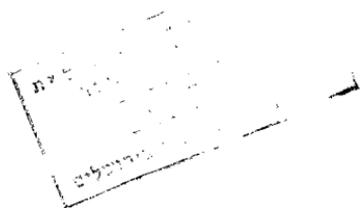


CONVERSION AMONG THE INTERMARRIED

CHOOSING TO
BECOME JEWISH

Egon Mayer
and Amy Avgar



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Foreword

INTERMARRIAGE HAS TROUBLED AMERICAN JEWS for many decades. In the first half of the century, the relatively small numbers involved brought sadness to the Jewish community, but they were not seen as a threat to its future. However, as the rate of intermarriage grew — and the Jewish replacement rate dropped — the danger to Jewish continuity became increasingly real. By the 1970s, many respected sociologists and community leaders were speaking seriously of the “vanishing American Jew,” and predicting precipitous, disastrous declines in the U.S. Jewish population by the 21st century.

Despite the widening concern, accurate facts were hard come by and solutions seemed even more remote. To cast some light on this vital subject, the American Jewish Committee undertook a series of studies involving intermarried couples and their children — the relationship of intermarriage to previous Jewish education and involvement, the ongoing ties of the intermarried to their respective families and faiths, the impact of intermarriage on the Jewishness of their children, and — most recently — the differential impact of intermarriage on the Jewish ties if the non-Jewish spouse converted to Judaism. All of these investigations have contributed important knowledge and understanding in this vital area, and are helping the Jewish community develop programs of outreach and involvement that, we hope, will keep many of the intermarried families within the Jewish fold.

This publication reports on the latest of these studies — the dy-

namics of conversion and its impact on the Jewishness of intermarried couples and their children. Estimates of conversion vary, but it is believed that roughly 20 percent of non-Jewish spouses convert to Judaism before or after their marriage to a Jewish partner, and there is general agreement that conversion contributes significantly to maintaining the Jewishness of the family. Little is known, however, about why some spouses convert and others do not, and what characteristics in the couple's relationship with their families and the Jewish community tend to encourage this step. These were the questions Dr. Egon Mayer sought to explore in his latest investigation; we believe his findings will be of interest and help to American Jews of every denomination.

Reform and Conservative rabbis have engaged vigorously in conversion efforts — particularly when marriage is at stake. Orthodox rabbis who reject, in principle, the validity of non-Orthodox conversion procedures nevertheless recognize the pragmatic importance of encouraging conversion as a way to preserve Jewishness in the home and bringing the family closer to the Jewish community.

Yet, despite rabbinic support for conversion, the data in this study point to the rather negligible impact that rabbis actually have on intermarried couples. Rabbis who consent to officiate at interfaith marriages on the assumption that they are encouraging ongoing ties of the couple with the Jewish community might well question the validity of that premise. Conversely, those who refuse to participate should explain their reasons to the couples, candidly but with sensitivity, maintaining a dialogue with them and their families that might open doors to later conversion.

Rather surprisingly, the findings indicate that most couples are virtually ignorant of Jewish communal outreach to the intermarried. Clearly, more visible and effective programming is needed, as well as an understanding of the ambivalent relationship between the intermarried and the Jewish community.

The study also finds that the attitude of the Jewish partner toward his or her heritage plays a crucial part in promoting the possible conversion of the non-Jewish spouse. This implies that the community might constructively focus its efforts on making Jews and Judaism more attractive to the Jewish partner.

Finally, the study suggests that the Jewish community would do well to reevaluate its attitudes toward converts, or "Jews by choice." Even though they had formally adopted Judaism, some converts

reported that they encountered suspicion or hostility on the part of the Jewish community. The absence of a uniform conversion procedure that is accepted by all movements within Judaism exacerbates this tension, as increasing numbers of individuals converted under the auspices of one religious trend may find that their Jewishness is rejected by the other denominations.

It is our hope that this study will help focus thinking about these complex issues and lead to constructive communal policies that address the implications of intermarriage and conversion.

It is only fitting to conclude these comments with a tribute to Yehuda Rosenman, director of the AJC's Jewish Communal Affairs Department, who was the guiding and moving spirit behind the American Jewish Committee's research on intermarriage since its inception more than a decade ago. His able and creative leadership helped nurture a climate conducive to serious discussion and dialogue, and inspired the Jewish community to discover and examine the facts needed to make sound policy judgments.

We are indebted to Dr. Egon Mayer for carrying out the research undergirding this study and to Dr. Amy Avgar for her role in shaping and writing this report.

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Introduction

IT WAS IN 1971, following the publication of the National Jewish Population Study, that the organized Jewish community was first jolted into the realization that there had been a massive rise in intermarriage among America's Jews. That study, conducted for the first time on a large and nationally representative sample, revealed that the rate of intermarriage had mounted dramatically: from about 7 percent in the 1940s to some 17 percent in the early 1960s, and to about 32 percent by the early 1970s. These numbers rang like a thunderclap throughout the American Jewish community, raising the specter of large-scale assimilation and the potential of a major Jewish population decline in the foreseeable future.

Amid the general alarm over the increased rate of intermarriage, much less attention was paid to an apparently related but equally rapidly increasing phenomenon: the entry of non-Jews into the Jewish fold, primarily — though not exclusively — through religious conversion.

The National Jewish Population Study found that approximately one-third of all intermarriages in the late 1960s involved the conversion of the non-Jewish spouse. Subsequent demographic surveys of Jewish communities, by Floyd Fowler in Boston in 1975, by Albert Mayer in Kansas City in 1977, and by Bruce Phillips in Denver in 1982, all showed that the tremendous increase in the rate of intermarriage among recent cohorts had been accompanied by a comparable rise in the rates of conversion among the non-Jews who married Jews. Thus, the proportion of converts among the intermarried has

remained constant at about one-third of the total pool.*

The survey of intermarried couples, sponsored by the American Jewish Committee and published in 1979 under the title *Intermarriage and the Jewish Future*, also found that about 12 percent of the Christians who had married Jews considered themselves Jewish even without the benefit of formal conversion; another 7 percent considered themselves “partly Jewish.” The survey demonstrated that the consequences of intermarriage for Jewish identity are not necessarily uniform. While intermarriage may bring about a loss of Jewishness in the majority of cases — when the non-Jewish partner has not converted to Judaism — it can also lead to an enhancement of Jewishness among those families where the Christian spouse embraces Judaism, either through formal conversion or by personal affirmation.

The critical importance of conversion for Jewish continuity was confirmed again in a later AJC study, *Children of Intermarriage* (1983). Yet both studies found strong indications that the Jewishness of the converts — and of their children — may differ in nature and degree from that of typical born-Jews.

The earlier AJC survey, for example, found that converts generally achieved higher scores than their born-Jewish spouses on *behavioral* measures of Jewishness. But these same respondents consistently scored lower than their born-Jewish mates on *attitudinal* measures of Jewishness. Similar findings were reported by Steven Huberman (1978) in a study of several hundred converts who were graduates of the Reform movement’s “Introduction to Judaism” course in Boston. “We infer from the reported trends,” Huberman wrote, “that converts as a group define their Judaism in religious rather than communal-ethnic terms. To converts Judaism is basically a *religion* like their former faith.”

