

# **‘Your People, My People’**

## **Conversion to Judaism and Jews by Choice**

From *Jewish Affairs*, Spring 1995

Dana Evan Kaplan

\*

South African Jewry stands at a crossroads. Diminished by emigration, it forms a community of less than a hundred thousand souls. But whether these Jews all remain in the new South Africa or whether some of them choose to emigrate in the coming years, a significant Jewish community will nevertheless remain in South Africa for the foreseeable future.

However, whereas in previous generations most South African Jews – like Jews all over the Diaspora – stayed in close proximity to other Jews socially, young Jews today are much more prone to socialize in mixed circles. Despite the fact that increasing numbers of young adults are becoming intensely observant, others are drifting away from the organized Jewish community. Whether this is the result of the changing social formation in the new South Africa, or simply the result of greater acculturation, the result is the same. Increasing numbers of Jews are meeting, dating, and eventually marrying non-Jewish partners, a disturbing phenomenon which has been extensively studied in the United States where it is an intensifying problem.<sup>1</sup>

This changing social pattern has brought conversion to Judaism into new prominence. In the United States, each of the major denominations in Judaism has examined and re-evaluated its approach to conversion.<sup>2</sup> Ever since the

experience of Ruth and Naomi, we have known of non-Jews who have of their own free choice decided to join the Jewish people:

And Ruth said, Entreat me not to leave thee or to return from following after thee: for whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge; thy people shall be my people, and they God my God: Where thou diest, will I die, and there will I be buried: the Lord do so to me, and more also, if aught but death part thee and me (Ruth 1:16-17)

In throwing in her destiny with that of her mother-in-law and accepting Naomi’s God as her own, Ruth commits herself to a transformation of identity that goes far beyond strictly theological issues.<sup>3</sup>

Becoming a Jew by choice unequivocally involves assuming a new identity; it requires the almost complete remodeling of the self.

The Progressive Movement in Judaism encourages the non-Jewish spouses of Jewish partners, as well as other interested individuals, couples and families, to become proselytes and to experience the joy such a conversion can bring.<sup>4</sup> As a Jewish community, we all bear a responsibility for teaching Judaism to those who come to us as proselytes, and of integrating these Jews by Choice fully into our midst. Each of these two aspects of the Jews by Choice process – teaching and integration – is critical in its own way to the successful, full merging into our community of these new Jews.

A prospective proselyte faces issues which are as much psycho-social as they are religious. While acceptance of One God and the observance of the Saturday Sabbath are important, equally important may be the emotional acceptance that the potential convert can give to Judaism, as well as the degree of acceptance that such a convert feels emanating from the established Jewish community.<sup>5</sup> The centrality of reworking one's identity for an emotionally fulfilling religious conversion is recognized by all the rabbinical and congregational bodies. Various formal and informal activities are currently being developed and implemented to facilitate this process.<sup>6</sup>

As Director of a 'Jews by Choice' programme in Cape Town, I sit on the Religious Affairs Advisory Committee that interviews prospective Jews by Choice. The majority of these prospective converts are in a committed relationship with a Jew, and may have experienced subtle or overt pressure to *megayer*. While such pressure can be coercive and destructive, it can also be the stimulus that motivates couples to seek a spiritual path they can travel

together. One conclusion that should not automatically be drawn is that most of these candidates are converting solely on account of their partner. Indeed, one of the reasons such candidates for conversion may have been attracted to the Jewish partner in the first place may have been that partner's commitment to Judaism. In such cases, a latent interest in Judaism may become a manifest dedication to the faith as a serious relationship with a Jewish partner develops. In the same way, those who independently and individually seek conversion may share much in common with those Jews by Choice candidates who are drawn to the faith by their Jewish partners. The initial impetus in each case differs, however, and the social framework within which an individual becomes Jewish is much more solid for those with a Jewish partner, particularly if he or she has a supportive family.

In recent years many writers have urged the Jewish community, and the various denominations in Judaism within it, actively to seek proselytes. The argument offered is that Judaism has represented the purest form of ethical monotheism for almost four thousand years. Paradoxically, those who seek to promote conversion to Judaism stress that Judaism's universality – its teaching that one does not have to be Jewish in order to find God – increases its attractiveness for many Gentiles. Equally stressed in this regard is the emphasis Judaism places on actions performed in this world, rather than on any rewards to be gained in the afterlife. This emphasis, it is argued, has propelled Jews to the forefront of the quest for a democratic society, especially marked in South Africa, where a number of the leading white South African

fighters against apartheid were Jews. While many of them had little or no formal links with the Jewish community, their inspiration can be clearly traced back to Judaic origins. The late Joe Slovo is an obvious example.

It has further been suggested that the current buzzwords in the Jewish community – continuity and survival – are actually the wrong words. While we desire to bring up a new generation of people vigorously committed to their faith, and want Judaism to survive as a religion, these desires are not enough. We cannot convince the younger generation that it is important to be loyal to the Jewish people simply by making an emotional appeal to them on the grounds that we are struggling to survive as a distinct group in a pluralistic society. The response to such an emotional appeal may very well be ‘So what?’ Instead, we need to be both able and willing to convert the central religious ideal of our faith – the Covenantal mission of our people ‘to be a light unto the nations’ – to an apprehension of God and to a steady process of religious growth. We need to be able to demonstrate to our young people the innate spiritual possibilities of our religion, and the many paths to awareness and enlightenment which it allows and encourages.

Moreover, even if we could be assured of continuity and survival, is that really all we want? Prophetic Judaism urges us to feel a deep longing, to think, to evaluate and then to formulate concrete plans of action based on our religious conceptions of the world. Judaism has never been, and should never become, a religion which exists only for a few die-hard fundamentalist believers functioning on the distant margins of society. Rather, we must

strive for a religion which is dynamic and developing, a religion which tries to influence the world beyond itself at the same time as it absorbs influence outside itself.

