



WHY DO PEOPLE CONSIDER CONVERTING TO JUDAISM?

There are many reasons. Often an interreligious marriage sparks an interest in the non-Jewish partner that can lead to a desire to share the religion of his or her spouse or partner. Similarly, when an interfaith couple decides to raise children, the non-Jew may initially decide to explore Judaism in order to seek a common religion for the family. Other people seeking religious meaning in their lives, with or without any connection to a Jewish mate, find Judaism offers them the best medium of religious expression.

DO JEWS SEEK CONVERTS?

Centuries ago, Jews did engage in proselytizing, particularly during the Greco-Roman period of Jewish history, when thousands of non-Jews living in Asia Minor, embraced Judaism. The destruction of the Roman Empire and mortal threats against Jews who sought converts marked the end of such efforts to gain converts.

Judaism respects the religious beliefs of others, as well as the convictions of those who choose no religion. At the same time, Judaism is an open religion that readily encourages and welcomes those who look to it for fulfillment and guidance in meeting life's challenges. In recent years, the Reform movement, through its outreach efforts, has taken a more active

approach to seeking out people who might choose to become Jews. (This pamphlet is an example of such an approach.)

HOW DO I KNOW IF JUDAISM IS RIGHT FOR ME?

The best way is to learn as much as you can about Judaism and begin to practice those aspects of Judaism that most appeal to you. Seek out Jewish friends, Jewish family members, or a synagogue community for support. As you study and try out Jewish practice and customs at your own pace, you will become comfortable with them and prepare for further steps.

An excellent way to get a sense of the traditions and practices of Judaism is to take an Introduction to Judaism course. The Reform movement sponsors these courses throughout North America. You may call a Reform congregation, the Union district office nearest you (see the list on the back of this pamphlet), or visit our website at urj.org/conversion for more information.

IF I TAKE AN INTRODUCTION TO JUDAISM CLASS, WILL I BE EXPECTED TO CONVERT?

No. These courses are offered to anyone who wants to learn more about Judaism. They are most often attended by individuals considering conversion, by interfaith couples learning together about Judaism and making decisions about whether to have a Jewish home, as well as by born Jews who want to learn more about their own heritage. Although many people do take the course as part of their process of choosing Judaism, there are no assumptions or expectations held about people taking the class.

IF I DECIDE THAT I WANT TO BECOME A JEW, HOW WOULD I GO ABOUT IT?

First, make an appointment with a rabbi. The rabbi will not only discuss the process and implications of becoming a Jew, but also explore with you your reasons for wanting to do so. In earlier generations,

rabbis would discourage potential Jews-by-choice, turning them away three times to test how serious the were. This custom is seldom followed today, but most rabbis still endeavor to impress upon the potential convert seriousness of such a choice.

People considering conversion are expected to study Jewish theology, rituals, history, culture, and customs and to begin incorporating Jewish practice into their lives. The scope of the course of study will vary from rabbi to rabbi and community to community. Most now require a course in basic Judaism and individual study with a rabbi, as well as attendance at services and participation in home practice and synagogue life.

Keep in mind that you are free to choose the rabbi with whom you will work. Talk to more than one rabbi and find one with whom you are comfortable. This rabbi will then become your guide every step of the way through your conversion.

IF I BECOME A JEW, WOULD PEOPLE REFER TO ME AS A "CONVERT"? IS THERE SOME OTHER, MORE POPULAR TERM TO USE?

In Judaism, people who become Jews have full Jewish status in every circumstance. For this reason, there may be some objection to any distinctive term that identifies a person who has chosen to become a Jew. On the other hand, many people are proud to let others know they are converts to Judaism. As the number of people becoming Jews continues to increase and as various Jewish religious institutions develop programs to encourage and assist people in this process, it has become common to talk more publicly about choosing Judaism. Consequently, a number of terms have come into common usage, including "convert" and "Jew-by-choice," often used interchangeably.

IF I BECOME A JEW WHAT WOULD BE THE ATTITUDE OF OTHER JEWS TOWARD ME?

