

Ambivalence towards Converts in Judaism

Arthur Johnston

Walter Sobchak: I told those fucks down at the league office a thousand times that I don't roll on Shabbos!

Donny: What's Shabbos?

Walter Sobchak: Saturday, Donny, is Shabbos, the Jewish day of rest. That means that I don't work, I don't get in a car, I don't fucking ride in a car, I don't pick up the phone, I don't turn on the oven, and I sure as shit [shouts]

Walter Sobchak: don't fucking roll! Shomer shabbos!

The Dude: Walter...

Walter Sobchak: Shomer fucking shabbos.

The Dude: Oh fuck it.

Walter Sobchak: I'm saying, I see what you're getting at, Dude, he kept the money. My point is, here we are, it's shabbas, the sabbath, which I'm allowed to break only if it's a matter of life or death...

The Dude: Will you come off it, Walter? You're not even fucking Jewish, man.

Walter Sobchak: What the fuck are you talkin' about?

The Dude: Man, you're fucking Polish Catholic...

Walter Sobchak: What the fuck are you talking about? I converted when I married Cynthia! Come on, Dude!

The Dude: Yeah, yeah, yeah...

Walter Sobchak: And you know this!

The Dude: Yeah, and five fucking years ago you were divorced.

Walter Sobchak: So what are you saying? When you get divorced you turn in your library card? You get a new license? You stop being Jewish?

The Dude: It's all a part of your sick Cynthia thing, man. Taking care of her fucking dog. Going to her fucking synagogue. You're living in the fucking past.

Walter Sobchak: Three thousand years of beautiful tradition, from Moses to Sandy Koufax...

[shouting]

Walter Sobchak: You're goddamn right I'm living in the fucking past!

The Big Lebowski, Joel & Ethan Coen 1998

Introduction

When Abraham accepted the covenant from God, and started to find converts among the Canaanites and the Semites there was no ambivalence toward converts. It was a religion composed of converts. However once the first generation of Jews was born and grew up, and the original converts died I'm sure the difference between converts and Jews by birth became apparent. Over the centuries a level of ambivalence grew between Jews by birth and converts. Converts were necessary to the creation of the religion. They were also necessary during the oppression of the Jewish people. When Jewish spouses were not available gentiles married Jews and raised their children Jewish. At times in history there was a call to converts, and at other times they were rejected. This ambivalence can be seen in the history of the Jewish people, in outreach groups, in the writings of converts, and in the contemporary debate over Jewish identity.

The Jewish religion has evolved a series of beliefs and customs in order to squelch the ambivalence toward converts. It is believed all converts are immediate descendents of Abraham this, if believed, would eliminate the fact that converts do not have Jewish biological parents. There is also the belief that all convert's souls were present at Sinai during the delivery of God's laws. These two rules are meant to seal the convert to the Jewish people body and soul. Furthermore it is believed that converts may have a purer connection to their choice of Judaism, because they made the choice free from the intimidation of the lightning, thunder, fire, smoke, and rumbling earth. It is believed that the Jews physically present at Sinai followed Moses more out of fear and less out of the modern convert who feels the silent call of the shofar in his heart. Additionally there are rules that govern that once the conversion is complete it is total and the convert is bestowed with all legal rights from that point forward. There are even stipulations that state it is improper to ask the nature of the origin of their Judaism. Given all these traditions and rules concerning converts it seems obvious that the religion has been struggling for years to deal with the ambivalence toward converts. Later I will begin with a brief history of converts in order to demonstrate how this ambivalence to converts has been waxing and waning since the beginning of Judaism.

The Debate over Converts

Contemporary Judaism demonstrates ambivalence toward converts. On the one hand there are those within Judaism who see converts as the solution to the problem of

intermarriage. If more gentile spouses convert this will stem the tide of Jews who become unaffiliated to Judaism, and therefore their children become less observant Jews. Studies show that homes containing converts are more observant than homes with a non-Jewish parent, and in some cases are more observant than homes where there are two Jewish by birth parents. There are also those who believe that attracting converts is a way to counter the loss of Jews from the genocide of World War II. Lastly this side believes that Jews are commanded to spread Judaism. On the other side there are Jews who believe that resources are better spent on retaining Jews by birth who are in danger of becoming unaffiliated to the religion. Some feel that this is only natural because converts only represent a watered down version of Judaism. Still others feel that it is not possible to truly convert. They believe that true Judaism can only be attained through birth. The convert is simultaneously called to and rejected.

Eighty to Ninety percent of converts to Judaism do so because they have fallen in love with a Jew. Perhaps they think conversion will make getting married easier, or raising their children easier, or getting along with their in-laws easier, but it also can make life very difficult. The conversion may never end the strife between one's in laws, while it may begin troubles with one's own parents. The trouble that many converts do not see coming is from their new community. Many converted Jews don't see this coming, but they quickly learn that it is a fact that one has to deal with. Being the rookie is a consequence of joining any new group, but often as time moves on one loses the newness that they once retained and eventually they blend into the group. I converted ten years ago and some days, at my synagogue, I feel like I just walked out of the mikveh. I feel have that I have made no ground at being accepted as a Jew on the same level as my

fellow Jews by birth. Like most converts, when I converted to Judaism for personal reasons. I did not convert in order to become part of the larger Jewish community. I wanted to share the same religion as my wife and children. This is known as a social conversion. I converted because of my relationship to another Jew. I admit that the impetus for converting was not initially based on my attraction to the Jewish religion. I probably never would have converted if it were not for the fact that I fell in love with a Jewish woman. However, over time, I gained a curiosity of Judaism, which grew into an attraction that became a commitment to the religion. When I finally converted to Judaism I was surprised to find that many Jews by birth seemed to treat me as something other than a regular Jew. For my Capstone I wanted to explore whether this was a phenomenon or a common experience for converts to Judaism.

