Jewish culture in Los Angeles was the dominant one although in another city, she might feel differently. Informant 10 saw cultural similarities between the two religions (Judaism and Catholicism) in that they both put an emphasis on family.

food, children and togetherness. Differences she saw were in Judaism there are holidays all year round and in Catholicism there is only Christmas and Easter. Informant 11 explicated that he felt there were cultural similarities between Judaism and Hinduism such as the wedding ceremonies which both contain a lot of dancing and are officiated by either a rabbi or a priest. He added that Judaism used to have a dowry system like Hinduism. The difference he stated was the fact that Hindus express their beliefs by wearing dots on their forehead and distinctive clothing like saris. "Judaism doesn't have this distinction. You can tell when someone is Hindu but you can't identify if someone is Jewish". Informant 12 struggled with whether there were cultural differences between Judaism and Catholicism. He recognized that Judaism accepts and encourages people to think on their own which Catholicism does not. He felt Jewish people are less reserved. "I guess there are no real cultural similarities. Jewish food is different". Informants 1 and 3 struggled to answer the question which may be indicative of a few things including the facts that they may not have understood the question or may not have seen any cultural similarities or differences between Judaism and their religion by birth.

It appears that the majority of the informants recognize the open and welcoming nature of the Jewish religion as being different from their previous religion. This seems to be something the informants really resonate with. They point out cultural differences like distinct clothing other religions wear as well as differences in food and the abundance of Jewish holidays as compared with Christian holidays. Informant 12 expressed that he felt Jews have different personalities and are a more vocal people. Most of the informants emphasize family togetherness as being something the other religions have in common with Judaism. It is perhaps telling us that family is important to them and this is

something they can relate to in Judaism. They mention that Judaism like other religions is altruistic. In addition, Judaism and other religions are very invested in how they raise their children and place great importance on the next generation. It is interesting how one informant believed that Christianity did not have a definite culture while most of other informants found some cultural continuity. In general it seems that they prefer what Judaism has to offer from a cultural perspective.

What Jewish rituals and customs do you intend to include in your life once the conversion process is complete? / What Jewish rituals have you adopted since converting? (what is your current level of observance?)

Most of the informants are relatively observant. They emphasize the different facets of Judaism they observe and it appears that they gravitate to observances that they resonate with. Informant 1 attends synagogue twice per month, observes all the holidays and has Shabbat dinners as often as possible. Informant 2 observes Shabbat, has mezzuzahs up in her home, keeps kosher, attends synagogue and says the Shema every night. Informant 3 observes Shabbat, all the holidays and keeps kosher. Informant 4 recites the blessings before meals, observes Havdalah, reads the portion of week and has Shabbat dinner. Informant 5 lights Shabbat candles, Hannukah candles and sometimes the Havdalah candle. He does not shop on the Sabbath but does drive. Informant 6 has Shabbat dinner, studies Hebrew, attends synagogue, observes the major holidays and observes a certain level of Kashrut. Informant 7 observes Shabbat to the degree that makes it separate from the rest of the week. She performs the rituals on Friday evening but still drives and spends money. She observes all the holidays and works hard on her

Hebrew. Informant 8 lights the Shabbat candles every Friday night, her family blesses one another and they eat the Shabbat meal together. They attend services once a week and she particularly enjoys the family service at the synagogue that is held on the first Friday of every month. Although she does not eat pork or shellfish she does not keep a kosher kitchen. For one week they kept completely kosher but currently keeping completely kosher is "too difficult". "Later on we might want to be more observant". Up until now she has observed the main holidays but intends on observing them all once she has converted. She has observed holidays like Sukkot by going to shul, building a Sukkah and eating appropriate foods, as well as observing Hannukah. She would like to try and fast on Yom Kippur. Informant 9's current level of observance is "reasonably high". She observes "Shabbos" on a Friday night and Saturday. She does what she is supposed to and doesn't spend money or watch television, stays at home and has a nice meal on Saturday. She does drive to synagogue on a Saturday morning. She performs the blessings on Friday night and Saturday. "I engage in special Shabbat reading to further my understanding of Judaism". She keeps 100% kosher in the home that she views as a "sanctified place" but not outside of the home. She observes Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur and goes to services on all the holidays. Informant 10 observes Shabbat but they are not "shomer Shabbos". "When you live in the outside world, it is hard to be strict. My husband is a doctor and works on a Saturday and Sunday every third weekend and has to answer the phone. In addition, one of my boys is an artist and the other is a musician and if they have a function on the weekend, we cannot not attend". At home they are strictly kosher. They are active in synagogue life and volunteer a lot. At one point they were members of a Chavura. "My level of knowledge is constantly increasing. I like to know