Judaism has always welcomed those who voluntarily become Jews and considers them full-fledged

members of the Jewish community. The Hebrew Bible, as well as later Jewish texts, includes examples of such individuals. The most famous and honored example appears in the Book of Ruth, where Ruth joins the Jewish people and eventually becomes the great-great-grandmother of King David, from whose descendants, according to Jewish tradition, the Messiah will come.

In our day, Jews wholeheartedly welcome those who have chosen to become Jews. While past generations may not have been so welcoming, we now see that our Jewish community is made stronger by those who choose Judaism. As more and more Jews-by-choice enter the Jewish community, as Reform Jewish Outreach promotes education about Jewish views of conversion, and as public discussion of such choice grows more commonplace, Jews-by-choice have found that their acceptance in the Jewish community has grown. In fact, Reform Judaism is proud of the many congregational leaders who have converted to Judaism, not to mention a number of rabbis and cantors who are Jews-by-choice.

IF I CONVERT WITH A REFORM RABBI, WILL ALL RABBIS CONSIDER ME A JEW?

Reform, Reconstructionist, and, under certain circumstances, Conservative rabbis recognize the validity of conversions performed by rabbis of all branches of Judaism. Many Orthodox rabbis,



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however, do not recognize non-Orthodox conversions. Your sponsoring rabbi will be able to discuss further any implications for you of conversion under his or her auspices.

IF I BECOME A JEW, WILL I BE EXPECTED TO SEPARATE FROM MY FAMILY OF ORIGIN?

By no means. Most Jews-by-choice maintain warm relationships with their family of origin. Conversion to a new religion does not suddenly make you over into something altogether new; nor does it cut you off from old family ties or memories.

However, some converts to Judaism find that, especially initially, their family may be hurt or confused by their choice. Such feelings often result from misunderstandings or a lack of knowledge about Judaism and are, therefore, perfectly understandable. If it happens with your family, what will help immensely is your patience, as well as a willingness to discuss your choice and to show your family that you've not abandoned them.

IF I DECIDE NOT TO BECOME A JEW BUT I HAVE A PARTNER WHO IS, CAN OUR CHILDREN BE RAISED AS JEWS?

Yes. Many Interfaith couples have decided to raise their children as Jews. In many families today, non-Jewish parents play a key role in providing for their children's Jewish education, as well as creating a supportive Jewish home environment. The more you learn about Judaism, the easier this will be for you. Many Jews see such parents as the givers of a precious gift and as a blessing to the Jewish people.

IF I DECIDE NOT TO BECOME A JEW, WOULD I BE WELCOMED TO WORSHIP IN A SYNAGOGUE WITH MY JEWISH FAMILY?

Most Reform and Reconstructionist and some Conservative and Orthodox congregations warmly welcome interfaith families to participate in various ways in synagogue life. In following the famous verse

from the Book of Isaiah 56:7, "For My house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples," almost all Jewish worship services are open to the public, so you and your family would be welcome to attend. Shabbat services are held on Friday evening and Saturday mornings. Call the specific congregation during the week to find out the times of worship.

IF I'M NOT YET READY TO CONVERT TO JUDAISM OR IF I DECIDE NOT TO, WHAT OPTIONS DO MY JEWISH PARTNER AND I HAVE FOR OUR WEDDING CEREMONY?

This is a very sensitive issue, on which there is a broad range of opinions. We encourage you to seek out a rabbi with whom you feel comfortable and have a thorough discussion about options.

No matter what kind of wedding ceremony you have, Reform Judaism considers itself a portal to Jewish life for intermarried families. Through organized Outreach programming and a general atmosphere of openness, an interfaith couple will find a welcome Reform congregations.

WHERE CAN I GET MORE INFORMATION ABOUT JUDAISM AND THE PROCESS OF BECOMING A JEW?

For more general information about Judaism, the following books offer accessible explanations and answers to more of your questions.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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Every Person's Guide to Judaism. Rabbi Stephen J. Einstein and Lydia Kukoff. NY: URJ Press, 1989.

What is a Jew? Rabbi Morris N. Kertzer, revised by Rabbi Lawrence A. Hoffman. NY: Collier Books, Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1997.



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Questions About Conversion

Becoming A Jew

Each year in North America, thousands of people convert to Judaism. While each person's path into Jewish life is unique, there are many shared questions

This pamphlet answers some of these basic questions and suggests additional resources.