A Brief History of Jewish Conversion

God commands three types of Love: Love for God, Love of the friend or neighbor, and the love of the proselyte. However the convert is not always loved. The Talmud contains two versions of how to relate to converts. The story of Hillel is one of nurturing and support, while the story of Shammai is based on impatience and rejection. A historical and influential set of guidelines dealing with conversion was codified by Maimonides. His ruling dictated that once converted, the convert was to be extended full rights.¹ Despite this the role of, and legitimacy of the convert is still argued over. There is also the tradition that explains that all Jews from all time to have been at Sinai and that the souls of converts were also there.² This notion explains why Jews by birth and converts should occupy equal footing within Judaism.

¹ Weiss p.188

² Shires p. 24

The current atmosphere of ambiguity and ambivalence over converts is not a new one. It is part of the history of Judaism. The debate over Jewish conversion and intermarriages is a very old one and dates back through many centuries to the book of Ruth and Ezra. The book of Ruth is the narrative of an early Jewish convert. Ruth, her sister in law, as well as her mother in law are all widows. They are living in lands outside of Israel. Ruth's mother in law, Naomi, absolves, her and her sister in law of any family obligations to stay by her side. Naomi mercifully does this because of the few prospects available to the three widows, including likely hardships. Orpah takes Naomi up on her offer while Ruth vows to stay with Naomi. The famous passage describing Ruth's commitment to Judaism is shown in the following exchange, "Do not urge me to leave you, to turn back from following you. For where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people are my people, and your God my God; where you die I will die, and there I will be buried. Thus may God do to me, and so may he do more, if anything but death separates me from you. (Ruth 1:16-17)

Some theorize that the writing of the book of Ruth was prompted by the writings in the book of Ezra. Ezra condemned intermarriages and, according to his book, forced the Israelites to abandon their non-Jewish. Ezra was a priestly scribe who is thought to have led about 5,000 Israelite exiles living in Babylon to their home city of Jerusalem in 459 BCE. Ezra is thought to have organized the ecclesiastical and civil affairs of the Israelite nation. It seems that the debate over intermarriage has been argued for 1500 years. However unlike the book of Ezra, the book of Ruth, provides a solution to the problem of intermarriage. That solution was religious conversion. Ezra observed that the men of his time began to worship the gods of their non-jewish wives. The book of Ruth

solves this problem of intermarriage by removing the the temptation of worshipping foreign gods through the conversion of spouses. There is even evidence of considerable numbers of gentiles converting to Judaism. But by the early medieval period conversion to Judaism became very difficult if not impossible, especially in Christian Europe.³

The Book of Ruth did not end the debate over intermarriage and religious conversion. Just this past Winter, at my synagogue the Rabbi felt the need to deliver a sermon on the subject. He warned of the danger of Jews who erected Christmas trees as part of their holiday celebration. He explained that despite the secular nature of Christmas it was definitely a Christian holiday that Jews had no business celebrating. In a way it was the same problem that Ezra confronted 1500 years previously when he saw men drifting from the faith because they were lured by their wives' gods.

Many Jews have become ignorant to the importance of converts in Judaism. Afterall Abraham the founder of Judaism was a convert, and who else was there for Abraham and Sarah to make into a people except the pagan non-Jewish population around them?⁴ On the festival of Shavuot which celebrates the revelation of the law, the rabbis selected, not the book of Ezra but the book of Ruth to be read to the congregation. And it is Ruth, the exemplary Jew by Choice, who is celebrated as the great-grandmother of King David from whom the messiah is to spring. Rabbi Lerner also points out that other important historical figures were Jews by choice, such as:

“Bitya, the daughter of Pharoah, and Yithro, the father in law of Moses, Zipporah, the wife of Moses, and Shifra and Puah, the Egyptian midwives who refused to obey the edict of Pahroah to murder Jewish males ans saved Jewish lives, as Jews by choice. With

³ Lerner p. 286

⁴ Lerner p. 280

pride the Talmud informs us that Rabbi Akiva, Rabbi Shemiah, and Abatalion were all decedents of proselytes.”⁵

It is clear that the present existence of the Jewish people was orchestrated through the help of important Jews by choice.

Historically conversion to Judaism has gone through many waves of acceptance and rejection. Much of Americas early Jewish practice was rooted in British Separdic social and communal structures. Because of this early American Jews were affected by the original 1290 expulsion of Jews and the subsequent 1656 readmission based on the tacit agreement not to convert Christians to Judaism. Furthermore a 1698 law made it a crime to deny Christianity. So from the very beginning the American Jewish population was predisposed against conversion. This negative attitude toward conversion continued, with many instances of those seeking conversion being rejected, until the the 1820’s. At this time the country as a whole was in a religious upheavel with many other religious groups splintering, fracturing and being created. This happened in part, because safer passage to America brought a wave of immigrants with different traditions and religions. With all of the mixing of different cultures, Jews became less of the odd man out. With all of these various religions making inroads in American acceptance there was even talk in the Jewish community that the univerlistic views of Judaism might make it an appropriate world religion. Worthy of taking on so many converts that it might become the planet’s only religion.⁶ The mass migration of the 1880’s squelched this idea.

Suddenly the Jewish population exploded from 8 million to 23 million in 1920.

Influences by the mass exodus of Russian Jews fleeing religious pogroms. The new influx of Jews were not intereseted in the univalistic views of their predecessors. This

⁵ Lerner p. 280

⁶ Kaplan p. 271

sudden expansion of Jews in America made the desire to attract converts irrelevant.

Conversion and intermarriage became non-issues.

Lastly, Converts suffer from the predicament of joining a group that is like no other in many ways. Throughout history Jews have come to be viewed from a universal perspective. People have come to view Jews as Jews first and individuals second. Because their identification is so strong it is difficult for an outsider to be recognized as one of them. Indeed Ambery wrote that we cannot change ourselves we are what we were in childhood. For that reason one can convert to Judaism, and practice Judaism, but to be a Jew is another matter. Despite the fact that Judaism may not have survived over the centuries without the contribution of converts a convert cannot inherit Judaism. A convert cannot inherit the memory of the Jewish people.

