"FITTING IN"
A Study of Four Converts

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Conversion has a long and honorable history in the Jewish religion. Even Abraham and Sarah, the Torah tells us, were involved in the "making of souls." During the time of the Roman Republic and the early Empire, it appears that Jews actively encouraged pagans to forsake their religion and become members of the House of Israel. Jewish customs seem also to have influenced those who did not undergo full conversion. Roman sources make reference to "god-fearing" men who took on traditions such as the seventh-day Sabbath and avoidance of pork but did not become full proselytes.[1] Sometimes that step was left to the next generation, whose men were circumcised and became full Jews.[2] Throughout the long centuries of dispersion in Christian and Moslem lands, conversion to Judaism was often forbidden by the majority faith. Judaism developed a suspicion of converts and required rabbis to actively discourage prospective Jews until they proved their desire to become *gere tsedek*, true converts to the Jewish faith and people without ulterior motives.

In our own day the advent of personal autonomy and the culture of spiritual individuality found in the modern United States has made conversion to Judaism an option for many people. Some of these are in a relationship with a Jew, while others have become intrigued by elements of the Jewish tradition. Some of the major questions for the Jewish community today, therefore, are who should be accepted for conversion, what are the standards for one converting, and should we actively seek converts among non-Jews? The various movements have put forth differing answers to these questions, with great disagreement sometimes within a single stream.

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[1] Salo W. Baron, *A Social and Religious History of the Jews*: Vol. 1, Pt. 1, Phila., 1952, p. 179
[2] Ibid., p. 179

One somewhat controversial Reform position, for example, is that of Rabbi Alexander Schindler – the former president of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations – who in the late 1970's advocated a program called "Outreach" to encourage participation in Judaism and conversion to it -- which he envisioned not only as a hand extended to Jews' non-Jewish partners but as an effort to "'enlarge the site' of our tents" through positive action.[3] While Orthodox rabbis are often reluctant to work with prospective converts,[4] a growing number recognize not only the right to convert of the proverbial *ger tsedek* but also the potential of those who begin conversion for reasons of marriage to "grow from accommodation to conviction."[5] The Conservative movement, according to Rabbi Stephen Lerner, joins the Reform and Reconstructionist movements in displaying "an open and welcoming approach to would-be converts."[6] The Conservative and Orthodox movements accept only matrilineal descent and require all the traditional elements of conversion, including *tevilah*, *milah/hatafat dam*, and *beit din*, while the Reform movement leaves the standards for conversion up to the individual rabbi. To shed some light on these and other issues, I have done intensive interviews with four converts representing the Reform, Conservative, and Orthodox communities and with the rabbis who acted as their *mesadre giyur*. We will first look at the information culled from these interviews, and then look at it in the light both of writing and scholarship on conversion, and the issues facing modern American Judaism.

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[3] Alexander Schindler, "Introduction" in *Not By Birth Alone*, ed. Walter Homolka, Walter Jacob, and Esther Seidel, London, 1997, p. 7
[4] Anita Diamant, *Choosing a Jewish Life*, New York, 1997, p. 20.
[5] Maurice Lamm, *Becoming a Jew*, New York, 1991, p. 83.
[6] Stephen C. Lerner, "Choosing Judaism," in *Celebration and Renewal*, ed. Rela Geffen, p. 78.

Two of my interviewees worked with Rabbi Fine,[7] a fairly "right-wing" Reform rabbi at a synagogue (also Reform) on the Upper West Side. Rabbi Fine sees his role in the gerut process as beginning after the man or woman interested takes an introductory class. In his view that kind of a class (which is not under his auspices) helps individuals determine, at least preliminarily, whether or not Judaism is for them. After the prospective convert has taken such a class, Rabbi Fine works with him or her for a number of months. Since the rabbi believes that conversion is a very individualistic process, he does not have a standard curriculum but tailors his lessons to the interests of the person involved. For instance, if someone's taste runs to modern literature he might spend some time focusing on the Jewish-subject works of Bernard Malamud or Philip Roth. Although he believes there are certain things every convert to Judaism should know, Rabbi Fine sees becoming a Jew as a process not of amassing facts but of establishing a connection based in love and community. Although the Reform movement as a whole does not require it, Rabbi Fine insists on immersion in a mikvah, and circumcision or *hatafat dam brit* for males, for those he converts. Additionally, he sees the question of accepting responsibility for mitzvot as "critical" for those becoming Jews, although he interprets the concept in light of his Reform outlook.

The first Jew-by-choice converted under Rabbi Fine with whom I met was Kwan. Kwan was born in Saigon, Vietnam in 1970 and immigrated with her family to the United States in 1975. Although the family had been nominally Buddhist in Vietnam, the role of the Presbyterian Church in sponsoring them in the U. S. led them to become regular churchgoers in that denomination. Although Kwan's parents were not really devout

[7] All names have been changed to protect the privacy of the individuals involved.

Christians, they felt an obligation to be somewhat active in their local Presbyterian church in Connecticut where they settled. Much more important to her family were the religious traditions they had brought with them from Vietnam. Kwan's family celebrated the anniversaries of ancestors' deaths with a feast and performed traditional acts of worship at a household shrine. Her parents combined a belief in one God with their Eastern religious practices and believed in the importance of continuing to observe Vietnamese cultural norms.

