

# Jews and Non-Jews: Falling in Love\*

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*Converts tend to bifurcate Judaism into ethnic and religious categories. They feel that they cannot be good Jews in ethnic terms. As one respondent remarked, "I will always know I am different." Thus, converts tend to turn to religion to validate their Jewishness. Converts who took Judaism seriously in our study indicated that being a good Jew means becoming a "religious" Jew.*

We were poor people, you know, even though my father was a Baptist minister. I was raised by a Jewish doctor and his wife. They said they would see that I was taken care of and raised right. I didn't convert while young, but I think the seed might have been planted then. In fact, I got disinherited by marrying a Christian. Then after I had nothing to gain, I converted. When mother died, I rejected Jesus. I believed in one God, but couldn't tolerate Jesus. Jesus betrayed me because of my mother's death. Then I met a rabbi who helped me, gave me books to read. Finally, I became a Jew. The ceremony was a once-in-a-lifetime feeling. I don't have the words. What a juicy story, huh?

So reports a convert to Judaism in a study I recently completed. This survey represents the first in-depth evidence of the implications of conversion for the Jewish community and polity.

This paper will discuss the following subjects:

1. Definition of Key Terms
2. The Conversion Study: Its Methodology
3. Who Converts to Reform Judaism
4. Conversion Motivation
5. The Practices and Beliefs of Converts
6. Family Matters
7. Becoming a Jew:  
Problems and Prospects

## 1. Definition of Key Terms

At the outset, I will specify exactly what is inter-marriage, mixed marriage, *mitzvah* marriage, and conversion. Most students of the

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subject accept the late Dr. Albert Gordon's definition of "intermarriage."<sup>1</sup> It is a marriage between a Jew and someone who is by *birth* a non-Jew. A Jew married to a born Catholic is, thus, intermarried. There are two types of intermarriage, mixed marriage and *mitzvah* marriage.

We shall use the term "mixed marriage" to describe a marriage in which the non-Jew does *not* convert to Judaism. We shall use the term "*mitzvah* marriage," for want of a better phrase, to describe a marriage in which the Gentile does convert to Judaism. This term has been coined by Rabbi Allen Maller, President of JOIN-US (Jews United to Welcome Christians into the Family of Israel).

Using these definitions, what are the rates of intermarriage? According to the National Jewish Population Study, one in three marriages involving a Jew is an intermarriage. Approximately 75 percent of these intermarriages do *not* result in conversion of the non-Jewish partner. About 25 percent of all intermarriages *do* result in a conversion of the non-Jewish partners. Therefore, the proportion is 75 percent mixed marriage to 25 percent *mitzvah* marriage.<sup>2</sup>

Two additional terms require clarification, "convert" and "conversion." These terms come from a Latin root meaning to change one's way of life. We shall use the term

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<sup>1</sup> Albert Gordon, "Intermarriage—What It Is" in Milton Barron, ed., *The Blending American*. Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1972, pp. 5-10.

<sup>2</sup> George Johnson, "Comparing the Inmarried and Intermarried: Implications of the National Jewish Population Study," *Analysis*, 32 (January 15, 1973).

"conversion" to refer simply to the abandonment of Hinduism, Catholicism, or some other religion and the adoption of Judaism. This process of "ecclesiastical conversion" does not have to result in a sweeping change in the person's attitudes and behavior.

Jimmy Carter has described himself as a convert, having been twice born, finding God, the way, the truth, the life. However, to qualify as a convert in our discussion, one need not undergo a Jimmy Carter religious experience. One simply has to convert formally to Judaism.

## 2. The Conversion Study: Its Methodology

The Conversion Study, reported below, was sponsored by the Union of American Hebrew Congregations. I served as research director. In this study, we focussed on three conditions: conversion without integration into the new social group and its religious life, conversion with partial integration, and conversion with full integration. Our research question is: "What are the factors (correlates) responsible for these levels of integration?" Further, what can be done by converts, their spouses, the families related to the converts, and the Jewish community and polity to upgrade the Jewish identification of converts?