Converts who have felt Ambivalence

Andrew Buckser describes how converts feel like perpetual outsiders in his essay in "The Anthropology of religious conversion". He relates how, "A number of converts told me of a lingering sense of illegitimacy, a feeling-in many cases quite justified-that other Jews regard them as interlopers."⁷ He specifically mentions a woman named Esther who complained that she constantly had to prove her Jewishness, and it was never enough through a snide reference here or a cryptic comment there, people...repeatedly cast doubt on whether she was a genuine Jew. As a result, she says that she has to follow Jewish law with far greater care than would a born Jew. Most Jews can eat a non-kosher meal, work on Saturday, or go out with a non-Jewish man, and no one thinks anything of it. But if Esther does these things, people will question the sincerity of her conversion.

⁷ Buckser p. 80

Jewishness is a conscious identity she has deliberately chosen, but it is one in which she never feels entirely secure.⁸

Situations such as Esther's lead Buckser to believe that, "conversion, in this sense does not make one a regular Jew."⁹ In the end he concludes that conversion only succeeds in making someone a 'convert', a distinctive status that carries ongoing symbolic and practical consequences. Unfortunately for the convert, who often desires to blend into the fold, instead he often discovers that his conversion was more than just a rite of passage, but a permanent feature of himself. Years after my conversion, my Father-in-law persisted in calling me 'gentile'. My wife's Uncle continued to tell me, every time I saw him that it was so funny that I converted. He would never explain why it was funny; he always acted like I should just know.

Ironically Esther viewed herself as Jewish because of what she felt was an ethnic link to the religion. That link came in the form of her father who was Jewish. Her mother was not. Unfortunately for her the laws governing patrilineal Jewishness are less consistently interpreted as compared to matrilineal ties. Esther sought to convert as merely a means to tie up a loose end just in case her Jewry was ever called into question she could prove her full status as a Jew due to her conversion. Interestingly potential converts, in general, often seek the most stringent methods of conversion so that there conversion will be more real, and less likely to be questioned. Ironically this doesn't help. At Convert.org one can explore the potential of having an actual Jew in the family tree.

⁸ Buckser p. 80

⁹ Buckser p. 80

As it turns out I had a quite an orthodox conversion for a reform synagogue. It is not a process I sought out, I just followed the rabbi's lead, but now I am comfortable with strictness of it. Although I was anxious at the thought of being naked in a mikvah in the presence of my brit dom it turned out to be a moving moment for myself and the others involved. The moment felt charged with supernatural power. I can't say that I felt Jewish immediately after, but I did feel a deeper connection to my wife, and to all Jewish people. The hat ta fat dom was another story. Although I had been circumcised at birth the Rabbi thought it was a good idea to go through a ritual circumcision. Despite what I have read in other accounts my experience was not painless. I will say I'm satisfied I took that extra step because it solidified the strictness of my conversion as well as the pain made me feel like I was willing to make sacrifices for my new religion.

In Esther's case she had an extra problem the Rabbi refused to take her on. He told her to start going to services. He hinted that having a Jewish boyfriend might also be helpful. This only accomplished several failed romances. Although the Rabbi did perform her conversion it was not until after weeks of class, attending services, and meetings. Esther always viewed herself as a Jew and she resents the status of convert that the Rabbi conferred upon her. She felt helpless. She feared that he would not complete her ceremony. She felt that she was being held hostage.

Often potential converts are viewed with skepticism. I feel that they are held to higher standards than Jews by birth. Often potential converts are expected to have a solely spiritual desire to convert to Judaism. Converts who begin the conversion process because of a relationship to a Jew are viewed with distrust. As if the attraction to Judaism via their relationship is a reason to define their motivation as less than pure. I don't

understand this line of thinking. All of us navigate life by undertaking certain changes in our philosophical thinking. There has to be something that initiates that change. Why would someone think that falling in love was an unworthy means of introducing someone to a different religion? Why would they need to prove a better motivation for their conversion? Love is often the impetus for all changes in life.

This is the situation that Anna found her self in when she decided that she wanted to convert to Judaism in order to marry her boyfriend. People viewed her desire as a convenient way to make her marriage more simple (ironically conversion makes your life anything but simple). She found that many felt that those who undergo social conversion do not take their responsibility to their new religion as seriously as compared to people who convert to Judaism solely out of self-discovery. Social conversions make up the overwhelming majority of conversions while those who convert for reasons other than family make up a very small percentage.

A popular feeling about converts like Anna goes like this: “A marriage convert like Anna cannot be expected to become truly Jewish. She may call herself a Jew, and she may observe some of the rituals, but she will remain at heart a gentile. Though the conversion will make them [her children] halakic Jews, it will not make them spiritual Jews, and they are likely to shed their Judaism when they grow up. If she and Oskar divorce, experience suggests that she will return with the children to the family and church of her childhood.”¹⁰ In fact Oskar stated that after Anna converted she became so scrupulous in her observances that it bordered on annoying. This situation happens to align with how households involving converts are actually run, which makes one wonder why converts threaten so many Jews by birth in positions of leadership in Jewish

¹⁰ Buckser p.75

institutions. The theory is that Jews by birth are more spiritual in their connection to Judaism, because it is all they knew from their upbringing. However this does not explain why so many Jews who are brought up as Jews, who knew of nothing else in their childhood than Judaism, eventually become unaffiliated Jews. Conversely, there are gentiles who grow up devoted to another religion only to find a deep connection to Judaism in adulthood that carries them through the rest of their life. Why then is Judaism by birth elevated above Judaism by conversion?

For those seeking to convert there are many books that contain the accounts of converts. I think that these books are published in order to support the potential convert. They offer many different versions of conversion stories so that the potential convert is bound to find a story similar to their owns, and therefore find comfort in the fact that they are not alone in their experience. Ironically today's ambivalence is so strong that it comes out in almost all of the stories I have read. Over and over converts and potential converts do not feel that they are totally accepted or that their conversion is ever genuine enough. Interestingly one editor of such a book felt that often converts come from dysfunctional homes. Another study attempted to determine the stages of change that the convert undergoes, and reported that those changes were most similar to those who were overcoming battles with obesity and drug addiction.¹¹

In the words of Converts

There are a plethora of books available to the convert, which are full of the real accounts of those who are in the conversion process. Although these tales are meant to be reassuring to the convert they are riddled with the converts experience with

¹¹ Bockian, Glenwick, & Bernstein

ambivalent attitudes. The ambivalent reaction to converts is so commonplace that even in these books that are supposed to offer solace cannot escape from it.