more and do more". They recently moved to Temple Beth Am as they were not satisfied with Congregation Ner Tamid and Beth Am suits their current level of observance more. She reads Torah, studies Hebrew and is currently taking her fifth trope class. Informant 11 is a member of Temple Akiba and observes all the holidays. His children attend Hebrew school at the temple three times per week. His family observes Shabbat and all the rituals and they maintain a Jewish household but are not kosher. "My in-laws became Orthodox in the last ten years which has created a rift between my wife and her parents. My wife's family invites us over for all the holidays". Informant 12 stated that he and his family is Reform in their level of observance. They do not work on Shabbat but don't observe it in the Orthodox way. They light candles and sometimes have Shabbat meals. They attend services once a month. He does not eat shellfish or mix milk and meat but doesn't observe all the rules of Kashrut. They observe Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur and Passover. "As time has gone on, we have gotten more observant".

The level of observance of all the informants is relatively high. Some went more into depth in explaining themselves while others just listed the exact rituals they engage in and did not feel the need to justify their level of observance. Many of the informants refer to the fact that they have gotten more observant since converting. It seems like as their comfort level with the religion increased so they began to engage in more rituals. The more familiar they became with rituals the more they seemed to want to engage in them more frequently. Some of the informants appeared driven to become as observant as they possibly could perhaps in an effort to feel as Jewish as possible. This is certainly a really clear way to feel Jewish especially if you have no ethnic background. Many of the informants stated reasons why they were not able to be as observant as they would have

liked, for example, the pressures of society. Others expressed that they had tried to keep kosher but that it was "too difficult". The fact that they had at least attempted to do this indicates how committed they were to their conversion and taking it seriously.

What experiences make you feel authentically Jewish?

All the informants feel authentically Jewish when they are taking part in the rituals and customs associated with living in a Jewish world. The experiences that make Informant 1 feel authentically Jewish include, going to temple, keeping some kind of *kashrut* (not eating pork and shellfish anymore). Informant 3 feels totally Jewish and doesn't need specific experiences to make him feel authentically Jewish. Informant 4 feels authentically Jewish when he is fulfilling mitzvot. Informant 5 feels authentically Jewish at public gatherings like the Israel Festival or a Debbie Freedman concert, when surrounded by other Jews. Informant 6 thinks that knowing the prayers and being able to walk into a service and know what is going on, and reading Hebrew make her feel authentically Jewish. For Informant 7 observing holidays, Shabbat, her upcoming Batmitzvah, reading Jewish books, and attending shul on Shabbat makes her feel authentically Jewish. Informant 8 feels that going to the Jewish market every Friday and wishing everyone Shabbat Shalom, lighting candles, and Torah study makes her feel authentically Jewish. For Informant 9 keeping kosher, going to shul, bringing her thinking into alignment with the values of the religion makes her feel authentically Jewish. When Informant 10 is lighting Shabbat and Hannukah candles, eating latkes, sitting in the Sukkah, reading and learning Torah, keeping Shabbat and *kashrut* she feels authentically Jewish. Informant 11 feels authentically Jewish because of her daughter's

upcoming Batmitzvah, learning Hebrew, his Barmitzvah in June, and holidays such as Yom Kippur. For Informant 12 going to shul, knowing the prayers better than most people, and being Vice President of membership for his temple makes him feel authentically Jewish. Of all the informants, only Informant 2 still has trouble feeling authentically Jewish. She feels like others see her as the "shiksa buying Shabbat candles." She feels authentically Jewish in her own home, away from scrutiny.