Our study population consists of converts to Reform Judaism who reside in Greater Boston and who are or were married to born Jews. The converts converted to Judaism from one to forty-nine years ago. The typical convert in our study population converted about four years ago.

The findings of this study are based on five data sources: 1) *extant data*—we examined the records of 389 converts who graduated the UAHC conversion program in Boston; 2) an *experience survey*—all Reform rabbis and a number of Conservative rabbis in Boston were questioned about their experiences with intermarriages and converts; 3) *non-participant observation*—I attended all sessions of the UAHC conversion class and an experiential program for potential converts and their fiancées; 4) *interviews*—a portion of the study universe are undergoing qualitative inter-

viewing; and 5) a *questionnaire*—the primary data source. All intermarried converts in the Boston area that we could locate were sent a questionnaire. This survey achieved an 85 percent rate of return, an extremely rare success rate. What are some of the results we obtained?

## 3. Who Converts to Judaism

### Sex

The majority of converts to Judaism is female. In our study, 66 percent of the converts were female and only 34 percent, male. I believe a number of factors contribute to this maldistribution. First, Jewish tradition necessitates that male converts be ritually circumcized. Many men fear circumcision. This deters them from even considering conversion. Second, American society still has patriarchal elements. Many men expect their spouses to accept their last name and assume the male's outer identity rather than vice versa. Third, *halakah* view the offspring of a Jewish mother as Jewish, regardless of the father's religion. Thus, many non-Jewish males consider conversion irrelevant. In my opinion, these three factors account for the male-female sex ratio in conversion.<sup>3</sup>

### Marital Status

The bulk of converts are engaged to be married to a Jew. We found that 71 percent were engaged; 22 percent were already married; 7 percent were single; and less than one percent divorced. This statistic means that the immediate precipitant for conversion is marriage to a Jew.

### Former Religion

Since Greater Boston is predominantly Catholic in composition, we expected to find 60 percent Catholics in our study. In fact, we found that only 48 percent of converts were

<sup>3</sup> The factors operating against conversion by males have also been noted by Rabbi Dr. Mark Winer in his unpublished dissertation, *The Demography, Causes, and Consequences of Jewish Intermarriage*. New Haven: Yale University, 1977, pp. 130-131.

former Catholics; 39 percent were former Protestants; 9 percent were of a mixed religious background; and 3 percent were of other faiths. Thus, Protestants are more likely to convert to Judaism than Catholics.

## 4. Conversion Motivation

We asked our respondents to indicate the most important reason why they converted to Judaism. The questionnaire results in rank order were:

"Judaism is more acceptable than the faith in which I was brought up:" 32%

"It is better to have one religion in the home so that children will not become confused:" 24%

"To please my spouse:" 20%

"One religion in the home brings a husband and wife closer together:" 6%

"To please the parents of my spouse:" 3%

"To get married in a Jewish ceremony:" 2%

Other reasons: 12%

These data indicate that a person usually chooses to become a Jew for intrinsic reasons, but that a significant minority become Jews for extrinsic reasons, such as to please their spouse, to please their in-laws, or to be married in a Jewish ceremony.

In response to the survey question, "what advice would you give to others considering conversion?" Most converts replied as follows:

"Make your own decision and don't let others, in particular, future in-laws, pressure you into it."

"Do not do it for love of spouse only. It is a hypocrisy."

"Think it out as rationally as possible. Ask yourself this question, 'Would I remain a Jew if my spouse died or we divorced?' If the answer is 'No'—do not convert."

The majority of respondents embraced Judaism because they had come to reject their former faith.

As one participant in the Introduction to Judaism class indicated,

"I can't believe in Christianity. Catholicism is so weird to me—confession, going to purgatory, confessing my sins at the age of seven.

Reform Judaism is better than being an atheist."

Most respondents also converted because they wanted to give their future children a sense of identity. One person told us:

"I used to think that my children should have no religion. Now I believe children must have something with which to identify. It is unrealistic and naive to feel you can just be a person, without a religious label."