“I’m not sure I ever will feel *completely* Jewish though. I’ll feel honored to be welcomed into the family of Judaism, but I’ll feel like an adopted child. No matter how much I may wish I were Jewish, it’s not my history; it’s not my story...But if God is listening, my sense is God’s very happy with my entrance into Judaism” *Jill*¹²

“I had this feeling of self-consciousness; it is hard to believe it, almost as if I didn’t deserve it.” *Jill*¹³

“I never expected to connect with the spiritual side of Judaism. I never even imagined that there could be that spiritual connection.” *Ellen*¹⁴

“He [Ellen’s husband] became worried that Max [their son] would not be considered Jewish by everyone, that the Orthodox would not accept his conversion (or mine).” *Ellen*¹⁵

I wondered if I would be comfortable, if the Orthodox would welcome me, someone who was clearly not Jewish by birth. Would they accept me?...Part of me was apprehensive, and other part was curious” *Ellen*¹⁶

“Other Jews who are nonobservant think I’m crazy for practicing the customs and laws. ‘Why would you want to do that?’ they ask. They haven’t chosen to practice Judaism for themselves, so they wonder why anyone else would...One day at services, I was feeling sad at being an outsider and wanted to be like everyone else.” *Laura*¹⁷

“I underwent a conservative (rather than a reform) conversion because I wanted my conversion to be accepted by more people.” *Laura*¹⁸

“Peter had converted to Judaism before they got married, but he felt like an outsider because he thought he didn’t know enough about his new faith. He yearned to feel like he really belonged. He and Danielle enrolled in classes I held at their synagogue and then continued to study with me privately. Eventually he asked me to prepare him for a more traditional conversion.”¹⁹

¹² Weiss p. 56

¹³ Weiss p. 60

¹⁴ Weiss p. 66

¹⁵ Weiss p. 67

¹⁶ Weiss p. 68

¹⁷ Weiss p. 80

¹⁸ Weiss p. 81

¹⁹ Weiss p. 84

“I wanted to undergo a conservative Jewish because it would be accepted by more Jews, but the rabbi the rabbi said two words to me that brought terror to my heart: Brit Milah, the ritual circumcision that every male undergoes.” Peter²⁰

“At first Danielle’s father was upset that I wasn’t Jewish. After she brought me home for dinner, he told her, “I never want him back again.” But later he warmed up and paid for a terrific wedding. I felt close to him.” Peter²¹

“But the mohel we contacted was not satisfied with my reform conversion; he wouldn’t let me fully participate in the ceremony as the father. I could have looked for another mohel, but I was awed by my son’s anticipated birth that I was inspired to take private instruction in Judaism from Rabbi Weiss and undergo a Conservative conversion. So I had a ritual circumcision after all. I finally decided to grin and bear it. The same mohel who would circumcise my son performed it.” Peter²²

“I grew up thinking I was going to marry someone Jewish; I was never given a choice or an option. In high school I can remember falling head over heels with a non-Jew and my mother losing sleep over it and having bad dreams. ‘If a Jewish boy asks you out, you have to take that date,’ she argued. We were not observant, but culturally, ethnically, we identified as Jews.” Danielle²³

“There are some Jews who may like me but who don’t think of me as a Jew because I was not born Jewish. In the kosher store, I may wonder how many are looking at me as if I am not a Jew. The people I have had the most trouble with, however, are secular Jews, or women who resent me because they assume I have married a Jewish guy, and they have some anxiety about finding one themselves” Anna²⁴

“Recently I went to an Orthodox Jewish synagogue, and it was one of the most spiritual experiences of my life, just being around true believers. I felt unworthy...” Anna²⁵

“Judaism doesn’t feel alien to me; it feels comfortable. But in saying that, I’m very hesitant; I’m nervous in saying that. In a sense I feel like I will always be an outcast no matter what religion I anchor myself in.” Anna²⁶

“But I’m very cynical, very judgmental, of those who convert to please a spouse.” Anna²⁷

“Here’s my dilemma: I want my own children to be born Jewish and not to a Christian woman. I don’t want to be in a fake Jewish wedding; that would make me feel like a fraud.” Anna²⁸

²⁰ Weiss p. 87

²¹ Weiss p. 86-87

²² Weiss p.88

²³ Weiss p. 89-90

²⁴ Weiss p. 102-103

²⁵ Weiss p. 115

²⁶ Weiss p. 116

²⁷ Weiss p. 118

“Don’t feel as if you have an obligation to tell people that you’re converting, that you’re not Jewish by Birth. The challenge is to fit in and to not be treated any differently at all.”
*Ezra*²⁹

I don’t fully think of myself as a Jew yet. I’d say I’m in limbo right now, like the man without a country. *Susan*³⁰

“Maybe marrying a convert wasn’t the ultimate dream that every Jewish family has for their son, but because I’m making the effort to convert, they’re caring and understanding and willing to meet me halfway.” *Susan*³¹

Outreach

Nowhere else is this ambivalence more visible as it is in outreach movements.

Harold Schulweis a rabbi and author of *For those who can’t believe*. Schulweis encounters many congregants who desire his services to officiate over a wedding regardless of the fact that they are not religiously observant. Although this is frustrating he has discovered that many of his conversations with such couples have unearthed true feelings for spiritual discovery and rediscovery. This is how he was motivated to create an extensive outreach/inreach program to help those who similarly needed guidance on their path to spirituality. A recent set of advertisements lead an audience of 400 – 500 people to listen to a lecture series delivered by Orthodox, Conservative, Reformed and Reconstructionist clergy. After the seventeen-week series individuals were given the opportunity to explore the denomination, which most appealed to them, to further investigate the possibility of religious conversion. This option would seem to satisfy opponents of programs that reach out for convert, because it reaches in to the disaffiliated as well.