Shabbat seems to play a central role for almost all the informants in creating an authentic Jewish experience for themselves. There is an emphasis among them of being active and trying to surround themselves with other Jews in Jewish settings. Whether it is a kosher market, a concert or a synagogue, the informants as a whole seem to take a proactive approach in creating an authentic Jewish life for themselves. It is important to note that Informant 3 did not answer the question as he feels totally Jewish and does not need specific experiences to make him feel authentically Jewish. One can infer that he may have been offended by this question in much the same way that informants 4 and 5 and were when they refused to answer the question that follows. By asking the question one is implying or reiterating that converts may not feel authentically Jewish.

In what situations do you see yourself as more or less Jewish?

This was the most controversial question in the interview and many of the informants were very sensitive to it. This is because in many ways it implies a lack of authenticity, an idea that has been used by Simon Herman in his work. Informant 1 feels less Jewish when friends don't accept her as being Jewish. They insist that her mother has to be Jewish in order for her to be considered a Jew which she feels is ridiculous and just

hurts her feelings especially since she is more observant than they are. This is a scenario that Lydia Kukoff emphasizes in her work. Informant 2 sees herself as less Jewish in public and more Jewish in her home. Informant 3 feels he knows more about Judaism than most Jews. Informant 4 did not wish to answer the question, as he does not worry about how others perceive him. Informant 5 did not wish to answer the question. Informant 6 feels less Jewish when surrounded by a lack of spirituality, for example when people go through the motions of prayer purely because it is tradition. In her hometown she feels very Jewish. There are never situations where Informant 7 feels more or less Jewish although she does get comments that she doesn't look Jewish to which she responds "so many of us don't". Informant 8 feels less Jewish in synagogue as she does not feel 100% comfortable in this arena and is still learning the routine. There are no situations in which Informant 9 feels less Jewish. "I feel more Jewish when doing Jewish things, for example being at synagogue. It feels like her community". This is indicative of the fact that people feel more Jewish when they are in a situation where the goings on are familiar. Informant 10 reported, "I never really feel more or less Jewish. I feel Jewish all the time". Informant 11 feels less Jewish when he goes to services and cannot follow what is occurring. "For me it's a struggle to keep up. I feel left out because of it". In Reform the situation is a little different because there is a lot of English yet he finds Conservative Judaism more appealing. "It is a process I will go through in my life". Informant 11 seemed to be indicating that he feels he doesn't quite fit in. When he is with people who are more observant, Informant 12 recognizes how much he does not know and feels less Jewish. He also feels less Jewish in situations when he is reminded that he wasn't raised Jewish or when people speak Hebrew and he does not understand it.

Learning Hebrew and reading the prayers makes him feel more Jewish. He had an adult Barmizvah at Temple Akiba. He has spent a lot of time figuring out what Hebrew words mean. He plans to teach a class in May on what the Shema and Amidah mean as well as the significance of Torah services.

This question prompted many of the informants to become defensive as indicated by their refusal to answer the question. Those who were not quite as offended admitted instances where they did not fit in, for example not feeling Jewish in a synagogue. It is easy to see why Informants 4 and 5 did not want to answer the question and found it offensive. Converts should not be made to feel "more or less Jewish". According to them and the laws governing conversion, once you have converted you are Jewish. To ask them when they feel more or less Jewish is implying in a sense that they are not Jewish in the true sense of the word. The fact that Informant 3 stated that he knows more about Judaism than most Jews was indicative of his resentment towards those Jews that view him as less Jewish than they are purely because he converted. Informant 1 also stated that she felt she knew more than many born Jews. The fact that Informant 2 feels more Jewish in her home than in public also indicates that in public she feels she is judged and labeled as a convert and in her own comfortable surroundings, she feels accepted and at peace. It is interesting that Informants 8 and 11 feel less Jewish in a synagogue and Informant 9 feels more Jewish in the same arena. This may be due to the fact that Informant 9 converted awhile ago and Informant 8 is yet to convert. Informant seven's comments regarding people telling her she does not look Jewish was a comment made by many of the informants as a response to different questions during the interview. It is something that bothers converts and they are certainly justified in being angered by such comments,

