



Jewish Community Studies

Apostasy Among American Jews

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Survey Information

After examining the results of this survey, it is fair to say that American Jewry is headed for some difficult and trying times ahead. The results of this study indicate that an increasing number of American Jews are identifying themselves as Christians.

The information for this study was acquired from data accumulated by the Council of Jewish Federations 1990 National Jewish Population Study. It was conducted by random digit dialing of respondents over the age of 18 in which 250,000 households were contacted and in which 125,000 were willing to participate and respond to questions asked. However, for our purposes we have chosen to include only those respondents over the age of 24 in order to allow time to make the decision to convert, an event which often takes place later in life than as a teenager. The unit for analysis in this survey is the household and not the individual.

Also of importance in the evaluation of this material is that the questions that were asked were mostly demographic in nature. What I have tried to do is to extrapolate sociological information from demographic questions. There are certain limitations to this study, however, there were enough pertinent questions asked that I was able to extract sociological information.

Although the population survey was conducted on a national level, the CJF has chosen to divide up the data gathering into modules meaning that there were certain questions that were asked to certain sections of the population and not to others. This makes general analysis of the people surveyed as a whole a difficult task.

However, with all of these difficulties noted, we were still able to conduct an interesting and efficient report on apostasy among American Jews.

Apostatizing Statues

At the root of this study is the classification of American Jewry. The first and most easily identified group is those that were born Jewish and still Judaism claim it as their faith. For the purpose of this report they will be identified as Jewish/Jewish or steadfastly Jewish. A second category is classified as those who were Jewish/JewishGS but whose first wife/husband was non-Jewish. The third category consists of those who were born Jewish but now profess no religion. They are termed Jewish/None. The last group, and the subject of this report, are those that were born Jewish and now identify themselves as Christian. They are termed Jewish/Christian. This group consists of those Jews that have actually crossed the boundary by deserting their own religion and adopting another. The chart shown below describes the proportion of cases in each category of apostasy.

Jewish/Jewish	89
Jewish/JewishGS	6
Jewish/None	1
Jewish/Christian	6

These categories define a sequence of social positions, each successive one being close to structural assimilation or conversion, the last, of course consisting of converts from Judaism from their lifetimes.

What we are attempting to analyze here is that each of these statuses, from top to bottom, indicate a decrease in Jewish identity and an increase in Christian identity. The first category, termed Jewish/Jewish includes a large number of Jews who are culturally and structurally assimilated while still professing Judaism. The second, Jewish/JewishGS indicates a boundary crossing. Intermarriage, once accepted, indicates a willingness to be part of the Christian world. Even if it is a non-conversionary marriage, this study indicates that people in this group are one step closer to conversion. There seems to be very little difference between the last two groups, the Jewish/None are simply termed as nominal Christians.

The Nature of Societal Conversion

Contemporary scholars of religious conversion, likely influenced by modern Western individualism and voluntarism and the mystique of sudden personality change, have concentrated on shifts in individuals' religious commitment, their being "born again" as new persons. In most societies in which several religions meet, personnel trickle continuously across the boundary between the faiths. Most of these passages can be adequately understood as idiosyncratic events in the lives of persons who were, not usually, marginal to their societies even before their shift of allegiance. This study is not an attempt to identify individuals who have apostatized but rather to look at the Jewish Community as whole. The reason being that individuals who convert, either through a formal conversion process or de facto by adapting another religions traditions and customs, do so usually for marginal reasons. We are more interested with the large numbers of apostatized Jews which are described in the chart below.

History has shown us that with the decline or disappearance of institutional authority within the structure of a specific community, aids in the decline or disappearance of that community. An example being the disappearance of the Zoroastrian religion. When the Muslims invaded one of their major goals was the establishment of Islam as the major religion of the world. The established their presence, including institutional authorities, wherever they conquered. Deprived of their institutional authority, Zoroastrian priesthood became Awali and within a few years after that they became assimilated into Muslim society. When such a situation occurs members of the conquered group will search for another source of legitimate authority in order to sustain social order. With the Zoroastrian religion this new authority was forced on them by the Muslim, but within the United States it occurred by Jews voluntarily adopting civil law rather than obeying halacha.