Kwan's earliest religious memories include being an angel in the Christmas pageant at her church and attending Sunday school (which she did from kindergarten through sixth grade). She remembers hating the iced tea the children were served after services. Her acquiring of religious knowledge at this time was largely confined to learning Bible stories, with which she became very familiar. She was never confirmed. It was really her parents' cultural beliefs, not their religion, that had the most impact on Kwan. Like many Asian (and other immigrant) families, Kwan's parents had very clear ideas of how a young Vietnamese (in her case) woman should behave. She felt more affected by this system of moral beliefs than by Buddhism or Christianity. As a teenager she sometimes rebelled against the structure her parents tried to impose. In the area of religion she saw herself as an atheist. Despite this history she now appreciates how difficult it was for her parents to maintain that structure and feels that their strictness might have helped her get into the prestigious university she attended.

Kwan's father had been a landowner and local political official in North Vietnam who fled to the south when the communists took over. Her mother had been a teacher. Upon immigration they found themselves in very different professions. Her father started

working at a Texaco station and then became a computer operator, at a time when computers still needed technicians to work them. Her mother became a seamstress. It was important to Kwan's parents that she and her siblings make it in the professional world. They wanted their children to become doctors. Kwan, however, became interested in journalism and pursued that as a career, coming to New York City shortly after college. When she started dating a Jewish man and the relationship became serious enough that the possibility of marriage was discussed, she and her partner decided that she would convert to Judaism, since her husband-to-be's religious and cultural identity as a Jew was more important to him than Presbyterianism was to her.

Thus becoming a Jew was for Kwan a practical decision. Nevertheless she felt some affinity for Judaism. From the beginning, she says, she never felt like she was adopting something "foreign or strange." Her first knowledge about Judaism had come from church, but she learned more about it as a modern culture and faith in college. She and Jon, her Jewish boyfriend, dated for four years before becoming engaged, and she therefore had a lot of opportunities to see his family's Jewish life. Jon's family was not so religiously active, but they practiced several of the most common Jewish traditions, including going to synagogue on the High Holidays and sometimes during the year. She approached two different Reform rabbis concerning conversion, but she ended up working with Rabbi Fine because she liked his synagogue and its diversity the best. Rabbi Fine, she says, was casual and warm and made her feel at ease. She was also impressed by his knowledge.

The first step she took was to enroll for a sixteen-week introduction to Judaism course. She liked the structure of the course – it dealt with Jewish history, holidays, and

culture -- but she did not think the instructor was so impressive. She found the teacher old-fashioned and uninspiring. Her sessions with Rabbi Fine -- which lasted a year until her formal conversion ceremony -- she liked better, although she suggests they were sometimes too unstructured. Rabbi Fine recommended novels and other works she might enjoy reading concerning Judaism. He also "consoled" her concerning one of her major fears, that she would never feel "Jewish enough" to actually be a member of the Jewish people. Jon during this whole process was very supportive, attending the sixteen-week class with Kwan and being generally there for her. He also became more actively religious as a Jew through Kwan's conversion process.

When I asked Kwan what about Judaism particularly intrigued her, she pointed out that certain things are true of the Reform Judaism she practices which may not be true in other denominations. For instance, she appreciates the freedom she has to choose and the ability to question both God and the Jewish religion. Although she was reluctant to offer any criticisms of her new faith because she feels so new to it, she did say that she is bothered by the divisions which make some Jews not recognize others, because "there're so few of us." Her conversion procedures included immersion and a naming ceremony for her family. She found the mikvah part very meaningful. She says it made the whole experience seem real and not academic, and that she "walked out of there feeling very Jewish." Rabbi Fine performed both the naming ceremony and Kwan's wedding.

Kwan and Jon have now been married over six months. They try to go to the synagogue on holidays and at least once a month. They also read some of the material from their course concerning a holiday before that holiday. Kwan has both Jewish and non-Jewish friends and feels comfortable with both, although there are certain things she

can share only with her Jewish friends, such as synagogue stories and Jewish jokes. Her Jewish friends thought her conversion was "great," while most of her non-Jewish friends were fine with it. There was one Catholic friend, however, who felt uncomfortable with the rejection of Jesus that conversion to Judaism entailed. Although she was worried that her parents would feel she was putting her new family before them, they actually were accepting of her conversion because they understood it was something she was doing for the sake of family. Kwan also made an effort to show respect for their traditions as well, performing the traditional Vietnamese rites of marriage before her Jewish ceremony.

Jim, who also converted under Rabbi Fine's supervision, was born in Florida but has lived in many different places. He is now forty. When he was three years old he moved to Germany with his divorced mother, who was a native of that country. From the ages of five to nine Jim lived in New York, and then went back to Germany and then to North Carolina after his mother remarried. Jim's mother was raised a German Catholic while his father came from a family of Georgia Southern Baptists of English/Scottish/Irish extraction. He was mainly raised by his mother and spent a lot of time with his maternal aunts and grandmother in Germany. Officially he grew up Catholic, but his mother was not terribly religious (although she now considers herself "born again.") Her family, on the other hand, were dedicated Catholics. Jim did not really go to church as a child, but he received some religious instruction at the age of nine in a small town outside Munich. At that time he was educated in the catechism and Old Testament. He recalls the instructor as a "great guy" and a "Vatican II priest." Although the purpose of this instruction was to prepare Jim for his first Communion, he was not interested in performing the rite and asked many concerned questions about it. The priest

consequently told his family that he was not yet ready, which even his devout grandmother accepted.