The increasing incidence of intermarriage and conversion raises not only the simple question of *how many* Jews there will be in subsequent generations, but also the thornier question of *what kinds* of Jews will constitute the Jewish community of the future. Closely related to this qualitative issue are questions concerning the factors that tend to encourage or deter conversion. Who are the non-Jews who choose to adopt Judaism? What sorts of sociodemographic

*In this study, as in the previous studies by the first author, “intermarriage” is an inclusive term defining marriage between any individual who was born Jewish and one who was not, regardless of whether the non-Jewish partner converted to Judaism.

qualities do they bring to the community? How and what do they learn about Judaism that shapes their sense of Jewishness? How are they perceived and treated by the larger Jewish community?

The first AJC report, *Intermarriage and the Jewish Future*, focused on the couples who intermarried, the kinds of Jewish and non-Jewish backgrounds they brought to the marriage, and the impact of intermarriage on Jewish identification, family relationships, affiliation and participation in organized Jewish life, and plans for child rearing. *Children of Intermarriage*, the second study in the series, looked into the Jewish identification of the offspring of such couples. Both studies confirmed, in a variety of ways, the critical importance of conversion for the maintenance of Jewishness in the family. Both also underscored how little is known about conversion.

The focus of this third report, therefore, is on conversion to Judaism. To gain a better understanding of the characteristics of converts as a group and of the dynamics underlying the conversion process, several comparisons are drawn. First, converts and nonconverts are compared on a number of personal and familial attributes, both current and retrospective, that are assumed, on the basis of previous research or common knowledge, to affect the likelihood of conversion. Second, the potential role of the rabbi and of community outreach are examined, and the formal preparation for conversion is explored. Finally, converts and nonconverts are compared with born Jews of various denominations in an attempt to measure the relative degree and nature of Jewish identification.

It is hoped that the findings reported here will shed light on the factors that encourage conversion, the relationship between conversion and Jewish identification, and the prospects for continuity and survival in a Jewish community characterized by increasing numbers of newcomers to the fold.

Methodology

TO OBTAIN A NATIONAL REPRESENTATIVE sample of converts and nonconverts married to Jews, several methodological steps were undertaken. Local telephone directories were consulted for 15 areas of major Jewish settlement, including the five boroughs of New York City, Long Island, Westchester, Denver, Los Angeles, Washington, D.C., Atlanta, Portland, Nashville, Chicago, and Houston. Using a sampling technique based on Distinctive Jewish Surnames (DJN),* 175 names were selected from each of the directories. A total of 2,625 names were pooled as a “resource sample” to be used for purposes of generating the actual research population.

The individuals selected from the directories were each sent a letter explaining the aims of the study and advising them that a research assistant would contact them to ask if they knew anyone or had anyone in their own families who had not been born Jewish but was married to a Jew.

Between March and December 1984, teams of AJC volunteers around the country completed 691 telephone interviews, which produced 615 names and addresses of converts and nonconverts married to Jews. These persons were then sent a survey questionnaire, which they were asked to fill out and return. By June 1985 a total of 309 questionnaires had been completed — a response rate of nearly 50 percent.

The final research sample consisted of 109 converts and 200

*DJN refers to names such as Cohen, Levy, Goldstein, etc., which have been shown to have over 90 percent probability of being Jewish.

nonconverts. For purposes of comparing these two subgroups with born Jews on a number of selected issues, a similar questionnaire was sent to a subgroup of the Jewish "resource sample." Responses were received from 191 (31 percent).

The written questionnaire consisted of over 100 items, both closed and open questions, designed to examine the respondent's family background, attitudes toward religion, interpersonal relationships, Jewish affiliation and identification, and the experiences associated with intermarriage. Converts were asked specifically about their decision to become Jewish, about the conversion process itself and about their acceptance by the Jewish community. Those who had not converted were asked about the factors that deterred them. Both the converts and the nonconverts were questioned about the role of the Jewish family, rabbinic officiation at their marriage, and Jewish communal outreach in shaping their ultimate decision.

Demographic Profile of the Respondents

IN AN EFFORT to begin to distinguish between converts and nonconverts, selected demographic characteristics were examined, including sex and age distribution, marriage history, education, occupation and income (Table 1).

Characteristics of Converts and Nonconverts

On the whole, the research sample was heavily weighted in favor of females. Of the 309 respondents, only 26 percent were men; 67 percent of the nonconverts and 86 percent of the converts were women.

In all likelihood, the large disparity in the distribution of men and women in the sample as a whole, and among the convert subgroup in particular, results from some degree of self-selection bias. For example, women may have been more interested than men in the subject of the study. They might also have been more willing to devote time to completing a mail questionnaire. Nevertheless, the ratio of men and women in the present study corresponds fairly closely to most other samples of intermarried couples and reflects the fact that, traditionally, Jewish men have been far more likely to marry non-Jewish women than the reverse. Concomitantly, women are more likely to convert than men.

The average age for the sample as a whole was 39.5. Although one-fourth had been previously divorced, the majority were married to their current spouses for at least ten years, and one-third had married before 1970. Over half of the couples had two or more

children. Thus, as a group, the respondents were entering midlife and had established their families and careers. They were, on the whole, highly educated. Over 40 percent had at least a master's degree; only one-fourth had not completed college. Family incomes reflected the age, education and professional training of respondents, with 54 percent reporting combined earnings of over \$50,000 in the

Table 1
Demographic Characteristics of the Research Sample

	Percent		
	Converts (<i>N</i> = 109)	Nonconverts (<i>N</i> = 200)	All (<i>N</i> = 309)
Sex Distribution			
Male	14	33	26
Female	86	67	74
Year of Marriage			
1960 or earlier	10	12	12
1961-1970	24	14	18
1971-1980	50	41	44
1981 or later	16	33	26
Number of Children			
None	19	28	25
One	10	20	17
Two	43	37	39
Three or more	28	15	19
Education			
Less than four years college	13	23	24
Four years college	41	31	35
Master's degree	30	31	29
Doctorate or equivalent	16	15	12
Occupation			
Professional	10	19	16
Educational/social work	29	26	27
Sales/clerical	17	20	19
Housewife	19	10	13
Arts	2	6	4
Entrepreneurial	4	3	3
Other	11	11	11
Not employed/student	8	5	7
Income			
Under \$30,000	12	18	16
\$30-40,000	12	15	14
\$40-50,000	18	15	16
\$50,000 and over	58	52	54

previous year. This figure is high not only relative to the general population but relative to American Jews as well. According to the AJC's *1984 National Survey of American Jews*, 41 percent earned over \$50,000 annually and the median age in that survey was over 50.