## 5. The Practices and Beliefs of Converts

Converts tend to bifurcate Judaism into ethnic and religious categories. They feel that they cannot be good Jews in ethnic terms. As one respondent remarked, "I will always know I am different." Thus, converts tend to turn to religion to *validate* their Jewishness. Converts who took Judaism seriously in our study indicated that being a good Jew means becoming a "religious" Jew.

This inability to become a Jew on ethnic terms was highlighted by numerous respondents in their interviews:

"Judaism is so ethnic. I doubt if I will ever feel really comfortable with other Jews. Similarly, how can a born Jew really understand me—an Italian Catholic?"

"The problem I see with conversion to Judaism is that I have to change cultures, whereas if one of you born Jews were to convert to Catholicism, it would be a *religious* change, and not necessarily a total change in your way of life."

Furthermore, true conversion would involve a personality disorganization. It is unrealistic to expect a convert to suppress all of the feelings and memories which have developed over his lifetime. One participant in the conversion class summarizes this point of view: "I don't want to give up my childhood memories, such as my feelings towards nuns. I can't deny what happened years before. They were pleasant memories."

Our observations about the bifurcation between religiosity and ethnicity among converts are confirmed in the survey data. Converts score high on religiosity, low on

ethnicity. For example, we can compare the religious behavior of converts in our study to that of born Reform Jews in Boston. The data on Boston's Reform Jewry come from *A Study of the Jewish Population of Greater Boston*, conducted by the Boston Federation in 1975. Table 1 suggests that converts are more religious than born Reform Jews.

Table 1.  
*Comparison of Converts and Reform Jews on Jewish Practices*

Jewish Practice	Converts	Reform Jews
Observe Passover Seder	91%	89%
Light Sabbath Candles	49%	30%
Fast on Yom Kippur	67%	47%

The discrepancy between the religiosity of converts and born Jews is more pronounced than the data suggest. Converts are much younger than the born Reform Jews in the Federation study. If converts were compared to Jews in a similar age bracket, the religiosity level of converts would be more statistically significant.

Converts are not only more observant of Jewish rituals, they also belong to synagogues in greater numbers and attend services with greater regularity than born Jews. Tables 2 and 3 confirm the relatively high level of synagogue involvement by converts. Again, the statistical significance would be even greater if we controlled for age.

Table 2.  
*Comparison of Converts and Reform Jews on Synagogue Membership*

Status	Converts	Boston Jewry
Presently Belong	57%	39%
Do Not Belong	43%	61%

Table 3.  
*Comparison of Converts and Reform Jews on Synagogue Attendance*

Frequency	Converts	Boston Jewry
Once a week—month	12%	10%
Every few months	33%	15%
Only High Holy Days	35%	37%
Less often or never	20%	38%

Although converts have a high level of religious identification, the survey data confirm their low level of ethnicity. Tables 4 and 5, a comparison of converts and born Jews, reveal the low ethnicity scores.

Table 4.  
*Comparison of Converts and Reform Jews in Response to the Statement, "Being a Jew, I Prefer Jews as Close Personal Friends"*

Response	Converts	Boston Jewry
Agree	24%	48%
Disagree	76%	52%

Table 5.  
*Comparison of Converts and Reform Jews in Response to the Statement, "Being a Jew, I Prefer to Live in a Jewish Neighborhood"*

Response	Converts	Boston Jewry
Agree	23%	34%
Disagree	77%	66%

The issue of Christmas is particularly problematic for converts. Although the majority of converts have abandoned observance of Christmas, a significant minority (26 percent) continue to observe the holiday. Converts tried to have fond recollections of Christmas. One woman in the conversion class remarked:

"Christmas was always so much fun. It's a great family celebration. When I convert, I want to be a good Jew but sneak in Christmas." The converts who celebrate Christmas strip it of religious symbolism. Another

woman refers to her celebration in this way:

"Christmas is devoid of religious meaning. We will continue celebrating Christmas devoid of religious meaning." One born Jew whose family celebrated Christmas stated:

"As a non-religious Jewish family, we had Santa Claus, presents, and it was great fun. You can be a good Jew and celebrate Christmas. We never connected any religious symbolism to Christmas. We will celebrate both holidays (Chanukah and Christmas), but devoid of religion."