²⁸ Weiss p. 119

²⁹ Weiss p. 131

³⁰ Weiss p.152

³¹ Weiss p.153

Schulweiss admits that racism is at play when Jewish borns do not fully accept Jews by choice as full Jews and this he feels blocks potential converts from contacting him. He points to a rude joke that he has heard more than once as proof. “Do you know the difference between a virgin and a shiksa? Once a shiksa always a shiksa.” His programs are trying to break down these stereotypes from the inside and the outside.

A recent development in the attitudes toward Jewish religious conversion was marked by recent changes in policy by the governing bodies of reformed and conservative Jews. As I stated earlier a unique quality of the Jewish religion has been the ‘hands off’ approach when it came to pressuring the non-Jewish spouses to convert. The President of the Union of Reform Judaism, the largest and most liberal of the three American branches with 1.5 million members, recently said, “The time has come to reverse direction by returning to public conversations and doing all the other things to encourage conversion in our synagogues.” The fear among Jews, which has been prevalent for many years, is the apparent watering down of American Jewry. The 2000-1 National Jewish Population Survey reported 47% of Jews intermarry. Although this is an increase from the previous survey it does demonstrate a leveling off of the more dramatic out marrying rates from the 1950’s to the 1970’s. The real fear in intermarriage for Jews lies in the fact that only a third of the children from a mixed Jewish marriage will describe themselves as Jewish.³² An interesting move by the conservative denomination is calling into question all children from mixed marriage’s Jewishness.³³ He is calling on the conservative movement to disregard prior Halakic precedence and instead require

³² Luo p. 1

³³ Schaalman p.76

parents to prove that they are raising their children Jewish in order for the congregation to recognize their Jewishness.

In most congregations the part of the synagogues responsible for maintaining ties with members of mixed marriages and inter-religious dating partners has been referred to as outreach groups. Outreach groups exist because Jewish institutions feel that they must do something to maintain connections with Jews in homes that are being raised without entirely Jewish influences. Predominantly the theory is that intermarriage is an inevitable fact, and it cannot be stopped, so the least that Jewish organizations can do is to maintain ties to the intermarriage couple so that some sense of Jewish influences can be impressed upon them.

Recently the effectiveness of Outreach programs has been called into question. Some feel that they have no value at all, and some Jewish leaders are calling for their abolishment. This is not to say those congregations are looking to close a path toward conversion to Judaism. Many congregations have a program in place called Keruv (a coming together), which solely acts as the program for those, interested in and actively seeking conversion. However there seems to be mounting evidence that outreach programs do little to encourage conversion, and may actually serve to promote a feeling of belonging for the non-Jew so that their potential desire to fit in through the conversion process may already be satisfied through the programs of the outreach group making conversion less urgent for them.

Jewish Institutions are in the business of promoting Jewish culture. The problem with outreach programs is that they may not help in that goal. Originally created from the basic human nature to promote acceptance and tolerance outreach programs do not

seem to attract couples interested in creating a more Jewish household. Instead of creating more Jewish households outreach programs might have had the unintentional effect of creating less Jewish homes. Keruv groups serve as a gathering point for non-Jews openly interested in conversion. However outreach programs may be more for the couple who merely want to feel comfortable at the congregation. The non-Jewish member can learn about Judaism and understand but rarely do they take the next step toward conversion. For these people outreach programs are merely educational. A place to learn about what is going on in religious services, what the kids are doing in religious school, or what other events are going on in the congregation. Many Outreach groups have moved away from the goal of helping people create a Jewish family and instead just want to promote comfort. For example, the Cleveland Jewish Community Center organizes a program where, according to the local Jewish Weekly, “interfaith families can discuss such topics deciding religion-if any-children will be exposed to” and the co-director is quoted as saying, “We feel it would be a place where people wouldn’t be pressured to make a decision one way or the another”³⁴ With such liberal programs, although they are caring and comforting, the fear is that they may by having a destructive effect on the Jewish family. Statistics clearly point out that children of mixed marriages tend to have less of a Jewish identity than those from both Jewish parents.

Another aspect of outreach programs that can be detrimental is their effect on how they create new perceptions about the synagogue even outside of the outreach program. Synagogues exist in a large part from the membership dues they collect. The more dues a synagogue can collect the more prosperous it is, and thus more services it can provide. Therefore it is very tempting for the synagogue to become very user friendly to its

³⁴ Liebman, Fishman p.22

potential members. Mixed married couples, especially, shop around for synagogues, which are extra tolerant and have broader programs for individuals that outmarry.³⁵ “As the Reform/Reconstructionist Rabbi David Polish pointed out, “Outreach to mixed marrieds, where successful, will have a transforming effect upon Jewish Institutions, possibly diluting Jewish content.”³⁶ The fear is that not only are outreach programs ineffective at converting potential Jews, but that they affect a change in the overall presentation of Judaism at the Synagogue. To not make non-Jewish members of a congregation feel left out synagogues downplay the ethnic parts of Judaism while playing up its more universalistic components. Having a strong Jewish identity is seen as the key to people creating a Jewish home and hopefully children who may one day marry Jewish individuals. The fear is that the philosophy of outreach programs are creating a greater affect on the entire programming of a synagogue. An affect, which could weaken the entire Jewish Identity of the congregation. My fear is that converts are seen negatively through their prior association with outreach groups.

Towards the end of their article Liebman and Fishman discuss that all these challenges are perhaps part of a general problem in American society, and that is the focus on the self and how we seek to satisfy our needs. In this post modern material culture people seek to find satisfaction despite the moral definitions set down traditionally by elders and those in authority. Synagogues like other institutions have bent to satisfy its members. Standards have been dropped in order to create more efficient marketing. This has created a rise in personal Judaism and a decrease in ethnic Judaism. Liebman and Fishman sum it up by stating, “In this climate of opinion, there

³⁵ Liebman, Fishman p. 26

³⁶ Liebman, Fishman p.21

are no impediments to intermarriage. From this personalist perspective, true love, the ultimate immediate personal experience, far supercedes the historical weight of ethnic ties.”³⁷