One of the people who had significant impact on Jim when he was young was his aunt, with whom he lived for eighteen months. She was religious but non-doctrinaire, and believed ethical living was the central message of religion. The whole town, Jim says, "worshipped her."

One of Jim's first encounters with Judaism was his attendance at a Seder to which he and his then-wife were invited in 1988. He really enjoyed the experience and sometimes he attended Jewish speaker programs with the friends who had invited him. His wife was Irish Catholic but even though they had similar faith backgrounds they had not had a church wedding. After his divorce Judaism went from being a mere theoretical interest to something Jim thought he might be interested in for himself. He approached Rabbi Fine, who responded positively and set aside time to study with him. Jim was impressed that the rabbi made the effort to schedule time with him. After reading a few books and going to a few synagogues, he found Rabbi Fine's synagogue to be just the right size for him.

Around this time Jim began dating Felicia, a Jewish woman from Argentina. However, this woman – with whom he is still together – was not the reason for his conversion. This relationship did, however, increase Jim's exposure to Jewish life. Her father had a good deal of Jewish knowledge since he had grown up fairly observant. Felicia, however, was conflicted about his conversion. She did not understand why he wanted to undertake such a step. It took a long time for her to accept Jim's plans to convert as reality. In fact, she came close to trying to talk him out of it. On the other

hand, Felicia believed that if he was going to convert, it should be with an Orthodox rabbi. Jim's study process took a little less than a year. At the end of May, 1999, Rabbi Fine pronounced Jim ready to convert. It took Jim several days to feel emotionally ready. The process, which included both immersion and *hatafat dam brit*, had both moments of exhilaration and terror for him. As Jim puts it, the Bet Din was the "intellectual part," the mohel was the "terrifying part," and the mikvah was "a surprise, the most emotional." Jim approached his conversion with trepidation. He felt funny entering a four thousand year old tradition after having just read "a few dozen books." He didn't know if he was ready. Jim says that part of the conversion ceremony was like getting a "passport," and part of it was "like the SAT." He also says that the mohel's drawing of blood was "a breeze" compared to what he expected. The mohel kept him relaxed with conversation while performing his task.

Among the things Jim has learned to love about Judaism is its attitude to Bible stories and the process of midrash. Jim points out that his family was very "uncritical" about the stories in the Bible. Although he had always hated church, he felt like he "got" Jewish services. Although he could never believe the Christian concepts he was taught, he felt an inherent connection to Jewish beliefs. His feeling of kinship with Jews extends even to the ultra-Orthodox, with whom he disagrees but does not completely reject or despise. His Jewish life now includes the possibility of he and his girlfriend planning a seder, which they would not have considered trying to do in previous years. One issue for Jim is his feeling Jewish "religiously," but not "culturally." He also is sometimes made uncomfortable by the things he doesn't know which Jews who think he has always been Jewish should know. Jim sometimes gets defensive in these situations. While he

says his Jewish friends from years past "didn't get" his conversion, he says his family has been "closed-lip" about the change. He therefore doesn't really know their reaction to his conversion, but his "born-again" mother feels close to Jews and is very happy.

Rabbi Goldstein is an Orthodox rabbi involved in outreach programs to non-Orthodox Jews. Although firm in his convictions, he is very willing to teach and debate those who are on another part of the Jewish spectrum. When I asked Rabbi Goldstein what reasons people give for coming to him for conversion, he said that people come for "the right reasons, the wrong reasons, and everything in between." To him, the "wrong" reasons include the conversion being a means to an end, in a situation for instance where he perceives the prospective convert is "not interested in leading a Jewish life." Like many other rabbis, however, he recognizes that "sometimes the wrong reasons become right." The conversion process for Rabbi Goldstein usually takes about a year. When it comes to *kabbalat ol mitzvot* Rabbi Goldstein is uncompromising. The convert must be "1000 percent committed to observe every last halakhah."

Joanna, who converted under the tutelage of Rabbi Goldstein, comes from the suburbs of New Orleans. Her mother was from the Alsace-Lorraine area of France and grew up Catholic because of an accepted rule followed when Catholics married Lutherans (which was the situation of her parents' marriage.) If the firstborn was a girl, the children would be raised Catholic; if a boy, they would be raised Lutheran. Joanna's father was the product of an intermarriage. His mother was a Catholic and his father was Jewish. Both his parents had been disowned upon their marriage; his Vilna-born grandfather having sat Shiva for his wayward son. Joanna's mother teaches business and commerce at a college, while her father once worked for a Wall Street firm but later became a crisis

intervention counselor. Her parents divorced when she was seven. Joanna attended Catholic schools mainly because the public schools were low-quality and other private schools were expensive. Her mother was a fairly observant Catholic, abstaining from meat on Friday and going to church on Sunday (she now goes even more than once a week). Although Joanna's father was more or less raised a Catholic, he showed little interest in church services and other religious activities.