which are both insensitive and unnecessary. The fact that Informant 12 feels less Jewish around more observant Jews is a phenomenon that many born Jews can relate to. These feelings are certainly not unique to converts and this particular issue is one that has divided the Jewish community for decades. The fact that people remind both Informants 1 and 12 they were not born Jewish is quite callous. This is the very thing that the Halachah requests that we not do. It appears that Informant 12 has been on a mission to ensure he does not feel less Jewish than born-Jew. She reported one instance where he feels less Jewish when he does not understand the Hebrew and then stated that he has made great efforts to learn as much Hebrew as he can. His efforts are commendable although it is sad that converts are made to feel compelled to compensate when they are deficient in certain areas which born Jews most of the time are equally deficient in.

What do you miss most about being (previous religion) ?

Many of the informants do not feel like they are missing something in their lives by not practicing some of their former rituals. Many of them mentioned missing the Christian holidays, but they seem to miss the affective associations of the holidays rather than the religious aspects. For example, Informant 8 misses "Christmas stockings and cookies for reindeers." Informants 2, 6, 7, 8, and 11 miss the holidays of their former religions. Informants 2, 5, 8, and 11 whether they miss the holidays or not, will still partake in some of them with their families. Informants 1, 4 and 6 feel that the Jewish holidays will substitute for Christmas and Easter. Informants 1, 3, 5, 9, and 10 do not miss anything from their previous religions. Informant 12 does not miss anything

religious about being Catholic, but he misses being able to eat a turkey and cheese sandwich.

If you had not chosen to convert, how would this have impacted your life?

Another way we attempted to get at the impact of conversion was to ask the informants what their lives would be like if they had not converted. Informant 1 would not be as happy if she had not converted. She had always felt like she was missing something in her life but church was not the answer. Informant 2 felt like her fiancée might not be marrying her if she had not converted but she reported that her life would not be as whole. Presently she feels her life is very full and without Judaism it would be very empty. Informant 3 doesn't feel his life would be as rich and he would feel lost if he had not converted. Informant 5 would still be looking and exploring other religions to validate that he made the right choice if he had not converted. Informant 6 believes she would not be with her fiancée if she had not converted. Informant 7 feels that if she never converted she would have been a "loner". She has found community and friends through her decision to convert. Informant 8 feels she would have continued not feeling fulfilled and spiritual about her religion. "I was destined to convert and it would have happened sooner or later". Informant 9 reported that if she had not converted, she feels she wouldn't have had the strength to leave her marriage. "I felt personally empowered and it gave me the nerve and the faith that I was going to be OK. It increased my self esteem". "I am more comfortable telling people about myself. I used to feel like I didn't want to express myself and was paranoid about what people thought". Informant 10 feels she is able to be more open with others and is more confident since converting. She does

not become upset if people question her because in Catholicism you are not supposed to question and she never liked that. She has no problem sitting on panels and speaking openly of her decision to convert. Informant 11 stated that "It would have disappointed my wife and created a rift and an identity problem within the family unit" if he had not chosen to convert. If he had not converted he does not believe he would have been as observant of Hinduism as there are no temples in Los Angeles and no central community of Indians. Informant 12 feels that if he had not chosen to convert, he feels he would be a lot less happy. Since he made the decision to convert he feels a lot happier with his lot in life. "I feel content and a sense of peace". The Rabbi is encouraging him to go to rabbinical school which at this point he can afford financially so he is seriously considering it.

