

Let me tell you a true story. During the late nineteen eighties I lived in Japan, teaching English and working for the Jewish community of Tokyo. There I met a fellow whom I'll refer to as Yoni. Yoni was an American born in Chicago of Israeli parents. While growing up, his family belonged to a synagogue. He attended religious school and celebrated a Bar Mitzvah. Yoni's family observed some Jewish holidays, but was otherwise largely non-observant. Indeed, his involvement in Jewish life ended with his 13th birthday. Eventually, Yoni went to medical school and became an anesthesiologist. Around the time he turned thirty, he became disillusioned with American culture -- he found it shallow and materialistic. And so Yoni did what any nice Jewish boy would in a similar situation -- he left the U.S. to study Zen Buddhism in a Japanese monastery.

There Yoni met a woman of Chinese ancestry from Singapore; I'll call her Li. She, too, had come to study Buddhism. These two were destined for each other; it was, as they say, *besheret*. Within a short time they became romantically involved. One day, while comparing their very different backgrounds, Li asked Yoni to explain to her the basic beliefs of Judaism. To her surprise and his embarrassment, he could only remember bits and pieces of the lessons he had learned in Hebrew school more than twenty years earlier. Together they decided to explore Jewish belief. The more Li and Yoni read about Judaism, the more it attracted them. For Yoni it was like finding a family treasure he had never known existed; for Li, Judaism felt like *deja vu*, like coming home to a place she had never been.

In due time they made their home kosher, and began to observe Shabbat. Once Yoni had become observant, he was appointed as the *mohel* for the Jewish community because of his medical training. Li began to study for conversion with the rabbi in Tokyo. After a period of three years, she finally felt that she was ready to become Jewish. Several months after her conversion, Yoni and Li were married -- although by this time she had taken a Hebrew name. How joyously all of us danced the day of their wedding! It was one of the highlights of the time I spent living in the Far East. Today, Yoni and Devorah live on a religious kibbutz in the Galil -- having made *aliyah* more than a decade ago.

This story is less exotic than you might think. Judaism attracts people of incredibly diverse backgrounds, races and ethnicities. Three summers ago I had the privilege of serving as a Rabbinic

Scholar for the *Imun Institute*, a program of religious training for Conservative lay leaders. The eight-day course empowers individuals to better serve congregations too remote or too small to have their own full-time rabbi. 1/4 of the participants were Jews-by-choice. There was a woman from rural Oregon, who, together with her husband and their eight children, converted to Judaism. There was a fellow from Huntsville, Alabama, another Jew-by-choice. Still another participant was from Philadelphia's elegant Mainline, the headmistress of a rather fashionable finishing school for girls. In the world at large, there are Catholic priests who've become Jewish, and converts to Judaism who have become cantors and rabbis. But of course, we don't need to look far away at all -- right here at the Jacksonville Jewish Center, we are blessed by the presence of more Jews-by-choice than you may realize.

Yet in some quarters perception lags far behind reality. There are those, unfortunately, who still treat conversion as a poor stepchild. Even more disturbing are those within the Jewish world who maintain that one must be born Jewish to "really" be a Jew. There's only one serious flaw in that argument: it runs absolutely counter to what Jewish belief teaches!

During the Middle Ages the Jewish community discouraged proselytism for good reason. The Church made conversion to Judaism a capital crime; proselytizing posed a threat not only to converts, but to the entire Jewish community. The same was no less true of those Jews who lived under the sway of Islam. Against that historical background, our ancestors were reluctant to accept converts -- lest their own security be jeopardized by the intolerance of the larger society. We can certainly understand why survival required this strategy.

But in the centuries before the medieval period, Judaism had a very different attitude toward conversion. Rabbinic literature offers myriad examples of positive sentiments toward those who joined the ranks of Jewish peoplehood. Consider the following statement from *Midrash*: "Dearer to God is the convert who has come of his own accord than all the crowds of Israelites who stood before Sinai. For had the Israelites not witnessed the thunder, lightning, quaking mountains, and the sounding of trumpets, they would not have accepted the Torah. But the convert, who saw not one of these things, came and voluntarily took upon himself the Yoke of Heaven. Can anyone be dearer to God than that?" Or, as the talmudic tractate of *Pesahim* teaches, "לא הגלה הקב"ה את ישראל לבין האומות"

אלא כדי שיתוספו עליהם גרים --The Holy One exiled Israel among the nations so that converts might join them” (Babylonian Talmud, *Pesahim* 87b). What a stunning way to explain our dispersion throughout the world! As for the biblical perspective, we need only think about the example of Ruth the Moabite, whom later Jewish history considered to be the first true convert: As Ruth told her mother-in-law, Naomi, “Wherever you go, I will go; wherever you stay, I will stay. Your people shall be my people, and your God my God (*Ruth* 1:16-17). Ruth’s great grandson, of course, was none other than King David himself.