There is data that suggests that this line of thinking is not based in reality. For one thing studies suggest that Jewish converts do not simply go through the motions in their ritual observances , but actually perform rituals at a higher rate than Jews by birth. According to the 1990 National Jewish population survey marriages that contain a convert light Shabbat candles 33 % to 30 % for homogenous Jewish marriages. Marriages including converts also attend seders 86% of the time as opposed to 84% of the time for homogenous Jewish marriages. Channukah candles are lit 89% of the time in relationships involving a convert as compared to homogenous Jewish marriages where Chanukah candles are lit 82 % of the time. Furthermore marriages that include a convert belong to 1-2 Jewish organizations 34% of the time compared to Jewish homogenous marriages where 31 % are members of 1-2 Jewish organizations. Lastly 72% of marriages between a Jew by Birth and a convert belong to a synagogue as opposed to 59% of Homogenous Jewish marriages. It seems apparent that it is a myth that somehow converts have a weaker connection to their Jewishness than Jews by Birth. In fact it appears that they are more dedicated to Judaism than Jews by Birth. It seems to make sense to me that someone who makes the decision as a mature adult to commit themselves to a certain course of action will do it with more consistency that someone whose religion was chosen for them at birth, and they may tend to take it for granted as they mature.

³⁷ Liebman, Fishman p.27

Ephraim Z. Buchwald who is founder of the National Jewish Outreach Program, is an example of a Jewish leader who is making life difficult for potential converts. Buchwald recently wrote that, “as long as there is a single Jewish child or adult who needs to be reached, it is immoral, I insist on the word, yes, immoral to expend Jewish resources trying to convince a gentile to put on a Yarmulke.”³⁸ Immoral is very strong word, and it is the word chosen by National Jewish Outreach founder to describe the effort to help people convert to Judaism. I think it points to the fact that there are those individuals in positions of power within Judaism who believe that Jews by birth occupy a position of higher status in Judaism compared to Jews by conversion. This leads me to ponder why being Jewish through a genetic link would be better than becoming Jewish as a consequence of your own choice.

In Stephen Dubner’s 1990 Book Turbulent Souls he discusses the revelation of discovering that his parent’s were both born and raised Jewish. For most his life Dubner believed that his parents were both born to the fervent Catholicism that they practiced. Dubner was even a altar boy. However, after his father’s death he discovered that his parent’s were both born Jewish. The bulk of the book is about Dubner’s struggle to determine his true identity. He pondered whether he was Catholic according to his child raising and his parents conversion, or was he Jewish because of his parent’s birthright. After a long exploration of Judaism and an extended family that he did not know about Dubner decided that he was Jewish. Not only does Dubner make this judgment for himself, but he also receives the blessings of some of the most orthodox Jewish figures in New York. Most importantly for this paper, these Jewish officials tell Dubner that he does not need any type of conversion to become part of a religion that had previously

³⁸ Buchwald p.277

been alien to him. The fact that Dubner had two Jewish born parents superceded all arguments that he needed a conversion because he had no previous spiritual or educational connection to Judaism. It seems that there is something magical about a person's genetic origins that subordinates any magic that is created from the spark of intuition that comes from inside someone who realizes that they must disregard all of their religious history in order to become a Jew.

Over and over again one is confronted with the idea that converts are subservient to Jews by Birth because of their stronger ties to the ethnic side of Judaism. One would speculate then that having ethnic ties to Judaism must create a special sort of Jew that can develop and strengthen the Jewish environment. One would think that ethnic Jews are more likely to perpetuate the Jewish people as well as their institutions, and their way of life. After all, a major dilemma in the Jewish community is the problem of disaffiliation. Although converts can also solve the problem of disaffiliation by creating more observant homes (which is proven by the numbers from the 1990 NJPS) ethnic Jews are viewed as the means of perpetuating the Jewish people in some better way.

Not all Jewish leaders think along the lines of Rabbi Buchwald. Stephen Lerner is the founder and director for the Center for Conversion to Judaism. Rabbi Lerner feels that Buchwald's view that money spent appealing to converts will only subtract from money spent to attract unaffiliated Jews is unrealistic. Rabbi Lerner admits that some converts may even suffer from subtle forms of racism when they are treated as second class Jews. He has heard Jews by birth refer to converts by saying "once a shiksa always a shiksa".³⁹ Further solidifying the feeling of some that total religious conversion is not possible, that converts cannot move beyond their convert status position. Lerner feels

³⁹ Lerner p.282

that it is a wonder that anyone converts to Judaism considering the hurdles that they have to jump in order to accomplish the feat. He points out how large the number would be if potential converts had fewer obstacles to navigate on their path toward conversion. The Rabbi who performed my conversion pointed out that, in theory, intermarriage could be beneficial for the Jewish religion, because it could potentially double the amount of Jews in the world. This notion is confirmed by Egon Mayer who found that couples tended to lean more toward Judaism than Christianity within combined marriages.

Ironically however current data suggests that one's level of Jewish Ethnicity offers very little help to those who wish to strengthen the Jewish community. Buchwald feels that it should be a natural course of action to spend more resources on keeping unaffiliated Jews in the religion. What might be the true fact is that all religions have a natural percentage of individuals who leave the religion whereas there may also be a natural average of individuals who are attracted to a religion. While it is prudent to spend a certain amount of money on retaining adherents who are born to a religion it is also practical to devote finances to those who are destined to convert to a religion. After all, the conversion process is seen by some as a way for a soul that has become disconnected from its proper place in Judaism to be reconnected in its appropriate place.

A study that attempted to find marrying patterns between Jewish siblings discovered that children did not marry other Jews as a result of their parent's affiliation with other Jews.⁴⁰ There seems to be a lot of belief in the fact that a person's Jewish identity contributes to whether they marry another Jew or not. Many people believe that one's Jewish identity is often determined by one's parent's friendship with other Jews. I

⁴⁰ Kalmijn p. 1355

suppose the theory goes like this: that children will observe their parents socializing with other Jews and this behavior will tend to make the offspring more likely to socialize with other Jews, and in the end this will make it much more likely that they will marry a Jew. If this were true, which studies point out that it is not true, then converts would be believed to be at a distinct disadvantage when it comes to producing children that perpetuate Jewish marriage. This line of thinking although incorrect might give some people reason to act differently toward converts in the community, because of their supposed lack of Jewish ethnicity makes them less capable of creating children with strong Jewish identities.