Converts differed from nonconverts in a number of ways: First, they had been married longer. Only 16 percent were married after 1980, compared to 33 percent of the nonconverts. Converts also tended to have larger families. Twenty-eight percent had three or more children, in contrast to 15 percent of the nonconverts; and nonconverts were more likely than converts to be childless (28 vs. 19 percent) or to have only a single child (20 vs. 10 percent). Finally, converts were better educated and reported somewhat higher family incomes. However, nonconverts were more likely to hold professional jobs and less likely to be unemployed or homemakers. While occupational status may be partially explained by the higher proportion of women among converts, the educational differences are all the more surprising in light of this fact.

Comparisons and Contrasts with Subgroup of Born Jews

Unlike the research sample of intermarried respondents, the Jewish subgroup was characterized by a fairly equal distribution of males (48 percent) and females (52 percent). The average age was 50, which is considerably higher than the average age of the converts and nonconverts, but consistent with the current figure for the American Jewish population as a whole. Given their older ages, the majority (59 percent) had married before 1960 and only about 7 percent were in second marriages. This contrasts with the research sample of converts and nonconverts, where 70 percent had married after 1971 and 24 percent were married for the second time.

The Jewish subgroup did not differ significantly from the research sample in terms of family income or family size. The average number of children per respondent was 1.7, compared to 1.8 for the converts and 1.5 for the nonconverts. Regarding family background, only 36 percent of the Jewish subgroup had two American-born parents, in contrast with 85 percent of the research sample. Forty-seven percent of the born-Jewish respondents, as opposed to a mere 6.4 percent of the intermarried, had two foreign-born parents. These demographic differences should be kept in mind when the substantive issue of Jewish identification is addressed.

Factors That Influence Conversion

A VARIETY OF FACTORS WERE EXAMINED to determine what effects they might have on a non-Jew's decision to convert. These included the kinds of expectations each partner had of the other before marriage, the strength of each spouse's personal religious convictions, family attitudes, relationships and pressures, and the role, if any, played by the rabbi and by Jewish community outreach.

The analysis of the data suggests that while conversion may be the outcome of a complex set of influences and choices, failure to convert is not necessarily based on a conscious decision process. Asked "Have you ever considered converting to Judaism?" 13 percent of the nonconverts answered in the affirmative, and another 16 percent said, "Yes, but not seriously." For the remaining 71 percent, the question had never even entered their minds.

Of the nonconverts who had considered conversion, one-third felt it would have gone "against their religious convictions," while about one-fifth felt they "could not do it" to their parents or their families. Two-fifths reported that religion was unimportant either to them or to their spouses.

Interestingly, over half of the 200 nonconverts felt that one could be part of the Jewish people and community without undergoing a formal conversion process. Given the highly secularized and personalized image of Jewish life generally conveyed by Jews today, they are probably correct, at least in their own terms.

Partners' Expectations Before Marriage

Based on previous research by the American Jewish Committee and others, there is mounting evidence to support the notion that conversion to Judaism is conditioned, if not determined, by the mutual expectations of the partners in the intermarriage. To explore this issue, respondents were asked to recall how they had felt, before the marriage, about the fact that their future spouse was Jewish (Table 2) and, in turn, how they perceived their spouse to have felt at the prospect of marrying a non-Jew (Table 3).

Table 2

"Before you were married, how did you feel about the fact that your future husband or wife was Jewish?"

	Percent	
	Converts	Nonconverts
"I was happy about it."	54.6	30.2
"I was not happy about it."	4.6	2.6
"Not at all concerned about his/her background."	40.8	67.2

The responses reveal marked differences between converts and nonconverts (Table 2). While very few of the respondents on the whole were "not happy" at the idea of marrying a Jew, converts were more likely to describe themselves as "happy" about the prospect. Typically, nonconverts reported that they were "not at all concerned about [religious] background."

Regarding the feelings attributed to spouses, the differences are instructive as well (Table 3). Converts were more likely than nonconverts to report that their Jewish spouses were "not happy" about their Christian backgrounds, while nonconverts largely perceived the issue to have been of little concern to their partners.

These findings suggest, first, that converts may have been more

Table 3

"Before you were married, how did your future spouse feel about the fact that you were not Jewish?"

	Percent	
	Converts	Nonconverts
"Happy about it."	2.1	11.2
"Not happy about it."	40.6	14.4
"Not at all concerned about my background."	57.3	74.4

favorably disposed toward Judaism from the start. Second, their perceptions of their partners' feelings may have contributed to their decision to enter the Jewish fold. To the extent that prospective Jewish spouses were perceived as displeased or perturbed about the religious issue, conversion may have been viewed as an important step in building the marital relationship.

Strength of Personal Religious Convictions

Converts and nonconverts appeared to be more alike than different regarding their formal religious training as Christians. The majority had been baptized and confirmed, and had attended parochial or Sunday school as children. Their parents had been active in their respective churches. Thus, it may be assumed that the religious socialization of the respondents had been quite similar in many respects.

Table 4
"Would you describe yourself as . . ."

	Percent	
	Converts	Nonconverts
"Very" or "moderately" religious	68.3	34.8
"Slightly" religious	26.1	34.2
"Not at all" religious or "antireligious"	5.6	31.0

Nonetheless, differences were observed in both the degree and nature of the respondents' religious feelings (Tables 4 and 5). Converts were more likely than nonconverts to describe themselves as "very" or "moderately" religious. They were also more likely to believe in a divine or supernatural force, to feel a personal need to pray, and to stress the importance of having a religious identity. The greatest disparity between the two groups was observed on this last issue (84.1 percent of the converts, as opposed to 44.8 percent of the nonconverts).

Table 5
Affirmative Responses to Three Religious Propositions

	Percent	
	Converts	Nonconverts
Belief in a supernatural force	78.7	62.2
Personal need to pray	73.8	59.5
Importance of having a religious identity	84.1	44.8

Though the question remains as to whether the respondents' religious attitudes were a cause or an effect of conversion, it is highly probable that converts were drawn to Judaism, at least in part, in response to an inner religious need. In this sense, conversion to Judaism may represent the exchange of one type of personal religion for another.

One convert expressed herself in this way:

Religion is very personal for me. It is my relationship with God. I rarely discuss it with anyone (including my husband). I don't look to explain it. But I feel more comfortable in that relationship (with God) since becoming Jewish than I did previously.

Many converts made reference to the appeal of the "realism" of Jewish religious life. They felt that Judaism's emphasis on routine ceremonial practices and communal participation was a feature of religious experience that they had missed before becoming Jewish.

Another convert wrote:

I began to think about converting to Judaism a little bit, when by chance I had an apartment within an Orthodox community during one year of college. I saw that the people had something, a closeness, a bond between themselves as friends, as family, that most non-Jews I knew didn't have.

It was, in fact, assumed that converts would be more apt than nonconverts to have had close or at least more frequent contacts with Jews prior to marriage. On the whole, however, the data did not support this assumption. There were no tangible differences with respect to primary Jewish friendships among respondents or their parents.