A lot has changed since medieval times. We live in a free society, where there is separation of church and state. We no longer need fear state sponsored persecution for the free exercise of religion. If anything, the strategy for Jewish survival today requires that we move forward by looking back to the Talmudic era. Instead of discouraging conversion, in the face of high rates of intermarriage, the serious threat of assimilation, and a negative Jewish birth rate, we need to encourage it in any way we can.

I’m not suggesting we ring doorbells, or pass out leaflets each Sunday in front of First Baptist downtown (though I’d be curious to see what happens). There are, however, many non-Jews unconnected to any religion, who would be wonderful candidates for conversion. Troubled by the dogmatic certainties of other faiths, they are attracted to a Judaism that emphasizes goodness and action in this world, rather than hellfire in the next. They are drawn to a religion that acknowledges there are many paths to God, and that the Almighty loves a righteous Gentile no less than a fully committed Jew. Having directed the Rabbinical Assembly’s Institute for Conversion and Outreach Education in New Jersey before moving to Jacksonville, I can tell you there are many individuals who come to conversion not through marriage, but through a process of spiritual searching. That Jews-by-birth are sometimes surprised that anyone would convert to Judaism for reasons other than marriage reveals far more about our own self-perception than it does about the attractions of Jewish identity.

While it is incumbent upon us to be warm and supportive of those who would cast their lot with the Jewish People for reasons of personal belief, it is likely that marriage will continue to serve as the primary catalyst for conversion. To be sure, there are times when conversion may not be a realistic

option for an interfaith couple. Obviously any person who is a devout practitioner of another religion would not be an appropriate candidate. There are also individuals who, out of respect for their parents' piety, opt not to formally abandon the religion of their birth. We can understand this because many of our own children do the very same thing out of respect to us.

But very often allegiance to another faith tradition poses no obstacle to conversion; it is the Jewish partner who demonstrates reluctance, and discourages the exploration of Jewish identity -- even when his or her significant other has expressed a willingness to contemplate a change in religion.

The reasons are varied. Sometimes, it's a lack of interest on the part of the Jewish spouse: "Why would I make her to go to such lengths when Judaism isn't much a part of my life?" Other times it's the perception of unfairness: "I'd never convert to his religion, how could I ask him to convert to mine?" In still other cases, there is a concern that conversion might actually drive the couple apart: "What if she likes being Jewish so much that she wants to start going to services regularly, keep kosher, or observe Shabbat? I'm a born Jew and I'm not ready to do any of those things; yet if that's what she wants, how will I be able to say no?" Indeed, there's a whole genre of jokes about this ambivalence, and at least one episode of *Sex in the City* in which a Jewish partner demonstrates discomfort at the religious zeal of his newly converted fiancée. Call it a case of life imitating art (or vice versa), but I know of at least one instance in which a Jew-by-choice broke off an engagement because of her fiancée's unwillingness to keep a kosher home!

A famous story is told in the Talmudic tractate *Shabbat* about the great sages Hillel and Shammai, who lived in the 1st century C.E. On three separate occasions prospective converts came before Shammai with preposterous requests upon which their willingness to convert depended: One demanded he would become Jewish only if appointed as High Priest, another insisted that his conversion be contingent on accepting only part of the Torah; the third offered to convert only if he could learn the entire Torah while standing on one foot. In each case, Shammai chased the fellow from his presence; Hillel, on the other hand, accepted all of them as students. In the end they all became righteous and devoted converts. To use the Talmudic idiom, *מתוך שלא לשמה בא לשמה* -- That which began with an ulterior motivation ended with a love of Judaism for its own sake. Many are the paths that lead to an embrace of Jewish life.

There are still those, however, who insist that conversion for the sake of marriage is forbidden by Jewish Law, inasmuch as *halakhah* forbids choosing Judaism for any ulterior motive. To those who think in such one-dimensional terms, I offer the words of Orthodox Rabbi Maurice Lamm, a distinguished professor at Yeshiva University, who writes, “A growing number of contemporary rabbis . . . are coming to believe that perhaps the marriage motivation should not be classified in the category of ulterior motive. A desire to establish a home in a unified religious commitment . . . savors more of sincerity than of personal gain, and must be for Heaven’s sake.”