This was a question that really prompted the informants to contemplate their situations deeply. There was definitely diversity in the answers we received but overall all of the informants felt that their lives would have been different if they had not converted. Many took different paths to conversion and this is illustrated in the answers to this question that focuses on how their lives would have been different. Many emphasize how their lives are different from a religious and a spiritual perspective and that conversion has added content and feeling to their lives. Many report that they would not feel as happy and fulfilled if they had not converted. Others refer to the fact they may not be with their partner today if they had not converted. In contrast Informant 9 reports that conversion gave her the strength to divorce her husband and increased her self-esteem. It is interesting how many see themselves as making a transformation not only

from a religious point of view. Many really feel like the process has permitted them to work on their inner selves.

How did you start to think of yourself as being Jewish?

Most of the informants started to think of themselves as Jewish through participating in Jewish rituals. These informants were part of the group of informants who came to see themselves as Jewish through involvement and a self-perception of themselves as becoming more Jewish. Informant 1 started to think of herself as Jewish when prayers started popping into her mind and she found she knew the words. Informant 2 started to think of herself as Jewish by the rituals she practices at home. She still wonders how others perceive her. Informant 5 started to think of himself as Jewish after the ritual circumcision and Mikvah. Informant 7 started to think of herself as Jewish through gradually involving herself in rituals, creating a fantasy Jewish life for herself, including Jewish roots, such as family members who were Holocaust victims and a Jewish childhood. She takes present events and regresses them to her childhood, for example, the Batmizvah. Informant 8 started to think of herself as Jewish in a gradual process and started performing rituals, like going to shul. Informant 11 started to feel Jewish when he converted and especially when his children were born and they started to observe Shabbat and the holidays as a family which they had not done before. The other group of informants started to think of themselves as Jewish through a personal journey, often involving study. Informant 4 started to think of himself as Jewish through learning with rabbis and reading extensively about Judaism. Informant 9 did not feel Jewish when she started the course. "When I felt the ideas were mine I felt more and more connected

and this contributed to my sense of identity. Informant 10 started to feel Jewish when taking the course at the University of Judaism. Informant 12 still thought of himself as a convert after conversion and then he took the B'nai Mitzvah course and learned enough in order to say the prayers and know the meaning of the words-this made him feel more Jewish.

If you don't think you feel Jewish do you think you ever will?

This question informs us that feeling Jewish can seem in-born for some converts or can take time to emerge for others. Informant 2 does not know if she will ever feel completely Jewish, but she does know that in time she will not care what other people think. Informant 3 is, as a non-born Jew, still adjusting to the concept of being a Jew and not being religious. Informant 4 felt Jewish even before he formally converted. He felt the conversion was just a formal process that he had to go through to be accepted as a Jew. Informant 8 feels Jewish. "I feel like I always had a Jewish soul." The other informants did not feel this question applied to them as they all felt Jewish. Many of the informants stressed the fact that they had always felt Jewish or that something was missing in their lives and Judaism made perfect sense to them. Thus when it comes to feeling Jewish many of the informants had a built-in sense of themselves as always being Jewish and the conversion process was a coming-home experience.

Many of the answers to this question echo the work of Epstein (1994), who writes about converts feeling like that had always been Jewish. He writes that many converts feel they have always had Jewish soul or that they were a Jew trapped in a Christian body.

How does your family relate to you being Jewish?

Some of the informants' families relate quite well to them being Jewish, while others had and have problems with the idea. Informant 1 has not told her whole family about her decision to convert because she knows how they talked about her sister behind her back when she converted. Those who do know have been nice to her. Informant 2 told her parents and they have been accepting of her decision to convert. They are fascinated and want to learn. Her mother is going to her fiancée's parents for Passover. Informant 3 told his parents at the time he converted. He had some problems with his family initially. They were upset that he had married a poor Jewish woman instead of a rich one. His stepmother asked him if he had to pick a Jewish girl, why a poor one? In addition, his stepmother did not attend his wedding. He broke some ties with his family when his children were young, because they tried to preach to them about Jesus. Ties were later restored, and he always felt that what he did was his business and did not pay attention to his family. Informant 4's family was initially offended and surprised by his decision to convert and give up Christianity. However, over time and after many discussions they have come to an understanding. They were also very supportive of his exploration and Jewish study. There are many cultural boundaries and it is often hard to explain ways of thinking. One particular problem area is their upcoming wedding. Informant 5's family relates well to his being Jewish. He does, however, feel lonely sometimes when he has to attend services alone. Informant 6's family has been great. Initially they were confused, but when they realized that she had put much thought into it, they respected her decision. They believe that children need a strong religious foundation, no matter what the religion. Informant 7's family is trying to relate to her