Not surprisingly, fewer converts than nonconverts were "satisfied" with their own religion as adolescents (37 vs. 59 percent). Obviously, as with other realms of human experience, those who converted were subject both to forces that pulled them toward Judaism outright, and to forces that made it easier for them to break with their religious past.

Family Factors

The process of drawing the non-Jew closer to Judaism and the dynamics that precede conversion entail external factors that go beyond the interpersonal relationships between the marriage partners

themselves. The families on either side obviously play a potentially crucial role. Thus, the survey inquired rather extensively into the relationships between the respondents and their families of origin in the past as well as the present, the religious backgrounds of parents and in-laws, and their respective attitudes toward the marriage.

Quality of family ties: It was hypothesized that the propensity for conversion may have been affected by the nature of the ties between respondents and their parents. Specifically, it was surmised that converts may have had weaker relations with their parents than nonconverts had with theirs. In this case, it may have been easier for the former to break with the religious identification of their families. It was also assumed that the act of leaving their religion of origin would entail some subsequent estrangement from their families.

Contrary to these expectations, however, none of the questions about family ties produced noticeable differences between the converts and the nonconverts in the sample, either in the past or at present. Asked to recall how close, at age 15 or 16, they had been to their parents (Table 6), both converts and nonconverts replied that they had been somewhat closer to their mothers than to their fathers; over half had been "very close" or "pretty close" to both parents. The picture remained about the same for present family ties. Other questions, concerning the quality of relationships with parents, the frequency of contact between respondents and their parents, and the cohesiveness of the larger family network, all yielded response patterns whereby converts were virtually indistinguishable from nonconverts.

Table 6
Degree of Closeness with Parents in Adolescence

	Percent			
	Converts		Nonconverts	
	Father	Mother	Father	Mother
Very close	20.4	27.1	19.9	29.5
Pretty close	32.4	37.4	29.8	36.8
Not all that close	25.0	26.2	25.7	21.2
Pretty distant	11.1	8.4	15.2	7.8
Not applicable	11.1	.9	9.4	4.7

Thus, the weakness of family ties does not appear to have been a precipitating factor in conversion. Nor can it be said, at this point,

that the strength of these ties acted as a restraining factor.

Families' religious backgrounds: To test whether there is a positive relationship between conversion and the perceived religious behavior of the Jewish family into which a non-Jew has married, respondents were asked to assess the strength of the religious convictions of their spouses and in-laws (Table 7). The analysis of these data revealed that two-thirds of the converts tended to have married into families that were perceived as "very" or "moderately" religious. This might also imply that many of them were actively encouraged to convert to Judaism by their Jewish families.

Table 7
Depth of Religious Attachment Ascribed to Jewish Spouse and In-laws

	Percent					
	Converts			Nonconverts		
	Spouse	Father	Mother	Spouse	Father	Mother
"Very" or "moderately" religious	66.7	66.0	60.2	25.1	39.4	39.1
"Slightly" religious	28.7	27.0	31.1	37.2	33.1	35.9
"Not at all" religious or "antireligious"	4.6	7.0	8.7	37.7	27.5	25.0

As far as the perceived religiousness of the respondents' own parents was concerned, converts were more likely than nonconverts to perceive them as "not at all" religious or "antireligious" (Table 8). Among both converts and nonconverts, mothers were perceived as more religious than fathers. But the most significant difference be-

Table 8
"Would you describe your parents as . . ."

	Percent			
	Converts		Nonconverts	
	Father	Mother	Father	Mother
"Very" or "somewhat" religious	39.0	64.8	44.2	61.1
"Slightly" religious	21.3	21.3	31.4	29.0
"Not at all" religious or "antireligious"	39.7	13.9	24.4	9.9

tween the two groups pertained to the religiousness ascribed to fathers. Converts were more likely to describe their fathers as “not at all” religious or “antireligious.” This may have been an enabling factor in the case of some converts and a restraining one in the case of some nonconverts.

Parents’ receptivity toward children’s partners: For a further examination of the family dynamics that affect conversion, respondents were asked to recall the attitudes of their parents to the Jewish partner they were about to marry and how their prospective Jewish in-laws had felt toward them (Tables 9 and 10). Both converts and

Table 9
“How accepting were your parents toward your future Jewish spouse?”

	Percent			
	Converts		Nonconverts	
	Father	Mother	Father	Mother
Unaccepting	13.2	9.7	11.9	7.9
Accepting with reservations	42.8	31.0	51.5	36.2
Accepting without any reservations	44.0	59.3	36.6	55.9

nonconverts saw their mothers as more accepting than their fathers toward their future Jewish spouses. But the mothers of converts were viewed as most unconditionally accepting (59.3 percent). In comparison to the non-Jewish parents, Jewish in-laws were viewed as generally less receptive toward their children’s prospective partners. And it was the converts more than the nonconverts who had experienced most resistance, initially, particularly from the Jewish mother-in-law.

It was noted earlier that when there was less external influence in

Table 10
“How accepting were your future parents-in-law toward you?”

	Percent			
	Converts		Nonconverts	
	Father	Mother	Father	Mother
Unaccepting	20.0	23.1	13.4	11.1
Accepting with reservations	37.8	45.1	39.6	41.7
Accepting without any reservations	42.2	31.8	47.0	47.2

terms of the Jewish spouse's expectations and less internal drive in terms of the respondent's own feelings toward Judaism, conversion was less likely to ensue. Similarly, when there was acceptance by the non-Jewish parents toward the Jewish spouse and resistance on the part of the Jewish family toward the Christian-born partner, the rate of conversion was higher. One convert from Portland described her situation as follows:

My parents loved my husband-to-be. He was pretty much everything they hoped for me, and they saw that I was happy with him. His father, on the other hand, had a lot of difficulty even introducing me to the rest of his family before I converted.

Desire for acceptance into the Jewish family and for unity in the family appears to have been an important factor motivating conversion. In response to the open-ended question "Why did you choose to become Jewish?" the most consistent theme related to the interfamilial relationships with spouse, in-laws, and children. "I felt that converting to Judaism was important to maintain the stability of my family — for my marriage and the children. I am very pleased I made that decision," a convert from Denver disclosed.

The data suggest that conversion did, in fact, ease family relationships (Table 11). Although among many of the respondents, relationships with their Jewish in-laws seem to have improved over time, nonconverts were more likely than converts to report "no significant change" (43 vs. 29 percent). Some of those who had converted felt that conversion in itself had a direct impact on the relationship with their in-laws. "After I converted," wrote one respondent, "and our first child was born [my father-in-law] took us all to his synagogue (which was Orthodox) and he introduced me to all his friends. We attended that synagogue on the holidays until his death." Another

Table 11
"Has your parents-in-laws' attitude toward you changed since you've been married?"

	Percent	
	Converts	Nonconverts
Yes, they've become more accepting	60.2	51.3
Yes, they've become less accepting	1.0	2.1
No, there's been no significant change	29.1	42.9
Not applicable	9.7	3.7

respondent disclosed: "I believe I would have married anyway, even if I had not converted. But the conversion made things a lot easier for the family, and especially for the children."