It is paradoxical then that Joanna's first religious memories are Jewish. It so happens that she went to a Jewish pre-school and to Jewish-run camps, and one of her earliest memories is making haroset for the model seder. She remembers feeling very comfortable with her father at that Seder. She also has positive memories of celebrating Sukkot. Her memories of Catholic school are less positive. She recalls a "creepy, old place" where the kids were obnoxious. She remembers preparing for confession and the teacher talking about Jesus and her not really getting it. "I don't understand," she said, "I pray to God." She could not really fathom why people would want to use an intermediary when one could go "straight to the boss," as she puts it. By the time she was in high school her family was worried she was anti-religious. Joanna tried, but felt there was something missing.

Her Jewish grandfather was one of the people who had a significant impact on her, even though he died when she was only five. Joanna says he was her favorite person and he "knew everything." She also remembers her paternal grandmother, who lived until Joanna was nine and seemed "sweet, wise, and grounded." From the beginning Joanna "just was interested" in Judaism, and very early on she decided she wanted to become Jewish. Once she was sitting with one of the older women at the Jewish

Community Center in nursery school, and she told her mother that she wanted to go home with the woman because she "lit candles." In addition to the Seder, she has fond memories of learning the aleph-bet and bringing home challot on Fridays. At the pre-school people weren't "mean and cold," as she later perceived they were in her Catholic school. She just associates that time in her life and her connection to Judaism as representing something "deep and peaceful." When Joanna began to speak she had a thick accent. Her Jewish grandfather said she sounded like his mother.

Her first reading about Judaism occurred when she went to her library in second grade and told the librarian – who said she should pick out two books – she wanted to read "something Jewish." That turned out to be the *Diary of Anne Frank.* She gained some of her first knowledge of Jewish religious materials in her high school Old Testament class, which was the only religion class in which she got an *A*. In college she made an effort to read more, and when she was financially independent she began actively seeking out the opportunity to convert. From the time she was a little girl she had wanted to become a Jew After college Joanna studied with a Conservative rabbi and took a class with the well-known New York speaker Rebbetzin Esther Jungreis. When a woman in the class found out Joanna was not actually Jewish, she gave her Rabbi Goldstein's number, saying, "He helps girls like you." She now says that she had become scared of the Orthodox because the Conservative rabbi was "politicizing everything" and overly emphasized the negative aspects of those to the right of him. Her fear dissipated, however, when she began working with Rabbi Goldstein.

The Conservative rabbi with whom she had been working asked Joanna if she would like to convert but she did not want a Conservative conversion. She felt that

Conservative Judaism was OK as a stepping-stone on the way to more traditional practice but lacked some legitimacy. "If you're gonna do it," she felt, "do it right." She also wanted her conversion to be recognized by all streams. Joanna did not want her future children going through an identity crisis someday because some Jews didn't recognize her conversion. She "shopped around" for a rabbi and no one appealed to her as much as Rabbi Goldstein. At this point she had already begun observing some Jewish practices, such as Kashrut, and she continued studying another thirteen or fourteen months with Rabbi Goldstein.

Joanna liked the process of conversion and felt intrigued by what she was learning. One thing she appreciates about Judaism is that there's enough material to "keep learning for seven lifetimes and you don't have to stop." Judaism appeals both to her emotional and intellectual side. She believes that Judaism has a healthy family system and worldview. For instance, Joanna feels that the laws of niddah and mikvah are particularly healthy, although from her point of view technically we don't know the reason for any of God's commandments. She could think of almost nothing that really disturbed her about Judaism, except for one time when Rabbi Goldstein quoted the Talmud to imply that the children of converts might have some stigma attached to them. The Orthodox tradition of separate roles for men and women, rather than being a turn-off, helped draw her closer to Judaism. The process for Joanna took "too damn long," but was very beautiful. Particularly memorable was her reaction to one member of the Bet Din's question, "Why on earth would you want to do this?" Her response was that she couldn't imagine *not* doing it. She says her mikvah experience was "completely transforming" and "beyond words."

Joanna now works at a religious non-profit agency and her Jewish life centers around the Upper West Side of Manhattan. She frequents the Carlebach Shul and the Jewish Center, and of course follows the traditions of Orthodox Judaism. She maintains both Jewish and non-Jewish friends, although there are some people she sees less now because of her traditional lifestyle and the time commitments (such as Saturdays) involved. Joanna's parents have been very supportive. Her father, she says, is happy she's happy although he may be a little jealous because she listens to Rabbi Goldstein more than him! When she converted she was concerned what her pious Catholic aunt would think, but her aunt is fine with it, since "any way to get to God is OK."

Rabbi Kornblum is a JTS-ordained rabbi and the spiritual leader of a Conservative congregation in the New Jersey suburbs of New York City. He works individually with those who convert under his supervision, in addition to sometimes suggesting classes in which they can begin to acquire Jewish knowledge. Rabbi Kornblum follows Conservative Halakhic procedure concerning conversion, including a Bet Din of male rabbis, immersion, and circumcision or *hatafat dam* for males. His beliefs with regard to *kabbalat ol mitzvot* are moderate. He feels that it is an important part of the process, but he does not require complete strict observance. For instance, Rabbi Kornblum will convert someone who has removed pork and shellfish from his or her diet but still will eat non-*schechted* meat.