being Jewish. She taught her mom some of the rituals that she has responded positively to. Her siblings don't discuss it with her and she believes them to be reticent to the idea. Her grandmother who is ninety-two years old has been very accepting and encouraging. Informant 8's family is unaware of her decision to convert. Informant 9 does not talk to her family about it. Informant 10's family is more comfortable today than were initially. They had to get used to her eating habits and she started inviting them for Jewish holidays and explained the rituals to them. Informant 11's sister is not antagonistic, however she does not understand what it means to be Jewish. He is planning to travel to India and will probably tell the rest of his family then of his decision. Informant 12 felt disapproval from an aunt and uncle. His siblings were accepting, his father tolerant, and his stepfather did not understand. His wife and sons are very pleased. It seems as though many of the informants' families were eventually won over to the idea that their child had chosen to convert to Judaism. After learning more about the religion and sometimes even sharing in the rituals and seeing how serious they were about their choice, they were more understanding. In contrast others have avoided telling their families to minimize confrontation.

The responses to this question shed light on the fact that dealing with family can be very problematic for converts. This also echoes the conclusions of Epstein (1994), who wrote that conversion can cause great pain among family members of the convert.

How are your children impacted by your decision to convert?

Children are an important factor in the process of conversion especially if there are children from previous marriages. Informants 1, 2, 4, 6 all stated that when they have

children they will be raised as Jews. Informant 3 converted after her children were born and they proceeded to become Orthodox. Informant 5 states his conversion has not impacted his children. They attend Catholic school as his wife is Catholic. Informant 8's son is eight and a half and attends Catholic school presently but she would like to ultimately send him to a public or a Jewish school. She has researched Jewish day schools but finds them to be very expensive and the school her son attends is not. Her son goes to temple and enjoys the services. She hopes he will eventually convert too and want to be Barmitzvahed. Informant 7 has no children but when she does have children will raise them as Jews. She does not want to tell them early on and wants them to have pure reactions to their faith. She wants them to be secure enough in their upbringing that learning she was a convert will not negatively affect them. She feels they will have a different upbringing to her own as they will be part of an observant family. They will be able to enjoy the benefits and the disadvantages of being Jewish. Informant 9 probably will not have children as she does not want to marry again and therefore they won't be impacted by her decision to convert. She feels guilty that she won't procreate but asserts she will contribute to the religion in other ways to make up for it. Informant 10 believes her children have had much more of a Jewish upbringing because of the fact that she converted. If she hadn't converted, they probably would have left Hebrew school after their Barmitzvah classes. Her sons were both Barmitzvahed and were confirmed in the tenth grade. They attended Camp Ramah in the summers and Los Angeles Hebrew High at the University of Judaism during the school year. Because she filled the home with Jewish paraphernalia and Jewish books, they became much more knowledgeable. They also questioned rituals like Shabbat when they became older and it restricted their ability

to go out with their non-Jewish friends. Presently, she feels because they are older, she is less able to control them and so allows them to make their own choices.

Informant 11 declared "My kids feel Jewish. They are proud of it and have no negative feelings about themselves". Most of his children's friends are Christian as they attend a secular school and he would like his children to be exposed to other religions. He enjoys educating them that there are different kinds of people with different religions as he feels it gives them an identity. They do not question him about his previous religion which is what he wanted. Informant 12 stated that as a result of his conversion, his older son has become quite interested in Judaism and is the top student in his Hebrew school class. He makes speeches in the synagogue often and his children express their pride in seeing him in front of the congregation.