The direct role of the Jewish family: It appears thus far, that the expectations of the Jewish spouse and in-laws, as *perceived* by the non-Jewish partner, play a part in motivating conversion. To what extent did the Jewish families exert direct influence? The data suggest that they did not play a very active role. Only one-third of the sample as a whole reported efforts on the part of their spouses or in-laws to draw them closer to Judaism and only 27 percent were openly encouraged to convert.

Significantly, converts more frequently than others (62 vs. 19 percent) reported that their partners had made a conscious effort to encourage their Jewish identification. Furthermore, over three-fourths of these converts felt that the influence exerted by their spouses was successful. By contrast, three-fourths of the nonconverts reported that efforts to draw them toward Judaism were unsuccessful.

Concerning the actual decision to convert, only 42 percent of those who became Jewish were reportedly influenced by spouse or in-laws. It would appear that Jewish families were more likely to have encouraged a general feeling for Judaism than for conversion itself. Not surprisingly, the vast majority of those who chose not to convert reported that no one had reached out to them to do so.

When asked who, specifically, did reach out to them, twice as many converts (70.7 percent) as nonconverts (35 percent) pointed to their spouses rather than to their in-laws, relatives or to people outside their families (Table 12). These data point to the potentially

Table 12
"Who reached out to encourage you to convert?"

	Percent	
	Converts	Nonconverts
Spouse	70.7	35.0
In-laws	17.1	22.5
Other relative	2.4	7.5
Rabbi	7.3	12.5
Friend	—	17.5
Other	2.4	5.0

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significant role played by the partner. Judging by the results, the intervention of others probably has minimal impact when the spouse does not assume an active persuasive role.

In contrast to the reported efforts of the Jewish spouses to draw their non-Jewish partners to Judaism, only 4.2 percent of the partners indicated that they had tried to bring their spouses closer to their own religion. On the contrary, in many cases converts indicated that they had tried to bring about greater *Jewish* observance in their homes! As one woman from Denver put it,

After a few years, I realized that because of my studying for conversion I probably had a better Jewish education than either my husband or his parents . . . I tried to draw them toward more Jewishness in their lives.

Another convert, from Houston, wrote:

In some areas of religious practice, it is my husband who has held me back (e.g., from the regular use of the mikvah and worship in a "shul" with a mechitzah). We tend to practice a more traditional form of Judaism than most of our Jewish friends and relatives.

Social networks of respondents and their parents: Two additional factors expected to contribute to the likelihood of conversion were the degree to which respondents were embedded in social networks and the degree to which their parents were involved in their communities. The hypothesis was that individuals whose parents had achieved social and communal standing by virtue of their leadership and recognition in local community affairs would be less likely to break away from their families. By the same token, when these individuals themselves were well integrated into their own social and organizational networks, they might be more reluctant to sever those ties.

Participants in the sample were asked whether their parents were active in local community organizations and whether they themselves had been active as adolescents in clubs or teams. Neither question produced any meaningful differences. More than 80 percent of both converts and nonconverts had participated in clubs and teams when they were teenagers, and about half of the mothers of both groups were active in local community organizations. The only difference pertained to fathers: fathers of converts were described as

somewhat less active in local community affairs than fathers of nonconverts. But the difference was too slight to allow for conclusions.

Looking at the entire gamut of family dynamics and their complexities, conversion would appear to be associated with certain pressures on the part of the spouse and in-laws and a corresponding acceptance or lack of pressure on the side of the family of origin. The findings suggest that the decision to convert may ultimately stem from reactions not only to the indirect and direct influences exerted by parents, spouses and in-laws, but also to perceptions of the relative importance of religion for each of these significant others. It would seem that many of the respondents who converted did so out of desire to please those who wanted them to become Jewish.

Social psychologists have demonstrated in a variety of experimental studies on topics far less emotionally charged than religious conversion that, when faced by various alternatives, most individuals determine their choices to a large extent by what they perceive as the normative expectations of those who are important in their lives. Similarly, in choosing whether or not to convert, persons are likely to reach a decision that is most congruous or least conflictual with what they perceive their significant others would expect of them.

The Role of the Rabbi

An examination of the factors that influence the decision to convert to Judaism would not be complete without probing outside the realm of personal and family considerations for other possible determinants. For example, what significance is attached to a rabbi's willingness or refusal to perform a mixed marriage or to officiate at one jointly with a priest or a minister? And if a rabbi does sanction the marriage, what effect will this have on a non-Jewish spouse's decision to convert later or on the couple's future Jewish life?

The data indicated that over 70 percent of the marriages involving born Jews and converts in the sample were performed by a rabbi (Table 13). Yet there was also some rabbinic participation in the marriage ceremonies of about one-third of the nonconverts. In fact, over 20 percent of these respondents reported that their marriage ceremonies were conducted exclusively by a rabbi.

Some observers have argued that rabbinic participation at an inter-marriage is conducive to bringing about a closer relationship between the couple and the Jewish community, whereas rabbinic refusal will

alienate them. Others have suggested that a rabbi's refusing to be involved in such a ceremony will ultimately prompt the non-Jewish partner to convert. Although a systematic analysis of these two positions is beyond the scope of the present survey, a few items in the questionnaire may shed some light on the issue.

Table 13
Type of Marriage Ceremony

	Percent	
	Converts	Nonconverts
Performed by a rabbi	71.0	21.0
Performed by a rabbi and non-Jewish clergy	1.0	8.0
Performed by a priest or a minister	3.0	23.0
Civil ceremony	18.0	38.0
Other/some combination of above	7.0	10.0

Respondents were asked to indicate whether they had actually approached a rabbi about officiating at their marriage (Table 14). Almost 84 percent of the converts and 45.5 percent of the nonconverts said they had. Indeed, most of these respondents had found the rabbi willing to cooperate. Less than half of the nonconverts who had approached a rabbi were turned down.

There were, of course, respondents who proceeded to convert after a rabbi refused to marry them; others did not. But only one-fourth of those who encountered refusal, converts and nonconverts alike, acknowledged that the rabbi's unwillingness to officiate at their wedding caused them to distance themselves from institutionalized Judaism. More importantly, however, over 60 percent of the nonconverts who were married by a rabbi felt this fact had no impact on their Jewish life (Table 15). This stands in sharp contrast to three-fourths of the converts who felt that the rabbi's participation made a significant difference in their lives.

Of the 35 nonconverts who had met with rabbinic refusal, 12

Table 14
"Did you approach a rabbi about officiating at your wedding?"

	Percent	
	Converts	Nonconverts
Yes, and he agreed	72.6	27.2
Yes, and he refused	11.3	18.3
No, we never asked one	16.1	54.5

found another rabbi; 11 were married by non-Jewish clergy; and 12 were married in a civil ceremony. Only 8 percent reported that the rabbi urged them to convert; and most reported that they were not urged to remain in contact with the synagogue in any way.