Janet grew up in Mexico City, the daughter of a Jewish father and a Catholic mother. Her father's mother was an Odessa Jew who fled to Mexico at the time of the October Revolution, while his father was of Polish Jewish stock. Janet's mother was a fourth generation Mexican of English descent. Janet's father had a clothing

manufacturing business while her mother worked in real estate. Both her parents, despite their Mexican residence, studied in the United States. Since Janet's mother's family was scattered throughout the United States, she grew up particularly close to her dad's side of the family and from an early age assumed she was Jewish. Although her father did not really go to synagogue because of an anti-institutional bent, as a young child she sometimes attended services with her grandmother. Her family celebrated Jewish holidays as well as Christmas, so she grew up, as she puts it, "conscious of the Jewish religion." Both her parents were raised aware of their religious heritage. Janet's mother grew up very Catholic, while her father was educated about Judaism although he was never Bar Mitzvah. His mother was fairly religious in fact, performing rituals such as lighting Shabbat candles on her own. Janet did not have any formal Jewish education herself, although she had a lot of Jewish girlfriends and sometimes went with them to religious school.

Janet's earliest religious memory is of holiday celebrations at her grandparents' house, particularly Chanukah and Passover. She has a distinct, warm recollection of her grandmother's gefilte fish. Those were very positive experiences to which she looked forward as a child. She was influenced by her whole family, but she mentions particularly her mother who wanted her to learn about both Judaism and Catholicism. Nevertheless she had a strong sense that it was Judaism that was her tradition. She grew up with a sense of Jews being one people, like a family, with a long tradition. At the age of eleven, however, she was devastated to learn from a friend that because her mother was Catholic she was not technically Jewish. From that moment on she always knew, at least in the back of her mind, that someday she would convert.

After Janet married a Jewish man from Argentina in a civil ceremony in Mexico, she had the opportunity to look into the possibility of conversion. She had been reading about Judaism since junior high, and in her late teens and 20's had been involved in the Kabbalah Research Center, a group which promotes the efficacy of the Jewish mystical tradition. Although that group helped give Janet knowledge of Jewish literature, she also found it "fanatic" and "cult-like." In early 1998 she approached Rabbi Kornblum about the possibility of becoming Jewish. She decided on the Conservative movement because it appealed to her middle-of-the-road outlook. Janet felt she couldn't be as strict as an Orthodox conversion would require, but she also felt that the Reform movement "threw tradition out the window." Converting with a Conservative rabbi would represent what she saw as Jewish tradition while allowing her the flexibility in practice that she needed. Janet's study process took a little over a year, and she loved it. Rabbi Kornblum was very welcoming and seemed excited to be able to help in her desire to be Jewish. Janet greatly enjoyed being able to discuss issues about Judaism in her weekly meetings with the rabbi, and considers that time "one of the most unbelievable years of [her] life." Her conversion, which took place two days before her Jewish wedding ceremony, was "positively emotional." Her whole family came out for the conversion and the wedding. Members of both sides of her family were happy for her. For Janet the whole ceremony was a wonderful experience. She felt overjoyed at this completion of a goal, which represented to her "the beginning of the rest of her life." She cried in the mikvah as she fulfilled something she had always felt. Janet also had a naming ceremony in the synagogue during which she read Torah. That was also very emotional, although she was concerned about her Hebrew.

For Janet, the most intriguing thing about Judaism is its long history and the sense that every little tradition has a meaning all its own. Sedarim and other celebrations with family are particularly important to Janet. Although she prefers to talk about what she *does* like, one thing that disturbs her about some Jewish communities is their sense of elitism, marked by a tendency to look down on non-Jews. This is one thing that bothered her greatly about Mexican Jewish society, for example, because she sees it as contrary to everything she has learned about the Jewish religion.

Janet is now 30 and does some marketing and public relations work while pursuing her true love, which is painting. Her Jewish life involves rituals such as lighting candles for Shabbat and some Shabbat observance (she usually spends the day reading). She and her husband attend services once or twice a month. Her husband was thrilled at her conversion because Judaism is very important to him, although he is not as observant as Janet. He probably would not have married a non-Jew, but he sometimes laughs at his wife's religiosity. Janet keeps kosher as much as possible, but this sometimes conflicts with her husband's lifestyle, such as when he brings pork into the house. He has however become more religious because of Janet. Janet maintains relationships with Muslim, Christian, and Jewish friends, and feels very integrated into her Jewish community. She says her family was very happy for her and proud of her. Her Jewish father was, according to Janet, "beaming," at her conversion, although he didn't voice his apparent pride. Her old friends always knew how much she wanted this and so they were delighted. Janet's paternal aunt and uncle were thrilled, and she thinks they perhaps felt her conversion was vindication of their family, since her father had married a non-Jew.