Attempting to Trace the Causes of Apostasy

As one may be led to assume from previous historical experiences, it is not the underprivileged or deprived that lead the way to a new religion. It is natural to think that those who are unhappy chose to blame the institutions or cultural factors in their life and leave them searching for a new and better solution. However, as this study indicates, there is no correlation between economic status and apostasy. On the contrary, we find that it is usually the elite within society that lead the conversion process with the other strata of

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society following behind them. This information has become a cause of great worry among Jewish Community leaders. If apostasy could be associated with one or two people converting every now and then we could say that this has been occurring through the years for centuries. However, when a mass conversion occurs lead by the elite of society and bringing along with them the lower statuses, it is a cause for great fear for the future of American Jewry.

The numbers are a valid cause for fear that we are losing our religion, despite the fact that it may come in stages or even generations. When we discuss the apostatized Jews, we are talking about Converts Out and Jewish Parentage/Background within other Current Religion or a total of 615,000 or 10% of the people survey who were born Jewish and no longer consider themselves Jews.

Although this is a one-generation survey we have asked questions about the respondents upbringing, including the religiousness of the home and of the respondents parents. There appears to be some connection between apostasy and the home, but this topic requires further research before anything definitive can be stated. We have not yet begun to explore in depth questions about the children of converts, but we have information that suggests that if a Jewish parent is married to a non-Jewish spouse (i.e. they are located in group 2 or Jewish/JewishGs), the next generation is likely to be in the group located below that (i.e. either the Jew/None group proclaiming no religion or the Jew/Christian group of converts). It should also be noted that the chart below indicated that a home which claims no religion is as likely to produce a Christian convert as is a Christian environment.

Influence of Religion In Which Person Was Raised on Apostasy Type

Apostasy Type	Religion in Which Raised (in percents)		
	Jewish	Christian	None
Jewish/Jewish	92	38	43
Jewish/JewishGs	6	15	20
Jewish/None	1	18	8
Jewish/Christian	2	29	30
Total People	(1611)	(34)	(40)

From this chart one is able to tell that of the 1,685 people, all of which were born Jewish, 34 of them were raised as Christians and

40 were raised with no religion in the household.

The Nature of Apostasy

It has also been assumed by many that the conversion of a people is a gradual process influenced by foreign elements being brought into society and that it is the decision of a few individuals on the part of the collective. In reality, it is a very quick and spontaneous event which takes place the moment a new structural authority is instituted. After the initial revolutionary change, a slower process of evolution takes place in which the assimilation both cultural and structural begins.

Crossing the Borders - Assimilation

Societal conversion is actually the assimilation of one group into another. However, one must distinguish between structural assimilation and cultural assimilation. The definition of structural assimilation is a change of the boundary of the groups in the restructuring of the social roles and the merging of social relationships, institutions and organizations of the respective groups. An example being the willingness of the American Jewish community to adopt civil law as the basis for the structure of their lives rather than *halakhah*. Cultural assimilation involves accepting symbols, a life style or a form of dress through which the group identifies itself. A Christmas tree is such a symbol which is used to represent Christianity. In general, there is a process involved in which I believe that structural assimilation precedes cultural assimilation.

Intermarriage

By now it is a known fact that a major route to conversion is by intermarriage. However, intermarriage does not necessary lead to conversion. Some 56 percent of the intermarriages are non-conversionary. That is to say that Jews who marry Christians do not usually convert. Most of the people that convert in intermarriages are Christians who convert to Judaism. Nonetheless, it is a first step on the road to apostasy. Regardless of whether they actually go through conversion process the result for the following generation is clear. The children of those marriages, essentially 80% of those marry Christians and essentially melt into Christian society.

The percentage of Jews who are accepting of intermarriages has increased significantly during the past years. 78% of the steadfast Jews, 96% of those with Gentile spouses, 100% of those with no religion and 98% of converts to Christianity were accepting of intermarriage. This is an indication that an overwhelming majority of the people questioned, including steadfast Jews, are accepting of intermarriage.

Significant Research Findings

By using a series of Gunman scales and selected variables, I attempted to measure the degree to which Judaism had been and was still a part of the respondents' lives. The first item I used to test Jewishness among the respondents' was Jewish education. I attempted to measure the intellectual cognitive involvement of the respondent in Jewish life. The steadfast Jews scored the highest with 32% of the people questioned responding that they have either gone to a Jewish school or they read Jewish books. The second group, those married to a gentile, scored 16%. It is not unusual that those that proclaimed no religion or those that claimed Christianity both scored 0%. However, this category does not provide sufficient information to make them apostates. It is not enough that they have little or no Jewish education, in order for them to be considered apostates they must actually denounce their religion.