Could there possibly be anything wrong with wanting to share a religious identity with one’s spouse, to use the pronoun “our” instead of “mine” and “yours” when it comes to spiritual matters? In response to an offer to consider conversion to Judaism, instead of reflexively answering, “Don’t do it for me!” why not say, “Wow, you must really love me -- why don’t we both explore Judaism together? After all, it’s been years since I went to Hebrew school and truthfully I could use a refresher. And as for you, my darling, you need to learn more about Judaism before you can honestly say, ‘This is for me or for our children.’”

In a Yom Kippur sermon some years ago, a Reform colleague of mine, Rabbi Michael Zedek, addressed his congregation with these words: “I have known many instances where a non-Jewish partner seriously would have considered conversion if only someone had asked, given some encouragement, if only the lover, spouse, or an in-law had asked. If it matters, at least ask. Say so. After all, this 4,000 year-old adventure of the Jewish people is a distinct, remarkable and amazing journey, and you would, perhaps, be amazed how often the refrain is heard -- ‘This is what I’ve always believed. I just didn’t know there was a group that did so, too.’” If you love being Jewish and consider it a gift, why wouldn’t you want to share it with the person you love more than anyone else in this world? As for the worst thing that can happen? Our spouses or significant others will say no . . . and life will go on. Encouragement is not coercion; there are no ultimatums, only opportunities.

It is the Conservative Movement that is best positioned to confront the challenge of intermarriage in a way that neither legitimates assimilation nor ignores the issue. Our task is not to shun those who contemplate marriage out of the faith anymore than it is to make endogamy and exogamy flip sides of the same coin. We need not accept the defeatist rhetoric that those who marry

out of the faith are lost to Judaism, anymore than we must rip out those passages of the Torah that do not accord with the melting pot culture of America. Either religion is powerful enough to change the course of people's lives, or it lacks a purpose. We need to move as Egon Mayer said "from outrage to outreach" and encourage the option of halakhic conversion to Judaism. And if, for whatever reason, conversion is not in the cards yet, it is still incumbent upon us to raise the consciousness of interfaith couples about the spiritual possibilities and benefits of Judaism. The seeds sown today may bear fruit tomorrow or the next day.

To that end, Rabbi Eliezer Ben-Yehuda, Rabbi Martin Sandberg and I -- the rabbis of Jacksonville's Conservative congregations -- have begun to discuss the creation of a program of educational outreach designed for the peripheral elements of the Jewish community, whether in-married or intermarried. In view of Federations recent demographic survey and its finding that approximately 50% of Jacksonville's Jews are unaffiliated and/or intermarried, we have a responsibility to share our religious wealth with those who are spiritually undernourished. We will do so without dilution of our identity, without apology for what tradition authentically teaches. For those who have witnessed the power of Habad to embrace the most marginal elements of the Jewish community, without pretending to be anyone but themselves, there is no reason why we cannot do the same. Our goal, therefore, is not outreach in the sense of being redefined by what's on the outside, but rather *keruv*, reaching out to the waters around us in order to bring more on board. In the debate of outreach vs. inreach it is imperative that we do both -- and if that places an extra burden upon us, so be it -- our shoulders are broad, the stakes are high, the reward priceless.

At the same time, here within our own synagogue we must begin to organize a network of members who are Jews-by-Choice, individuals willing to share of themselves and their experiences with those contemplating conversion and those already engaged in the process, to serve as sounding boards and guides, and to raise consciousness among all Jews that conversion is a blessing. To our brothers and sister who have embraced the path of Jewish peoplehood, how can I ever express my admiration, respect and inspiration -- in sharing with me the spiritual travels that brought you to Judaism, you have shed light on my own Jewish journey; in seeing Judaism through your eyes, I see it anew. It is a privilege to be your rabbi, and I thank you for that.

Let me leave you this morning with the words of Julius Lester. An African American and one-time Black Power nationalist in the late 1960s, Lester eventually converted to Judaism. In a moving book entitled *Lovesong: Becoming a Jew*, he chronicled his experiences and wrote, “I know now who I am. I am a Jew, and I am a lovesong to the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, a praisesong to the God of Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah. That is all the 613 *mitzvot* are, the *midrashim*, the Talmud, the Torah, *Kashrut*, *Tzedakah*, and everything else in Judaism. They are lovesongs to God. And so am I.”

May God grant us more composers, and more lovesongs in the life of the Jewish people. How sweet the music they add to our lives, how beautiful their counterpoint, how lovely the harmony they bring to the melody of Jewish experience.