Although our study focused on the transformation of the convert, we asked the Jewish fiances and spouses if attending the conversion program had changed their views toward Judaism. The following comments of conversion course participants indicate that the conversion experience forces the born Jew to rethink his attachment to Jewish life:

"I was into the Jewish thing until *Bar Mitzvah*. Now since my fiance is converting I enjoy getting back into it. I've learned more in the conversion course than in four years of Hebrew School."

"I've started thinking more about Judaism. For me it's been quite an education being in the course. I enjoy the exploration."

"I had no contact or interest for so long. Now I feel more contact with my background." Another born Jew makes this startling statement:

"Marrying out of your faith forces you to rethink your feelings about Judaism. It almost seems like a good thing to do."

## 6. Family Matters

We asked our respondents a variety of questions about their relationships with their parents, in-laws, and spouses. I would like to focus on one issue, namely, the relation between conversion and marital stability. Eighty percent of the respondents said that converting to Judaism helped their marriage.

These survey responses are typical:

"We observe holidays together and it helps to draw us closer at those times. Conversion has also helped to give us a better under-

standing of each other's family life and religion."

"Being of the same religion is one more thing that we share together. The observances help bring us closer together."

## 7. Becoming A Jew: Problems and Prospects

Religious conversion is a very difficult and painful experience. Conversion is frequently a trying emotional experience. For example, converts usually feel *guilty*. One convert says: "I turned my back on the tradition that nurtured me. I may be losing the truth. Celebrating Passover not Easter makes me feel guilty."

This feeling of guilt is often exacerbated by the convert's Christian friends. These friends often tell the convert that he is crazy or an outright traitor for converting.

After undergoing this self-recrimination and hostility by friends, converts expect to be welcomed with open arms by the Jewish community. When they are not accepted with cordiality, converts feel deeply hurt. One convert who was sincere and authentic in her conversion, attending religious services regularly, indicated that her Christian friends viewed her with disgust. Nonetheless, some Jews who would never enter a synagogue would still say to her:

"Once a *Goy*, always a *Goy*."

Most converts also encounter some resentment from the Jewish family into which they marry. The following anecdotal story is extreme, but contains a kernel of truth:

"Irving brings his non-Jewish fiance, Mary Ann, home to meet his mother. The mother says she will accept Mary Ann. Irving is relieved and tells his mother, 'Ma, I'm so happy. How come you're so accepting?' His mother turns to him and says, 'Irving, I'm glad you're happy. Do what you want. Now leave me alone. I'll just go upstairs and hang myself.'"

Finally, conversion causes anguish for the non-Jew's parents. Christian parents are hurt when they realize their child will not be married by a priest, their grandchildren will

not be baptized, their grandchildren will not receive communion. This deeply hurts the convert's parents.

For this reason the convert's parents should not attend the conversion ceremony. Parents will be anguished when they hear the convert renounce Christianity and agree to raise his children as Jews. In fact, in our study, the overwhelming majority (82 percent) of the parents of converts did not attend the ceremony.

Once the conversion is complete, most parents try to face the new situation. Once the resentment, anger, and hurt of the parents have subsided, parents should try to understand why their child converted. If the child is happy in his new state, parents should try to develop a good relationship with the convert and spouse. To continue to harass the convert will serve no purpose.

In conclusion, becoming a Jew is fraught

with problems. The Jewish polity has an obligation to help the convert overcome the problems inherent in his situation. Rabbis, Jewish communal workers, the spouse, the parents and family of the convert must show the newcomer compassion and understanding. We must extend to the convert a warm and heartfelt welcome and do everything possible to involve him or her in all aspects of positive Jewish living. If such a strategy is truly adopted, more non-Jews will convert to Judaism and converts will become more fully integrated into the Jewish community.

Intermarriage poses a grave threat to Jewish survival. It does, however, have one element of compensation. By welcoming converts into full membership in Jewish life, we may demonstrate that "being a Jew is the least difficult way of being truly human."<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Robert Gordis, *Love and Sex*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1978, p. 240.