Most prospective proselytes point to the centrality of the family and the home as one reason for their choosing Judaism. Jews often say that their description of Friday night family dinners elicits strong positive reactions from their non-Jewish friends, many of whom may lack such a vehicle for family support and togetherness. Observance of *shabbat* is unquestionably one of the most important precepts of the Torah, and *shabbat* itself is a day cherished and celebrated by all Jews who take their heritage seriously. Many other features of Judaism and Jewish life can similarly be highlighted as positive aspects of the Judaic religious heritage which have much to offer the spiritual and emotional growth of a prospective convert.<sup>7</sup> All these are perfectly legitimate reasons for a person to want to adopt Judaism. But one point should be stressed: one should come to the Jewish religion because Judaism will enhance one’s sensitivities and understanding, and add to the meaning one derives from life. Conversion should not take place solely to placate a spouse or a spouse’s parents.<sup>8</sup> Religion must be authentic if it is to have any spiritual resonance. If we use it solely to provide a stamp of familial approval, it becomes an exercise in futility. Rather, embracing Judaism should be, or should become, a life-enhancing process which helps us to find greater meaning in life and helps us to cope with the good and the bad, the happy and the sad. We become part of a community which celebrates the weekly and yearly calendar together. We feel a connection

to each other. While it is vitally important not to allow a prospective Jew by Choice to overstate the nature of that emotional bond between congregants of any particular congregation and Jews generally, we nevertheless share a common sense of purpose and destiny.

Yet there are problems as well. How well we, in each congregation as well as in the Jewish community as a whole, help to integrate into our religious community those who come to us as Jews by Choice will be a major factor in determining how active they will remain in five, ten or fifteen years' time. The guidelines produced by the Committee on *Gerut*, that Committee which deals with the issue of conversion to Judaism for the Central Conference of American Rabbis, the Association of Reform Rabbis to which all Progressive Rabbis belong, stress this:

The warmth and vigour with which we accept these Jews and integrate them into our communities and activities are among our highest priorities and obligations.<sup>9</sup>

These sober imperatives notwithstanding, this resolution wholeheartedly to accept new converts is difficult for many of us to carry into practice, particularly if we have always had and cherished an ethnic Jewish identity. If for us 'Jewishness' means speaking Yiddish, coming from a particular neighborhood, liking special foods, and bearing a distinctive appearance, then a Jew by Choice may not seem to our casual view very 'Jewish'. No matter how committed such people are to our religion, to our synagogue, they remain, at best, second-class Jews. As Rabbi Perry Netter has remarked: 'If Ruth lived today and

knew how difficult it was to be accepted as a convert, she might not have done it.'<sup>10</sup>

Nevertheless it seems to be that at least in the Progressive Jewish community, there is a great deal of acceptance. As we approach the end of the century, increasingly fewer of us, whether born Jewish or Jews by Choice, know much – if any – Yiddish, or come from Jewish ghettos. We are all acculturated South Africans, and we all accept that Judaism admonishes us to receive with an open heart all who come as sincere proselytes. The question of how far and how sincerely we receive the proselyte is not simply an issue of how we relate to the people who approach us every year asking to join a 'Jews by Choice' programme. Its importance far transcends that. How we deal with the proselyte, now and in the future, will reveal much about how we intend to deal with the world at large. How we deal with the proselyte will reveal to us how we view our Judaism. How we deal with the proselyte will show us in which direction we are pointing our religion as the twenty-first century approaches.

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Mayer, E., *Love and Tradition: Marriage Between Jews and Christians* (New York, 1985), and Cowan, P. and Cowan, R., *Mixed Blessings: Marriage between Jews and Christians* (New York, 1987).

<sup>2</sup> There are numerous representatives of each of the three major Jewish religious movements writing on conversion. To name but two from each movement there are Maurice Lamm and J. Simcha Cohen (Orthodox); Stephen Lerner and Lena Romanoff (Conservative); and Alexander Schindler and Joseph Edelheit (Reform).

<sup>3</sup> The pioneering study of this commitment is Herman, S.N., *Jewish Identity: A Social-Psychological Perspective* (New York, 1977). The focus Herman gives to Israel has since been adapted, but it may well fit the South African situation better than the American model.

<sup>4</sup> There are personal testimonies given by Jews by Choice, many of which describe and discuss in depth the process of identity-formation involved. One of the most fascinating is that by a black proselyte. See Lester, J., *Love Song: Becoming a Jew* (New York, 1988).

<sup>5</sup> See Ross, D.S., 'Psycho-Social Issues in Conversion', *Journal of Reform Judaism* 36:1, Winter 1989, pp. 31-52; Romanoff, L., *Your People, My People: Finding Acceptance and Fulfillment as a Jew by Choice* (Philadelphia, 1990).

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, the programme developed by Rabbi Michael Oppenheimer at the Suburban Temple in Beachwood, Ohio in *Reform Judaism Outreach – The Idea Book* (New York, 1988), p. 47.

<sup>7</sup> See Belin, D., *What Judaism Offers You* (New York, 1992).

<sup>8</sup> Shapiro, R. 'Conversion: Considering a New Paradigm', *The Reconstructionist*, July-Aug. 1986, p. 13.

<sup>9</sup> CCAR.DivreGerut: *Guidelines Concerning Proselytism* (New York, 1983). The Chairman of the Committee on *Gerut* at this time was Rabbi Joseph A. Edelheit.

<sup>10</sup> Netter, P. 'Will Your God Really Be My God?', *Moment*, Feb. 1989, pp. 44-47.