Apostasy is associated with political attitude. Part of the broader theory of societal conversion is that an anti-establishment, liberal or revolutionary sector of the host society recruits members of the minority who, thereby, adopt liberal attitudes. This seems to be reflected here. American Jewry has been generally defined as liberally but when questioning the respondents in this survey we have found converts to be the most liberal of all. Below is a chart of the percentages of respondents that considered themselves liberal when asked.

Jewish/Jewish	48%
Jewish/JewishGS	44%
Jewish/None	33%
Jewish/Christian	65%

The liberal here may be described as critical of both the Jewish and non-Jewish societies. This makes him/her apt to disengage from one

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society and cross the boundaries into another. When this actually occurs and the conversion takes place, the apostate usually finds themselves in a liberal sections of the other religion. For example, when a Jew converts to Christianity they will most likely find themselves in the main-line Protestant community, rather than in a fundamentalist atmosphere, because they Protestant community is likely to be more accepting of converts.

When comparing the types of organizations people belong to and the types of philanthropies to which they donate a picture emerges similar to the ones pictured above. As you move from the top of the chart of classifications down to the bottom, you find that the most steadfast Jew donates the most to Jewish philanthropies and organizations and the convert donates the least. The respondents were asked about their membership to Jewish and non-Jewish organizations. The answers were then classified into belonging to only Jewish, both Jewish and non-Jewish and only non-Jewish. Of the entire sample of people, 32% responded to belonging to only non-Jewish organizations. The breakdown within that 32% is as follows:

Jewish/Jewish	29%
Jewish/JewishGS	46%
Jewish/None	56%
Jewish/Christian	64%

The percentages, as I stated above, are indicative of the stages that occur during conversion. As part of cultural assimilation the convert replaces Jewish activities with Christian ones.

A similar picture occurs when comparing the allocation of funds to philanthropies. The respondents were questions about whether they gave to Jewish philanthropies, non-secular philanthropies or both. 27% of the respondents questions replied that they give only to secular charities. The results are as follows:

Jewish/Jewish	24%
Jewish/JewishGS	42%
Jewish/None	47%
Jewish/Christian	73%

These numbers also indicate a natural progression towards assimilation into the Christian community. The most steadfast Jews (including those on the marginal end) donate the least to non-Jewish causes and converts donate the most. Although these funds may not be going to Christian causes, they are none-the-less being taken away from Jewish causes.

A natural progression occurs during conversion in which there is the decrease in the attendance of synagogue. When questioned 55% of the respondents replied that they never attend synagogue or do so only a few times a year. Within that 55%, the breakdown is as follows:

Jewish/Jewish	53%
Jewish/JewishGS	70%
Jewish/None	100%
Jewish/Christian	95%

We do not have information on the five percent of converts that do attend synagogue, but we it is likely that they are either attending with their spouses, friends or Jewish parents. While disengagement from the synagogue is part of the reorganization of social relations, like a lack of Jewish education, it is not enough to consider someone a convert. In order to really consider someone converted they not only must abandon their religion including the synagogue, but they must begin to take on Christianity and the Catholic church. As part of the cultural assimilation that occurs the synagogue becomes replaced with the church.

The study also allowed a comparative measure of synagogue and church attendance. The respondents were classified into those that attend synagogue only, those that attend church and synagogue and those that attend only church. 43% of the respondents attend both church and synagogue. However, from the numbers list below we cannot tell how often and why Jews will attend church. What is evident from the percentages listed below is that are many what we could term "marginal Jews", those are Jews who fall into the Jew/Jew category but on the border of moving out of that category and towards apostasy.