It is of course impossible to claim a scientific basis to a "survey" which included only four Jews-by-choice and three rabbis. Nevertheless certain broad patterns may be evident in these interviews, especially those which match stories told by converts in *Turbulent Souls* and *Lovesong*, two books cited later on in this study. My purpose here will be to suggest further studies which might be advisable concerning who should be encouraged to convert, and those instances where the likelihood of a conversion "sticking" are the greatest. One of the major debates in the Jewish community today is how far we should go in seeking out converts. The debate ranges from the American Syrian community, whose Brooklyn Beit Din in 1935 declared all conversions to Judaism "fictitious and valueless" in an effort to slam the door on intermarriages[8] to the belief of some – particularly in the Reform movement – that we should actively seek out new Jews among those who are "unchurched" in the general community. The latter is the above-cited position of the UAHC's Rabbi Schindler. His views grew out of the program of Outreach, which the Reform movement began in the seventies to connect with intermarried families and bring them into the Jewish fold. The premise, which had been borne out by statistics, was that an intensely negative response to intermarriage was not stemming its tide.[9] About this approach Schindler wrote in 1997, "A clenched fist and excommunication will not alter the statistics of intermarriage, but a beckoning hand and increased communication may soften their impact." [10] That program, which was at first criticized by many in the Jewish community, ended up gaining a significant number of supporters even in the traditional Jewish world. Schindler quotes the late Rabbi Joseph

[8] Jonathan Wittenberg, "Motivation in the Halachah of Conversion" in *Not By Birth Alone*, London, 1997, p.3.
[9] Schindler, p. 3.
[10] Ibid., p.3

D. Soloveitchik, "our generation's most respected voice of mainline Orthodoxy" as saying, "Regarding the plague of intermarriage, from which the Orthodox have not been spared, it is necessary to do what the Reformers are doing – within, of course, an Orthodox context."[11] Schindler counters criticisms of Outreach by saying that these efforts have led to more Jewish involvement (including rearing children as Jewish and the conversion of the non-Jew in the marriage) on the part of the intermarried and in fact enhances, and doesn't dilute the dedication of those who identify as Jews.

Less mainstream is the next step Schindler suggests. All along, he declares, he envisioned Outreach "not as an emergency programme to repair the holes in our tent, but as a long-range effort to ... 'extend the size of our dwellings.'"[12] Schindler wishes to see a Judaism that shares the wealth of its religious worldview with as many people as possible:

> This is what Outreach was meant to be from the beginning. It calls for more than a passive acceptance, and requires an active pursuit. It means something more than welcoming the strangers who choose to live in our midst. It bids us seek them out and invite them in – like the prototype of the proselytizing Jew, Abraham....[13]

This attitude has inspired some and concerned others. Many, myself included, worry about a Judaism filled with the same missionary zeal that makes us uncomfortable when practiced on us. This worry continues to exist even when we are assured by voices like that of Rabbi Walter Jacob that "we will certainly not attempt to gain converts from those who are already affiliated with a religion,"[14] for Jews to a large extent don't feel culturally comfortable attempting to gain converts. Further some worry, as Jacob puts it,

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[11] Ibid., p. 4
[12] Ibid., p. 7
[13] Ibid.,p. 7
[14] Walter Jacob, "Conversion and Outreach in the United States," in *Not By Birth Alone*, London, 1997, p. 79.

that the nature of the Jewish people will be changed by such an approach. Jacob thinks this may be true, but that the change need not be negative. "The national and cultural element," he predicts, "will diminish in importance while the religious, spiritual, philosophical paths will be strengthened."[15] All of this relates to some of the major issues for rabbis and Jewish educators today, including the declining outside pressure on Jews to remain Jews and the loss among the younger generations of Jews of a sense of obligation to maintain their ethnic identity. Anecdotal evidence has suggested to me, for example, that younger marginal Jews feel less obligation to observe the High Holidays than the similarly marginal Jews of an earlier generation. Furthermore, one of the hot topics among my generation of rabbinical students is bringing "God-talk" more into Jewish life, since older rabbis felt more comfortable with talk of mitzvot and obligations, which was geared more to preserving identity than developing spirituality. Jacob's view fits in well with this in its prediction of a Judaism less nation-based and more religion-based.

However Judaism – for the foreseeable future, at least – is both a people and a religion, and as such there are specific difficulties pertaining to those who join it. As the British rabbi Lionel Blue puts it, the converts he dealt with in the rabbinical court were "outsiders trying to find a place in an insiders' religion."[16] There are numerous cultural barriers, from both sides, affecting those who join the Jewish community. Kwan and Jim both express some of the relevant concerns above. Kwan mentions how during her conversion process she was afraid that she would never feel "Jewish enough" to actually become a Jew, while Jim felt odd entering an ancient tradition on the strength of having

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[15] Ibid., p. 79
[16] Lionel Blue, "Insiders and Outsiders," in *Not By Birth Alone*, London, 1997, p. 130.

read "a few dozen books." Jim also mentions the concern of feeling "religiously" Jewish but not "culturally," and the awkward moments when he demonstrates ignorance in a Jewish setting of something born Jews tend to know. It is not always that easy to assimilate into the Jewish community.

Some of the literature on this subject demonstrates the same thing. In her Rutgers doctoral dissertation entitled "The Integration of Jews By Choice Into the Philadelphia Jewish Community," Dr. Sybil E. Montgomery studies some of the issues and barriers surrounding converts' entering Jewish society. She discovers that although 87 percent of her respondents – completed converts to Judaism in the Philadelphia area – answered the question, "Are you a Jew?" in the affirmative, it took them varying degrees of time to feel that way. Thirty percent, for example, felt a Jewish identity even before enrolling in a conversion course, while almost forty percent did not feel Jewish until some time had passed since their conversion rituals.[17] That would mean that for many converts the conversion process and rituals do not end with them feeling like complete members of the community.