The study The Family Factor in Jewish-Gentile Intermarriage determined that the actual reason why both siblings in a family tended to both marry Jewishly was largely a by-product of their education. The rate at which Jews marry other Jews goes up with each degree of Jewish education attained. The researchers found no significant correlation between endogamy and ones' parents affiliations. Although some put a strong degree of importance on one's Jewish ethnicity it actually has little affect on the perpetuation of Jewish people. People can go out with their Jewish friends, belong to the Jewish Community center, and send their children to Jewish camps, but in the end their best bet for insuring a future Jewish in law is to focus on their child's Jewish education. Since studies indicate that converts have higher levels of observance it would not be a stretch to hypothesize that they send their children to Jewish education at higher rates as well. Therefore converts may actually be more proficient at perpetuating Judaism.

Although critics of calling out to converts like Ephraim Buchwald don't want to spend money on attracting converts I feel the money is better spent on converts who tend

to be more observant and more compliant to sending their children to Hebrew school. Money spent on retaining unaffiliated Jews who put little energy into their children's Jewish education may be a waste of time. In fact the Jews who wrongly perpetuate the myth that having Jewish friends and simply belonging to Jewish clubs are actually hurting the Jew's future. A convert's lack of Jewish ethnicity is not a flaw. It is a natural part of their conversion process, and it is not a detriment to expanding the Jewish people.

Ironically converts are even criticized for their higher observancy rates. I have a convert friend who was told that she was 'almost better than a real Jew', because she was more meticulous in her observant practices. I have been criticized by my in laws for ruining their Christmas. Although my in laws are both Jews by birth they celebrate Christmas. My wife and I decided that this would be an inappropriate (and unwanted) tradition for us to continue in our home. Every year we endure the same criticisms for being too Jewish. Rabbi David Kirshenbaum actually warned Jews not to misplace too much attention on proficient converts in one's family. "Among certain Jewish parents, a proselyte daughter in law who can make tasty gefilte fish for the Sabbath and kreplach for the festivals is more highly regarded than their own daughter and certainly more than their Jewish daughters-in-law",⁴¹

Egon Mayer who has long been considered one of the many experts in the field of Jewish marriages echoes these experiences in his book Love and Tradition: Marriage between Jews and Christians. He estimates there may be as many as 8,000 "New Jews" a year, many of whom are characterized by the fervor of the conversion. Mayer quoted one former Christian to the effect that her Jewish in laws rejected her because she was "too Jewish". A situation that sadly, I can all too easily relate to.

⁴¹ Kirshenbaum p. 107

Lastly if anyone doubts that people cannot make a complete and sincere conversion to a new religion one should consider the case of the Hindu women who were forcibly married to Muslim men during the partition of the Indian subcontinent. “Social workers often met fierce resistance when they tried to return women who had been forcibly converted to Islam from their original Hindu homes. Having married Muslim men, raised Muslim children, and lived Muslim lives, they had effectively become Muslims, whatever their religious beliefs or the circumstances of their conversion.”⁴² If these women who were forcibly converted refused to go back on the religion forced on them then why would voluntary converts be doubted for the veracity of their religious commitment?

As I close this section of my capstone I feel I have established that there are several problems within the Jewish community concerning Jewish converts. Converts are simultaneously viewed as being not real Jews and being too Jewish. They are viewed as part of the problem concerning declining numbers of Jews when they are actually part of the solution. The converts I have spoken to wish to blend into the community, but they can’t shake their status as a convert. Although I have alluded to the reasons why this happens I will point out in depth in the next section of my capstone the reasons why converts are not fully accepted and allowed to blend into the community.

⁴² Buckser p. 82

Converts in the Hierarchy of Judaism

O.J. Simpson, not a Jew
But guess who is? Hall of famer Rod Carew- he converted
We got Ann Landers and her sister Dear Abby
Harrison Ford's a quarter Jewish- not too shabby

The Hannukah Song, Adam Sandler

I continually run into the same scenario at functions where Jews predominate. Usually it starts with people asking me if I'm Jewish. Then they ask what my name is. This question is followed by the pronouncement that 'Johnston' does not sound Jewish. I feel like I'm being evaluated. It seems that my status as a Jew is very important to the person I'm speaking to. I normally leave these inquisitive people unsatisfied by saying, 'There are a lot of names that don't sound Jewish aren't there?'" In the beginning when I admitted that I was a convert hence the non-Jewish name I felt that those individuals had attained the information needed to categorize me in their head. I think this is part of the problem that converts face. They have converted into a religion composed of a hierarchy, and so it is natural that they will fit into a predetermined level of that hierarchy, which does not take into consideration who they are as an individual

For many the first rule in the hierarchy is birthright. This is unusual because it implies that Jews are a race. It perpetuates that there is a biological component to Judaism. This is an idea that scientists have worked hard to extinguish. In the early to middle twentieth century there were many studies to determine whether Jews were

different from the greater population. Studies examined appearance, intelligence, and thrift, among other topics. Over and over again it was determined that Jews were not biologically different from their counterparts in society. Hitler's attempts at exterminating a Jewish 'race' added to the taboo surrounding the categorization of Jews as a distinct race. In 1943 the Immigration and Naturalization service ended the practice of using Jew as a category for a Race or peoples, even though other nationalities continued to be ascribed to racial lists until 1950. So it seemed after the war the world was set to end describing the Jewish people as part of a genetic or biological race.

Oddly this perspective has begun to change for contemporary Jews of this era. Shelley Tenenbaum and Lynn Davidman created a study to determine how Jews view their ethnicity. Surprisingly, they found that increasingly Jews seem to be returning to the outmoded method of genetics in order to identify themselves. Because the Jews in the study traced their Judaism to blood origins they tended to doubt the authenticity of religious conversion with out any blood connection to the people.