This question reaffirms earlier themes in the literature on conversion that state that younger children tend to convert and older children are more likely to remain their birth religion. This scenario presents problems for the family and does not foster a cohesive family unit. Whom people tell about their decision to convert is directly connected with what people tell their children and expose them to. Many parents don't want their children to have the stigma of being labeled a convert and therefore do not inform them right away of their decision to convert. The irony is that young children will be Jewish as they will grow up this way and not know any different religion. Informant 7 indirectly refers to the stigma she does not wish her future children to be labeled with and because they will be born after her conversion took place, she states although not directly, that they will be "real" Jews. Informant 8 is in a difficult predicament because her child is older and has been exposed to Catholicism for eight and a half years. The fact that she

states she hopes he will convert is indicative of the fact that she realizes she cannot force him to do so and it has to be his choice. It seems that she would ultimately like him to convert in order to create a more solid family unit. Even though he attends Catholic school she is still hopeful that he will convert. Many converts have a strong desire for their children to convert as it directly relates to their sense of having a Jewish family. Some of the informants feel very strongly that their children never even know they were once not Jewish while others insist that you cannot hide something of this nature and you have to deal with it and allow them to learn about their previous religion if they wish to. Most of the informants seem to feel that their children have benefited tremendously from their conversion and are more observant as a result of having two parents committed to the same beliefs. Although many of the informants only converted and became more observant after their children were born, Judaism was the only religion the children were familiar as either their mother or father was a born Jew and practiced somewhat. This certainly would have helped them adjust more easily when the other parent decided to convert.

Will your children be exposed to your prior religion, i.e. through grandparents?

Most of the informants' children were or will be exposed to their prior religions. Most of them were or will be exposed through contact with their non-Jewish grandparents, aunts and cousins. Informant 1's future children will be exposed to her prior religion to some extent because of her parents. She does not feel that they will have to get together with her family during the Christian holidays, but rather they can come together during other occasions. She wants to marry a Jew and raise her children Jewish.

Informant 2 feels her future children will be exposed to Christmas because of her parents, but she will explain to them that it is not part of their religion. Informant 3's children were exposed to his prior religion to some extent through his family. All three of his children now practice Orthodox Judaism. Informant 4's children will be exposed to Christianity, but in a way that will not allow them to lose their Jewish identity. Informant 6 feels her children will "absolutely" be exposed to her religion. Informant 10's children were not exposed, but they were not told they were Catholic when they were born. Informant 12's children will not be exposed, but he would not object if they wanted to learn about Catholicism. Informant 7 has no children yet, but does not want future children to be exposed to Catholicism. Informant 9 does not intend to have children. Informant 5's children are being raised Catholic by their Catholic mother and attend Catholic school. Occasionally he attends church services with his family in order to stay close to his children. Most of the informants acknowledged that it is inevitable that their children will have some exposure to their parents' original religions. Informant 8's son will be exposed through his grandparents (son was born Catholic). Informant 11 does expose his children at events like a cousin's wedding. He explains that this was his prior religion. They are going to India so they will be exposed to Hinduism. However, for many of them it is important that they explain to their children that this is not their religion, but rather a time for them to spend time with their grandparents and share their holidays with them. It is also a way for the informants to stay connected to their past, but at a distance.

Are you happy with your decision to convert?

This question focuses on how the convert feels presently after enduring all they have in order to become a Jew. Informants 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 9 and 12 all stated they were happy with their decision to convert. A few of the informants answered this question more in depth than simply stating they were happy they converted. Informant 7 commented that now that the conversion is over she just wants to assimilate and hopes people will no longer bring up the fact that she is a convert as it is annoying to her. Informant 8 stated she would never have converted if she did not want "Even if I didn't convert, my relationship would still be the same. It is easier to have one unit (family) than to have two separate religions". Informant 10 stated that she is comfortable in addition to happy with her decision to convert. She feels lucky that when she converted her husband joined her in the level of observance she chose and became her study partner. "My husband and I became much closer". Informant 11 stated that he had no regrets.