Furthermore, although many respondents valued their Jewishness and various aspects of the Jewish religious tradition, a significant number also expressed a wish that the rabbinical community be more aware of the convert's socialization needs. The common firm rabbinic belief that a convert is a Jew in all respects, meant to support Jews by Choice, can have the result of not giving special assistance to converts and leaving them with a "sense of abandonment."[18] For example, out of a group of 42 converts, 30 felt the rabbinic community had not been attentive to their needs after the formal

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[17] Sybil E. Montgomery, *The Integration of Jews by Choice into the Philadelphia Jewish Community*, Ann Arbor, 1991, p. 97.
[18] Ibid., p. 138

procedures were finished.[19] According to the thesis, "they wanted the rabbis to understand that conversion is only the beginning of a lengthy socialization process and they need to take an active role in it."[20] Sometimes converts, trained by their rabbis to view Judaism in religious terms, became frustrated when attempting to find religious role models among people "who no longer think of Judaism in religious terms."[21] In her "Conclusions and Policy Implications," Dr. Montgomery suggests, "The notion that conversion courses and ceremonies make Jews out of non-Jews has perhaps outlived its usefulness."[22] Specifically, she suggests that more might be done to ease the convert's entry into Jewish life.

Anita Diamant, in her book *Choosing a Jewish Life*, a guide to conversion to Judaism from a liberal perspective, includes several examples of the difficulties new Jews face in becoming used to their new community. For instance, a convert to Judaism who grew up in a Waspish home is amazed at the lack of etiquette observed during meals in her in-laws' home, including the constant getting up from the table, the volume of the conversation, and the comments about the demeanor of others at the table.[23] "I knew I wasn't in Kansas anymore," declares the woman.[24] Diamant points out that "time alone... cannot resolve all issues of ethnicity. American Jews still tend to behave as though there were only one authentic cultural expression of Judaism, which tastes, smells, and sounds like the Judaism of nineteenth century Eastern Europe."[25]

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[19] Ibid., p. 139
[20] Ibid., p. 139
[21] Ibid., p. 161
[22] Ibid., p. 162
[23] Anita Diamant, *Choosing a Jewish Life*, New York, 1997, p. 213.
[24] Ibid., p. 213
[25] Ibid., p. 210

There are thus numerous cultural issues for Jews-by-choice to overcome as they integrate into the Jewish world. What can we learn from these four interviews and other personal accounts about which conversions are most likely to stick, and perhaps which members of general society we should target in a possible active approach to seeking conversions? The four people interviewed all seem to have been "successful" conversions (although we would have to check up with them in several decades to see if that is completely true) in the sense that all of them are affiliated and feel well integrated into their various Jewish communities. Three of the four explicitly stated that they attend synagogue at least once a month, and all of them made clear in one way or another that they regard Jews and Judaism as their own. I would like to spend a little time discussing one of the significant factors in "successful" conversions that these interviews and other sources seem to identify. They feel a deep, almost mystical connection to the Jewish people and heritage. Both Joanna and Janet attested to feeling, from the time they were little children, that they were meant to be Jews and that Jewish tradition somehow belonged to them. Joanna speaks of Judaism being for her something "deep and peaceful" in her childhood and of finding a connection in her Jewish nursery school which she failed to find in her later Catholic education. Janet tells how she always felt she was Jewish, and how devastating it was for her to find out that technically that was not true. From that moment she always knew she would someday convert. These experiences are paralleled by the description of his connection to Judaism by the writer and academic Julius Lester, an African-American who converted to Reform Judaism[26] as

[26] Because he chose not to be circumcised (Lester 195), Lester's conversion would not be recognized by the Conservative and Orthodox movements.

an adult. This is the statement he uses as the frontpiece to his story, *Lovesong*. It is dated December 1982:

> In the winter of 1974, while I was on retreat at the Trappist monastery in Spencer, Massachusetts, one of the monks told me, "When you know the name by which God knows you, you will know who you are."
>
> I searched for that name with the passion of one seeking the Eternal Beloved. I called myself Father, Writer, Teacher, but God did not answer.
>
> Now I know the name by which God calls me. I am Yaakov Daniel ben Avraham v'Sarah.
>
> I have become who I am. I am who I always was. I am no longer deceived by the black face which stares at me from the mirror.
>
> I am a Jew.[27]

Lester has a complex history because of his identification as a black militant -- one accused of being anti-Semitic, in fact -- in the sixties. He is also the son of a Methodist minister. Nevertheless, he writes of how his favorite composition as a child – whose provenance was then unknown to him – was Kol Nidre,[28] and how in the sixties he often gazed at a small New York Sephardic cemetery, "wishing I could be who they had been – Jews."[29]

The deep connection to Judaism evidenced since childhood on the part of Julius Lester, Joanna, and Janet is in part traceable to one overriding fact. Each of them had Judaism in his or her ancestry. Lester's great-grandfather was named Adolph Altschul and was buried in the Jewish cemetery of Pine Bluff, Arkansas. Joanna's paternal grandfather was Jewish. Janet had a Jewish father and grew up around her Jewish grandparents. In each case the emotions drawing these individuals towards Judaism from early childhood are clearly articulated. There is a palpable sense of love in each one of their stories. It may seem obvious to point out that those descended from Jews will feel

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[27] Julius Lester, *Lovesong*, New York, 1988, p. 1.
[28] Ibid., p. 20
[29] Ibid., p. 37

more connected to Judaism than others do, but the eloquence of these accounts testifies both to the power of the bond and its extent. This is further confirmation of what programs like Outreach have tended to assume. The first place to look for possible new Jews is among the ranks of those who have one Jewish parent, even if they were not Bar/Bat Mitzvah or "officially" raised as Jews in any way. Furthermore, deep affections for Judaism may well occur among those who have only one Jewish grandparent, or even great-grandparent. Ancestry likely remains one of the most powerful factors in giving people the sense since childhood that they were meant to be Jews as is demonstrated by the stories we have cited.