In fact, the genetic essentialism of their Jewish identities led some to question whether or not a person could convert and become "really" Jewish. Michael, a 45-year-old lawyer, echoed the doubts that Kauffman Kohler expressed in the late 19th century: "You can convert to the religion, but you still would not have the genetics. And if you do not, it gets watered down and once it's watered down, it's less Jewish." Although Michael is adamant that he is an atheist, he nevertheless feels a greater claim to being a member of the "tribe" than any outsider who might join and even become highly observant. While Michael used "genetics", a term that surfaced often in the interviews, Charles, a 47 year-old elementary school teacher, conveyed the same sentiment with the

word “biological”: “They can convert to the religion, but they can’t convert to being a Jew, I don’t think. It is a biological.” Laura, an administrator in her thirties, commented that one does not necessarily need to be born Jewish to be Jewish because people can adopt the religion but that those who are born “with it” are inherently Jewish whether or not they embrace the religion.

Although the belief that a person has to be born a Jew in order to be Jewish was more prevalent among the unaffiliated than the children of intermarriage, Meryl, a 20-year-old college student with intermarried parents, also claimed that birthright trumps conversion when it comes to making decisions about Jewish authenticity. She explained: “Genetics, birth is what makes someone Jewish.....being born into a Jewish family. It’s like a birthright. I would still consider the person who is not practicing who was born into the Jewish faith more of a Jew than the person who converted, even if that person is practicing.” Although Mark, a 24-year-old graduate student, also based his doubts about conversion on genetics, he was the only person who used the word “blood” to discuss Jewishness:

It’s like a birthright...Say we have someone born into a Jewish family...never goes to temple, doesn’t practice, never even bar mitzvahed. And then on the other side you have someone who was raised, say, Catholic, converted, even had like a bar mitzvah, obviously at a later age than thirteen, and actively practices the religion....I would still consider the person who is not practicing who was born into the Jewish faith more of a Jew than the person who converted. And again it’s.... I think it just goes deeper as to just are you practicing... are you a

practicing Jew or a nonpracticing Jew? Because it's in your blood really. And there's no way to get around that....It's about genetics. (Tenebaum p.441)

There are some obvious flaws in trying to view one's Judaism as biologically inherited. First of all those individuals would be following Hitler's dictum that a Jew was an individual with three Jewish grandparents. Second how can someone test his or her blood to determine it's Jewish purity? Third how does one take into account the effect of converts in one's family? Since the beginning of Judaism, over the course of 100 generations, any number of converts could be part of someone's family tree. How would those ancestors affect one's status as a Jew? How many individuals expect to be the by-product of 5000 years of Jewish by birth ancestors. After all, aren't all Jews descendants of a convert, Abraham?

The interesting thing is that in a way Judaism *is* a birthright. Recent developments in genetic testing have allowed scientists to determine that the Jewish people did coalesce from a common group of people from the Middle East. However geneticists have determined that this group was not initially homogenous. Instead it was probably a coming together of several local populations such as the Canaanites, Semites and others. A group that sounds like the coming together of converts orchestrated by Abraham.

The genetic link is especially strong in the kohamins (Kohens, Cohens) who are believed to be the descendents of the ancient rabbis. There were ancient prohibitions against that clan from marrying converts. That tradition continues among the Orthodox

sect of modern Jewry. Because of this 80% of the Y chromosome of Jewish males belonging to this group can be connected to the early individuals of biblical times. The worldwide Diaspora of Jews, caused by the Assyrian invasion of the 8th century as well as the destruction of the first (586 B.C.E) and second (70 C.E.) Temple caused that DNA to be spread throughout the globe. Today descendants of the early Israelites can be confirmed through genetic testing in China and India. At the time of the Diaspora two main groups (Sephardic and Ashkenazic) continued to resist intermarriage. It was not until further pressures from Islam and Christendom, during the middle ages, further dispersed those groups and made intermarriage inevitable. Consequently as much as 50% of Ashkenazic women today may be descended from Gentiles.⁴³ This is the result of Jewish men who had very little prospect of marrying Jewish women therefore they married the Gentile women around them. The question that is important for my paper is whether those men provided a formal conversion for their wives, they probably didn't.⁴⁴ If these women did not undergo conversion then that may call into question the Jewish heritage of even Ashkenazic Jews in Israel, since by law Jewishness is passed down through the matrilineal line. For those who define their Judaism by birthright this new genetic information may change how they view their ancestry. The news has even affected some Gentiles to explore their Jewish heritage, and in some cases it was the impetus for their conversion to Judaism.

Indeed this genetic link to gentiles was a benefit to the Jewish people. In addition to expanding the Jewish people the intermarrying lead to a healthy mixing of genetic background. Because Jews tended to settle in restrictive populations they had the

⁴³ Entine p.95

⁴⁴ Entine p.94

tendency to unintentionally marry distant cousins, thus creating harmful genetic mutations. There are strong connections to between Judaism and genetic mutations such as Tay-Sachs and the BRCA 1 gene associated with breast cancer. Intermarrying with Gentiles made these mutation less prevalent. Today one of the highest incidences of Tay-Sachs is in an Orthodox community in Crown Heights Brooklyn, that strongly resists outmarrying. From a geneticist's perspective the intermarriage of Jews enables hybrid vigor, and if the spouse converts to Judaism then the tradition of Jews will achieve equal vigor. From this point of view it is illogical to reject converts, because of their positive affect.

Conclusion

Judaism is a very old religion. It has evolved to where it is over thousands of years. The ambivalence I feel as a convert is disheartening. As someone who has studied the Jewish people intensely over the last year I know that the creation and survival of the Jewish people has been highly dependent on the contribution of converts. At the same time I recognize that the evolution, survival and perpetuation of Judaism would not have been possible without the persistence of Jews by birth. The ambivalence toward converts might even be a necessity of ensuring that newcomers have the necessary dedication to the religion. Only the dedicated convert will be successful in insuring that their offspring are faithful to the Jewish traditions, and from the accounts I have read the preponderance of Jewish converts tend to be very dedicated to their new religion. Even the polarization of the Jewish people into different sects might have helped to make the religion more accessible to different types of people. Although I feel more could be done to elevate the

status of converts in Judaism, perhaps that would offset a careful balance. It has been said that the true measure of a Jew is not whether their children are observant, but whether their grandchildren are observant. In this way it is not the importance of present Jews that is important, but only the Jews of the future. Converts are an important link from the past through the present to the future.

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