All twelve of the informants answered this question in the affirmative. Informant 7 is obviously bothered by the fact that Jews insist on pointing out she is a convert. It does not seem like born Jews realize how offensive this is to converts. Informant 8 wanted to make it known that she would never do anything in her life that she was not willing to do. She seemed to be inadvertently attempting to convey the fact that her reasons for converting extend beyond the fact that she is engaged to a Jewish man. Informant 10 emphasized how blessed she feels that her decision to convert led to other positive events occurring in her life such as her husband's increased level of observance and a closer relationship with him. Informant 11 clarified his answer by stating he had no regrets, which in essence is another possible answer to this question.

V. CONCLUSION

Limitations:

Results must be viewed and interpreted with caution due to the small sample size. In addition, people who were willing to participate may be atypical and not be representative of all people who convert to Judaism.

Findings:

Our findings were numerous, but there were several key points that stood out. Firstly, the way that the informants came to acquire a Jewish identity was through three core practices. Namely, living in a Jewish world with its customs and rituals, embracing Jewish values, and extensive learning about Judaism. These core practices were also an integral part of their initial attraction to Judaism and helped them create a Jewish identity and for themselves. One informant went as far as to create a fantasy Jewish past for herself. The informants came to Judaism via various paths; some were married to Jews and living in a Jewish context, some were engaged to or in relationships with a Jewish partner, and some sought out a new religion as they did not resonate with the beliefs or philosophies of their own. While the first two groups of informants were initially exposed to Judaism through a Jewish partner, they ultimately were moved to convert for themselves and wholly embraced the beliefs and traditions.

Our findings also show that the informants were very sensitive to the questions that addressed their authenticity as Jews. Clearly the informants want to be viewed as authentically Jewish and not have to prove or be reminded of their conversion.

Furthermore, their responses reveal that they are often aware of how others view them and remind them of their status as converts. Many commented on the fact that their appearances were remarked upon, for example, "you don't look Jewish." In spite of this many of the informants readily acknowledged that they could identify less with the tragedy of the Holocaust and were less sensitive to anti-Semitism than born Jews.

For all the informants the process of conversion was a life-changing experience that altered their value system and life-style and contributed to their spiritual growth. In addition, the process is an on-going one as they are committed to continually strive to mold their identities as Jews.

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VII. Appendix

Questionnaire

- 1) Tell me a little about your background (demographic, age, sex, ethnicity, where you met your partner).
- 2) When did you first think about conversion and when did it become a possibility?
- 3) What was your experience of conversion (how were you received by the Rabbi and the community)?
- 4) What kind of conversion did you choose and why?
- 5) How did the process of conversion unfold? (who officiated at your wedding?)
- 6) What was attractive about Judaism?
- 7) Who did you tell and not tell and how did they react to your decision to convert?
- 8) How is Judaism similar or different from the religion you were raised?
- 9) Are there cultural similarities or differences?
- 10) What Jewish rituals and customs do you intend to include in your life once the conversion process is complete? / What Jewish rituals have you adopted since converting? (what is your current level of observance?)
- 11) What experiences make you feel authentically Jewish?
- 12) In what situations do you see yourself as more or less Jewish?
- 13) What do you miss most about being (prior religion)?
- 14) If you had not chosen to convert, how would this have impacted your life?
- 15) How did you start to think of yourself as being Jewish?
- 16) If you don't think you feel Jewish do you think you ever will?

- 17) Are you sensitive to anti-Semitic remarks?
- 18) How do you explain yourself to non- Jews?
- 19) Have you ever visited Israel?
- 20) Do you have any problems with Israel?
- 21) Do you look to consult with Jewish professionals?
- 22) Do you identify with the tragedy of the Holocaust?
- 23) Who are your closest friends?
- 24) How does your family relate to you being Jewish?
- 25) How are your children impacted by your decision to convert?
- 26) Will your children be exposed to your prior religion, i.e. through grandparents?
- 27) Are you happy with your decision to convert?