Fully half of the respondents who had been denied rabbinic officiation, converts and nonconverts alike, felt that the rabbi had dealt with them “insensitively.” Converts were more inclined to have viewed the rabbi’s position as reasonable, suggesting, once again, that they may be more positively disposed toward Judaism in general and thus more understanding of the rabbi’s negative stance. Whatever the explanation, it is conceivable that a sensitive approach on the part of the rabbi may help draw couples to the community, rather than alienating them from the community.

Table 15
“Has the fact that you were married by a rabbi had an influence on your Jewish life?”

	Percent	
	Converts	Nonconverts
“Yes, it has made our family life more Jewish”	44.3	7.7
“Yes, it has made somewhat of a difference”	31.6	30.8
“No, it has made no difference at all”	24.1	61.5

In view of the small size of the subsamples considered above, any conclusions must be seen as tentative, and the relationship between rabbinic officiation and conversion remains open to question. It would seem that a rabbi’s response, whether positive or negative, ultimately had less of an impact on the decision to convert than some of the other factors explored earlier. In fact, as compared with the role of the Jewish spouse and in-laws, rabbis reportedly played a relatively minor role.

Jewish Community Outreach Efforts

Concerned that the pervasiveness of intermarriage will continue to deplete its ranks both numerically and spiritually, the organized Jewish community in recent years has initiated “outreach” efforts to bring about the conversion of the non-Jewish partners. Since such a posture marks a significant departure from Jewish experience and tradition, its validity has been the object of considerable communal debate. It appears, however, that the opinions of those individuals to

whom the outreach is specifically directed, namely, the Christian spouses of Jews, on the one hand, and unaffiliated Jews who would be most likely to marry out, on the other hand, have rarely if ever been solicited by those who engage in this debate.

The survey revealed that only 42 percent of the converts and 21 percent of the nonconverts had been exposed to some kind of outreach efforts. The rest reported that they had not been approached by any representative of the Jewish community. Whereas 34 percent of the converts favored such efforts, only 13 percent of the nonconverts did. Among the respondents in the Jewish subgroup, Reform and Conservative Jews had a somewhat positive view of outreach (44 and 43 percent, respectively), but Orthodox Jews were skeptical (12 percent), as were the unaffiliated “just Jewish” respondents (14 percent).

It is clear that if the Jewish community is intent on pursuing outreach to the intermarried, its leaders and policy makers will need to heed and assess these findings. Constructive new strategies should be devised in the face of what appears to be widespread indifference on this issue, both on the part of the target population and the general Jewish constituency.

The Significance of Conversion

FROM A CONSIDERATION OF THE PERSONAL, familial and communal factors that appear to increase or decrease the likelihood of conversion, the study proceeded to examine the conversion experience itself. How effective was the required preparation for conversion and what did it involve? How did the converts feel about their experience? Were there any significant differences among those converted under Orthodox, Conservative or Reform auspices?

Assessing the Conversion Experience

The converts in the sample reported that, on the average, about a year-and-a-half had elapsed from the time they began seriously considering converting to the time the formal ceremony took place. The period of study was, for most, six months, but in some cases lasted as long as two years. For the majority, preparation for conversion involved the study of Jewish laws and customs, history and prayer, in individualized sessions with a rabbi or teacher.

Half the respondents reported exposure to the study of Torah and one-third reported having had personal counseling during their course of study. Very few were exposed to Jewish experiences through trips or audiovisual aids.

About half were tested orally on the material covered in the conversion class; but only 15 percent had to pass a written exam. Since the general format of most courses appears to have been highly academic and formalized, it is surprising to find that many were never tested on what they had learned.

The majority of converts had found the preparation classes “very satisfying” (57 percent) or “somewhat satisfying” (27 percent). The most frequently cited source of satisfaction (by 50 percent) was the intellectual stimulation of learning about Judaism. The conversion

process appears to have been enjoyed as an academic exercise more than as a cultural experience or personal pursuit. As one convert wrote, "Learning what's written in books was easy. It was much harder to learn about the everyday joys and chores of 'living Jewish.'" And another commented: "I learned much more about what it takes to be Jewish since my conversion than I did prior to it."

Nearly a third of the respondents felt frustrated by the fact that preparation for conversion, in their view, was not adequate to enable them to fit comfortably into the Jewish world. Moreover, the program of instruction often seemed to lack opportunities to explore and resolve the feelings of the prospective converts regarding this experience in their lives. Other sources of dissatisfaction related to the program's structural aspects, such as duration, commuting distance, scheduling problems, Hebrew requirements, expectations of religious observance, and so on. About 15 percent complained that their relationship with the rabbi or with their fellow students had not been personal enough.

When the converts were asked: "Do you feel that conversion has been a significant life-changing event for you," on the same plane as such other momentous experiences as marriage, graduating from college, or entering the job market, 64 percent indicated that it was "very significant" and another 29 percent answered that it was "somewhat significant." For the remaining 7 percent conversion had not changed their lives to any meaningful degree.

As might be expected with any life-changing decision, half the respondents indicated feeling at least some inner strain between their opting for Judaism and the parental heritage they left behind. The majority reportedly experienced no actual difficulty fitting into the Jewish community. To the question "Have you found it easy or difficult to feel a sense of group belonging with the Jewish people?" more than 81 percent replied "Very easy" or "Fairly easy." Twelve percent reported some difficulty in feeling they belonged to the Jewish community and only 7 percent reported experiencing a great deal of difficulty. Yet in contrast with their own sense of belonging, three-fourths felt that the Jewish community did not understand them. Over two-fifths described their reception by fellow Jews as ranging from cordial to suspicious and unaccepting.

Denominational Differences

On the whole, there seemed to be no striking differences among

respondents who had formally adopted Judaism under Reform, Conservative or Orthodox auspices, both in terms of their assessment of the conversion experience and their sense of Jewish and religious identification.

The majority (63 percent) were converted by a Reform rabbi, 24 percent by a Conservative rabbi, and the remaining 13 percent by an Orthodox rabbi. Respondents in all three categories were quite similar as far as their personal sense of religious commitment was concerned (Table 16). Those converted under Orthodox auspices were somewhat more likely than the others to consider themselves “very” religious. At the same time, however, slightly more of the Orthodox converts than those who had been converted under other auspices perceived themselves as “not at all” religious or “antireligious.”

While some observers assume that Christians who marry Jews and convert to Judaism may do so out of other than purely religious considerations, the study found that converts were far more likely than nonconverts to regard religion as an important component of their identity (cf. Table 4, above). Indeed, broken down by denominations, 86 percent of those converted under Reform auspices, 80 percent of those converted by the Conservative and 83 percent of the Orthodox-converted claimed that “having a religious identity” meant a great deal to them. Only 23, 17 and 18 percent, respectively, said they sought opportunities to be with people of the ethnic background into which they were born and raised. About 70, 83 and 83 percent, respectively, expressed “a need to be part of the Jewish community.”