It is worth citing a parallel yet opposite example. In the 1998 book *Turbulent Souls*, Stephen Dubner chronicles his parents' journey from Jewish upbringing to dedicated Catholicism, and his own return to the Jewish fold. What struck me particularly in this case is the overwhelming sense of Dubner's parents when they were young that they had found a home in the Roman Catholic Church. Veronica Dubner – when she was still Florence Greenglass – asked her Catholic dance teacher numerous questions as a young woman about the Christian religion, and she was encouraged by her to read more about it in the New Testament. Florence prayed daily for guidance from God as a priest had taught her, and one day at morning Mass she felt Him give it. "If she were meant to embrace this Messiah," writes Stephen Dubner of his mother, "surely he would summon her."[30]

And so he did. At Mass one morning before rehearsal, she listened intently to the priest's sermon. He cited the Gospel of John: *God said, This is my beloved son in whom I am well-pleased; hear him.*

[30] Stephen J. Dubner, Turbulent Souls, New York, 1998, p. 29.

Hear him – listen to Jesus, and do what he said. The instructions could not have been simpler, or more welcome. Florence, having exposed her heart, was now rewarded with the kiss of God upon her ear. The shadows of her soul were flooded with sunlight; a sublime peace settled over her.[31]

Shortly thereafter Florence Greenglass was baptized. Both she and, somewhat independently, her future husband, felt the same kind of automatic affinity and love for Catholicism that Janet and Joanna felt for Judaism. This is evidence that a sense of "rightness" is not unique to those who become Jews, but may be something in the phenomenology of religion itself which attracts different people in various ways and at different times depending on their experiences. This would be a good area for further study.

Unlike the cases we have just cited, Veronica Dubner did not develop a connection to Catholicism due to a Roman Catholic in her family tree. She found an intimate connection to that faith as a searching young adult. Part of the impetus for this may have been the influence of her dance teacher. Similarly, Jim – who did not have Judaism in his ancestry and did not feel the need to be Jewish as a child – exhibits some of the same traits as Veronica. As an adult he became friends with Jews who exposed him to some of the traditions of Jewish life and he began to feel a spiritual home in Judaism which he had by nature never felt in the Catholic Church. Whereas even the priest understood he was "not ready" to receive Communion as a child, Jim just felt like he "got" Jewish services as an adult. Furthermore, although Kwan's story is in some sense the most conventional – she converted largely for marriage – she also testified that Judaism did not feel inherently strange to her. She also has seemingly integrated well into the Jewish community and become fairly active in her synagogue.

[31] Ibid., p. 29

We can thus cite various factors which in different ways and combinations influence people to find a spiritual home in Judaism (or indeed in any religion). One is the connection of ancestry. However, the combination of a not very strong childhood religious base with later influential friends or mentors from a given faith community has great power as well. This we can perhaps see in the cases of Jim and Veronica Dubner. Similarly, Kwan did not have a very strongly religiously associated home and it seems that Judaism clicked for her as well when she began to be involved in it (She stated that she did not feel that she was adopting something foreign). There are two overarching factors, then, which unite all four of our interviewees. One is *the primacy of childhood experiences*. All four had either a sense of lack of connection to their parent religion in the home or in church as children or strong exposure to Judaism while young. Joanna's description of her automatic connection to her Jewish nursery school is perhaps the best example of this. This factor fits in with research that suggests the age of greatest educational impact is the pre-elementary school age. For the Jewish community this means that, however we perceive the need to create new Jews, we should be aware of how important pre-school and synagogue children's programs are in the scheme of things. The second factor is *positive social experiences* relating to Judaism. All four of our subjects had, at some point in their lives, connections to Jewish friends or a Jewish community which left a deep impression on them. Joanna had her preschool, Janet had her grandparents' house, Jim had the Jewish friends he went to lectures with, and Kwan had her fiancé and a synagogue she liked.

In conclusion, I would like to point out that probably the broadest suggestion of these interviews and anecdotes is that there are tangible factors – relating to upbringing,

experience, and personality – which cause some people to find affinity and a sense of connection with Judaism while others (even if they convert for marriage or whatever reason) just never seem to "get bitten with the bug." Since it seems likely that such a sense can be true for people becoming active in religions besides Judaism, the Jewish community would do well to study all the factors which go into creating a person's religious identity. If the Reform Outreach program is thought a good idea – even to the extent that Schindler takes it – such a study might suggest where to focus our energies. It is an encouraging sign for the Jewish world – and perhaps to all those who belong to a faith community – that religion still has the power to inspire and guide people of all backgrounds and creeds.