Jewish/Jewish	42%
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Jewish/JewishGS	52%
Jewish/None	n.a.
Jewish/Christian	39%

The survey has also shown that the type interpersonal relations one maintains is directly relevant to apostasy. The most assimilated into Christian society a Jew is, the easier the transition becomes from Judaism to Christianity. By socializing with Christians, living in primarily Christian communities, Jews become assimilated quicker and the possibility for conversion rises. A Guttman scale was formed of three items: one referring to the proportion of close friends who are Jewish, a second to the extent to which the neighborhood is Jewish and third to the importance of the neighborhood being Jewish. Those that replied that they had few Jewish friends and lived and liked living in a gentile neighborhood is as follows:

Jewish/Jewish	22%
Jewish/JewishGS	53%
Jewish/None	50%
Jewish/Christian	59%

With the exception of the steadfast Jew, all of the three following groups feel comfortable in a non-jewish environment and with non-Jewish people.

While at the collective level, structural assimilation is prior to cultural, on the individual level cultural assimilation recognizes the collective structural assimilation that has already taken place. Cultural change may prepare the individual for adapting his position to that of the group. For this reason, it may precede that actual shift in membership of the individual. The apostate draws away from Jewish expressive activities. The sequence of apostasy statuses reflects this to an increasing degree. For example there are many Jewish families who not only do not light candles on Hanukkah but will put up a Christmas tree in their homes. Because so many of the steadfast Jews or so called Jewish/Jewish do not observe Jewish rituals and holidays yet still consider themselves Jewish we must distinguish between not observing Jewish tradition or culture and beginning to do something Christian in its place.

The first Gunman scale was used to measure what we have termed

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the Holiness tradition, that is the attitude of Judaism to the sanctification of nature and of time. The specific items used in the questioning were Kosher meat, separation of milk and meat utensils and carrying money on shabbat. You will see from the numbers below that most of the community has abandoned these traditions, including the so called steadfast Jew. 60% of the respondents did none of the above. 25% admitted to buying Kosher meat while 10% maintain kosher homes and 6% keep the sabbath. However, among those that do at least two or three of the traditions mentioned above we find that only a minority of the steadfast Jews are committed to the traditions above.

Jewish/Jewish	18%
Jewish/JewishGS	2%
Jewish/None	1%
Jewish/Christian	2%

The next scale was used to measure home observances. It consists of four items: attending a Pesach seder, lighting Hanukkah candles, fasting on Yom Kippur and lighting sabbath candles. Again we find not only a low percentage among steadfast Jews but a natural decrease in occurrence as you move from steadfast Jew through the stages to convert. 36% of the respondents do all of the above, 31% does one, two or three and 33% does none. Of those who do three or four of the items it can be expected that the steadfast Jews would have the highest percentage and converts the lowest.

Jewish/Jewish	57%
Jewish/JewishGS	26%
Jewish/None	6%
Jewish/Christian	0%

It is obvious from the numbers above that the decline in home expressions precisely parallels the sequence of apostasy statutes. The next scale measures items less religiously oriented and more communally oriented. Respondents were asked if they read Jewish literature (most often a Jewish newspaper), if they observed Purim or if they attended an event for Israeli independence day and lastly to Jewish education. Surprisingly, 74% of the respondents do not participate in any of these. Of those who do participate, the

sequence noted numerous times above, appears again here.

Jewish/Jewish	28%
Jewish/JewishGS	12%
Jewish/None	0%
Jewish/Christian	0%

To approach the issue of apostasy from a different perspective, below we observe the percentages of respondents who have a Christmas tree. Rather than question what Jewish rituals and traditions they do observe, let us examine this Christian ritual and analyze the results.

Jewish/Jewish	15%
Jewish/JewishGS	36%
Jewish/None	83%
Jewish/Christian	52%

The fact that those respondents who claimed no religious affiliation had the highest percentage of those who have Christmas trees indicates the power of Christianity to pervade even into non-religious households.

A Pessimistic Outlook for American Jewry

One may conclude from the percentages revealed in this study that there is definitely a sequence of apostatizing statuses. Within the steadfast Jew category, lies a significant number of marginal Jews who may eventually move down the categories and end up being a convert. With the replacement of religious authority or halacha with civil authority the seeds for apostasy among Jews have already been sewn. A majority of American Jews have begun to replace their source of tradition and life style from a Jewish background to that of the assimilated Christian. Christianity is the norm in the United States. In an effort to keep up with the norm, many Jews are finding it easier to adopt their way of life and even their religion in order to be assimilated. The information in this study provides a bleak view

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for the future of American Jewry. A revolution is taking place in the American Jewish and the majority of people are not even aware it and its potentially disastrous results.

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