Converts were asked more specifically about the extent of their involvement in a broad range of Jewish religious, communal and cultural activities (Table 17). Their responses to the 11 questionnaire items generally suggested a high degree of Jewish activity, with those who converted under Orthodox auspices showing somewhat higher levels of involvement on certain items. Yet these differences were so

Table 16
Converts’ Self-Described Religious Feelings

	Percent		
	Reform	Conservative	Orthodox
“Very” religious	5	—	8
“Moderately” religious	62	58	58
“Slightly” religious	30	33	17
“Not at all” religious or “antireligious”	3	9	17

Table 17
Converts' Affirmative Responses to Various Indicators of Jewishness

	Percent		
	Reform	Conservative	Orthodox
Are you a member of a Jewish congregation?	84	92	92
Are you a member of a Jewish organization (not a synagogue)?	62	65	92
Do you regularly participate in Jewish religious services?	67	58	83
Have you contributed this past year to any Jewish fund-raising?	77	87	92
Do you take any courses on Jewish life?	66	88	83
Do you read any Jewish newspapers or periodicals?	78	78	100
Do you make a special effort to watch TV programs like "Holocaust" or "Heritage"?	84	88	75
Did you attend a seder this past year?	92	100	100
Were Hanukkah candles lit in your home this year?	92	100	100
Did you attend synagogue this past Rosh Hashanah?	91	83	92
Did you attend synagogue this past Yom Kippur?	88	83	92

slight as to be meaningless, underscoring that converts from all three subgroups were much more alike than dissimilar with respect to Jewish life.* Asked if they believed in a supernatural force and if they had an inner need to pray, some three-fourths of all converts answered in the affirmative (cf. Table 5). Again, those who had been converted by an Orthodox rabbi diverged somewhat from the general response pattern in the matter of prayer: only 54 percent reported they felt a need to pray from time to time.

Finally, it bears noting that, whereas 70 percent of the Conservative and 75 percent of the Orthodox converts considered their conversion to have been a "very significant" life-changing event, only 52 percent of the Reform converts assessed their conversion in this way.

*To be sure, the 11 items asked of persons converted under different denominational auspices do not presume to exhaust the full range of Jewish life and identification, and there are manifest and acknowledged differences in the religious ideals and practices of Orthodox, Conservative and Reform Judaism. One might have assumed these differences to be more salient in the responses of the respective converts. But with all their limitations, the selected items do tap matters of broad consensus among the three major groupings of American Jews, and the converts' response patterns do provide some useful data.

Comparing Converts and Nonconverts With Born Jews

HOW DO CONVERTS AND NONCONVERTS married to Jews differ from born Jews as far as Jewish attitudes and behavior patterns are concerned? If the influx of newcomers who have tied their personal fates to that of the Jewish people compensates somewhat for its numerical attrition, how does their presence affect the quality of overall Jewish group identity and survival? What relationship can be drawn between attitudinal and behavioral measures of Jewishness, on the one hand, and religious and ethnic identification, on the other?

To find answers to these questions, the converts and nonconverts in the sample were compared with the resource sample of born Jews in relation to religious feeling and expression, Jewish identification, and their respective positions on selected social and political issues.

The religious feelings of converts and nonconverts and their reactions to three salient religious propositions were described earlier (p. 11, and Tables 4 and 5). As noted, the converts in the sample were more likely than the nonconverts to consider themselves as "very or somewhat religious," to believe in a supernatural force, to have a greater need to pray, and to stress the importance of having a religious identity. Regarding religious feelings, the responses of the born Jews fell somewhere in the middle. Forty-six percent described themselves as very or somewhat religious, compared to 68 percent of the converts and 35 percent of the nonconverts. On the first two religious propositions, converts ranked considerably higher than born Jews (78.7 and 74.8 percent vs. 48.6 and 59.5 percent). The

findings pertaining to religious identity were virtually identical for both groups (84.1 vs. 83.1 percent), a somewhat surprising departure from results of earlier research. It must be recalled, however, that the majority of the converts were women and also younger than the subsample of Jews. It is likely that these factors affect the way an individual defines religion.

The components of Jewishness were subsumed under four categories: religious activities, communal activities, cultural activities, and attitudes (Table 18). To get as detailed a picture as possible, the Jewish resource sample was broken down into denominational subgroups.*

Regarding religious activities, converts as a group were found to be equally if not more observant than other denominationally affiliated Jews. The vast majority had attended a Passover seder, lit Hanukkah candles, and worshiped at a synagogue on Rosh Hashanah and on Yom Kippur during the past year. In fact, the percentage of converts who regularly participated in religious services was far higher than the percentage of Conservative and Reform Jews who did. This finding may be explained, in part, by the converts' religious attitudes and feelings. However, it should also be recalled that the majority of converts were women and that gender differences may account for a higher degree of religious feeling and ritual observance among this group. The similarities between converts and born Jews are all the more striking in view of the fact that the converts were younger. Communal affiliation tends to increase with age and reaches a peak in one's middle adult years. Thus, a much greater discrepancy might have been expected between the involvement in Jewish life of the older Jewish subgroup and that of the converts.

Although nonconverts were less likely to observe Jewish rituals, their percentages did not fall below those of the non-affiliated born Jews. It is likely that many of them undergo some form of Jewish socialization through their spouses and in-laws. Alternatively, the data may be more a reflection of the assimilation of the unaffiliated Jews than of the Jewishness of these nonconverts.

The data also appear to support the fact that converts resemble

*The denominational distribution of the Jewish resource sample was as follows: Orthodox, 4 percent ($N=8$); Conservative, 31 percent ($N=58$); Reform, 32 percent ($N=67$); not affiliated or "just Jewish," 32 percent ($N=59$).

affiliated Jews not only in terms of religious practice, but also in terms of their communal and cultural activities and socioemotional

Table 18
Affirmative Responses to Various Indicators of Jewishness

	Percent					
	Non-Converts	Con-verts	Born Jews			
			“Just Jewish”	Re-form	Conser-vative	Ortho-dox
Religious Activities						
Did you attend a Passover seder this year?	68	95	95	85	99	100
Were Hanukkah candles lit in your home this past year?	65	94	62	88	88	100
Did you attend synagogue this past Rosh Hashanah?	26	90	20	74	81	100
Did you attend synagogue this past Yom Kippur?	25	88	33	75	88	100
Do you regularly participate in Jewish religious services?	22	67	12	47	44	100
Communal activities						
Are you a member of a Jewish congregation?	16	87	15	70	67	100
Are you a member of any Jewish organization (not a synagogue)?	12	67	31	65	65	100
Have you contributed to a Jewish fundraising drive this past year?	39	81	62	95	86	100
Cultural activities						
Do you read any Jewish newspapers or periodicals?	31	80	42	59	79	100
Do you make a special effort to watch TV programs like “Holocaust” or Abba Eban’s “Heritage” series?	58	85	77	87	88	50
Do you prefer to vote for political candidates who are supportive of Israel?	43	82	75	91	84	75
Attitudes						
Do you feel comfortable in Jewish settings?	76	91	90	97	99	100
Do you feel a need to be part of the Jewish community?	16	75	38	81	91	100
Do you feel that you would like your own children to live as Jews?	25	92	65	98	99	100

attitudes. Thus, for example, they are affiliated with Jewish organizations, contribute to Jewish causes, take special interest in Jewish political and media events, and above all, would like their children to live as Jews. On this last point they are much more resolute than nonaffiliated Jews. The one question to which converts responded somewhat differently than denominationally identified Jews was "Do you feel a need to be a part of the Jewish community?" Seventy-five percent answered in the affirmative, compared to between 81 and 100 percent of the affiliated born-Jewish groups.

Although nonconverts and nonaffiliated Jews generally scored equally low on questions pertaining to ritual observance and community activities, some differences were noted. The nonaffiliated Jews felt relatively more comfortable than nonconverts in Jewish settings (90 vs. 76 percent), were more likely to want their children to live as Jews (65 vs. 25 percent) and, obviously, had a stronger sense of ethnic identification, as shown by their interest in Jewish political and cultural issues and contributions to Jewish causes.

On a related matter, the respondents were asked whether they agreed with the statement that Jewish parents "must make all efforts to ensure that their children do not marry non-Jews." The breakdown of the responses revealed that the more "liberal" the subgroup with respect to Jewish tradition, the less likely its constituents were to agree with the proposition. Forty-five percent of the nonaffiliated Jews and 35 percent of the converts expressed agreement. In view of

Table 19
Responses "Strongly in Favor" of Certain Propositions

	Percent					
	Non-Converts	Con-verts	Born Jews			
			"Just Jewish"	Re-form	Conser-vative	Ortho-dox
The right of women to have abortions	82	85	94	86	86	25
U.S. aid to Israel	56	90	82	93	96	88
Abolishing the death penalty	41	51	47	61	58	74
Increased government spending on welfare programs	44	41	51	47	39	12
Israel's approach to protecting its own security	43	77	76	77	84	50

their responses regarding the desire to raise their children as Jews, it would appear that relatively few of the converts saw a contradiction between intermarriage and Jewish continuity.

The survey also inquired into a number of sociopolitical attitudes by which Jews are often assumed to be distinguishable from non-Jews (Table 19). On almost all issues, including the right to abortion and abolition of the death penalty, the percentage of converts who were “strongly in favor” fell somewhere between the nonconverts and the born-Jewish subgroups, with converts tending to be more liberal, on the whole, than their nonconverted counterparts. It is particularly noteworthy that converts shared with all denominationally affiliated Jews a strong support for Israel. They felt significantly stronger than nonconverts about issues pertaining to the economic security of the Jewish State and, with respect to U.S. aid for Israel, were even more strongminded than nonaffiliated Jews.

These findings suggest that although conversion is primarily a religious transformation, it seems to be related to sociopolitical attitudes as well. Converts appear to undergo a socialization process whereby they assimilate traditional Jewish values and attitudes more in keeping with the norms of their new religious reference group than with those of the group from which they originated.

Summary and Conclusions

THE FINDINGS THAT HAVE EMERGED from this study of conversion among the intermarried point to a number of general conclusions that must be duly qualified in view of the limitations of the survey and the small sample sizes. The major findings may be summarized as follows:

1. Compared with nonconverts, the converts in the sample were more likely to be women. Converts also tended to have larger families, more education and higher family incomes.

2. Most of the nonconverts (71 percent) had never seriously considered converting. Only a third reported that their spouses had encouraged them to do so. By contrast, converts more frequently reported that they had been urged by their spouses to convert and that the Jewish family had reached out in an effort to draw them closer to Judaism.

3. Among some 60 nonconverts who had considered conversion at some time, just over half were deterred by their own religious convictions or those of their Christian families; the others reported that religion was not sufficiently important, either to themselves or their spouses, to prompt conversion. By contrast, the converts in the sample placed a high priority on religious affiliation. They also saw the religious issue as important to their spouses and their Jewish in-laws.

4. In keeping with their greater need for religious identity, converts were also more likely than nonconverts to profess a belief in a supernatural being and to express a personal inclination to pray.

5. Converts reportedly experienced greater resistance from their Jewish in-laws before marriage than did nonconverts. They were also more likely to report an improvement in the relationship with their in-laws after they formally adopted Judaism.

6. On the whole, there seemed to be no striking differences among the converts who had formally entered the Jewish fold under Reform, Conservative or Orthodox auspices, both in terms of the conversion experience and their sense of Jewish and religious identification.

7. On almost all of the indicators of Jewish identification, behavior and attitudes, converts resembled born Jews affiliated with the major religious denominations of American Judaism (Orthodox, Conservative, Reform). The nonconverts were much more similar to nonaffiliated, "just Jewish" Jews.

8. Whether or not a rabbi was willing to officiate at one's marriage ceremony does not appear to have significantly encouraged or deterred the conversion of the non-Jewish partner.

9. About three-fourths of the converts, but only one-third of the nonconverts, felt that rabbinic participation at their marriage brought them closer to Judaism.

10. Although most of the converts said they found it easy to fit into the Jewish community, they felt that born Jews lacked sensitivity and understanding for their particular situation.

11. Relatively few converts and nonconverts reported that they had been exposed to Jewish community outreach efforts. Even fewer deemed such efforts desirable. Among the born-Jewish groups in the study, only Reform and Conservative Jews seemed in favor of organized outreach.

12. Converts reported that their course of preparation for conversion appeared to have been more heavily weighed toward the academic components of Judaism as a faith than toward the experiential components of Jewishness. They indicated that there had been little emphasis on personal counseling, either during the conversion process or after its conclusion.

13. The more "liberal" the subgroup with respect to Jewish tradition, the less likely the belief that Jewish parents ought to make sure their children do not marry non-Jews.

The study was originally designed to probe one overarching research question: What are the differences between converts and nonconverts married to Jews that might help explain why some

convert and others do not? As is sometimes the case, findings have a way of redefining the research question.

The findings suggest that attempting to account for conversion by examining the characteristics of converts and nonconverts focuses on a very narrow aspect of the process — indeed, on the most obvious — namely, the individual. On the other hand, it may be argued that the decision to convert, though ultimately reached by an individual, is in fact the product of complex forces operating within a broader social context. By the same token, the absence of conversion is a reflection of processes that go beyond personal choice. Both outcomes — conversion or its absence — seem to flow from a matrix of personal, familial, and larger social forces.

Taking the personal, familial, and social characteristics of respondents into account, it appears that conversion is the outcome of a series of relative influences that simultaneously “pull” the individual toward Judaism or away from the religious background of the family of origin. Three major variables come into play: (1) the strength of an individual’s own religious commitment measured against that perceived in one’s spouse; (2) the religious convictions of one’s family of origin vs. those of the spouse’s family; (3) the power and status of one side in the marriage vs. that of his or her spouse.

The probability that the non-Jewish partner in intermarriage will convert to Judaism is enhanced by efforts to draw the individual closer to the religious fold. Conversion, in turn, has been shown to strengthen family ties, which ultimately enhance the social fabric of the family as a unit and as a context for a stable Jewish life.

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