

Jewish Religious Conversion in South Africa Today

Dana Evan Kaplan

The study of conversion to Judaism in South Africa today allows us to view a number of topics from a perspective different from that which is usually taken.¹ First, the study of religion in South Africa has focused primarily on Christianity and, to a lesser degree, on Islam. Judaism has been sorely neglected, with only a handful of researchers undertaking studies on any aspect of Judaism in South Africa.² Also, most of the limited numbers of studies that have been made focus on the Jewish community as a socioeconomic or ethnic group rather than from the perspective of analyzing religious trends. Some of the studies focus on how other South Africans viewed or view Jews, or how individual Jews built great careers in business or industry. In short, the study of South African Judaism has not been extensively researched, and a study of how South African Judaism views conversion to Judaism will contribute to a clearer understanding of South African Judaism as a religious phenomenon.³

In fact, the topic of conversion to Judaism in South Africa has never been methodologically studied by any researcher in sociology or any other field. One study from 1973, by Stuart Buxbaum, reports on synagogue marriages in South Africa 1935–66, and indicated “the low number of Jewish marriages and their gradual decline.”⁴

Buxbaum reports that an important reason for the low number of synagogue marriages during the period that he studied is the occurrence of mixed marriage.⁵ He admits, however, that there is no quantitative information on the intermarriage rate because of the fact that when such marriages are solemnized at a magistrate's court, neither the bride's nor the groom's religious affiliation is recorded. Little sociological research has been done since. Professor Allie Dubb of the University of the Witwatersrand began research

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on converts in Johannesburg in the 1970s but never completed his work or published his findings.⁶

From another perspective, conversion to Judaism has been receiving growing attention from scholars in the United States and elsewhere. The topic has been studied in the context of a very open and pluralistic society.⁷ How the phenomenon of conversion to Judaism will differ in the context of South African society will give a new perspective on how conversion to Judaism should be seen in a comparative framework.

Religious conversion has recently been delineated by Lewis Rambo as a seven-stage process. Although these stages can and will vary, the process will frequently follow a model where the potential convert experiences a crisis, engages in a quest, encounters an advocate of a specific religion or denomination, interacts with that advocate in a way that helps the convert build a commitment to the new religion, becomes a convert to that religion, and becomes an adherent of that religion.⁸

In the Jewish religion, this dynamic is certainly possible. Whatever the psychological dynamics at work, the specifics of the actual conversion will include circumcision for males, immersion for both males and females, and a conversion ceremony.⁹ The talmudic views on conversion are accepted as the basis of current Jewish religious policy by both the Reform and the Orthodox movements in South Africa. The Orthodox, however, adhere to the talmudic procedures and expectations expressed in the above quotation and elsewhere in rabbinic literature;¹⁰ the Reform use the talmudic material as one criterion, and add and/or change the expectations and procedures based on a series of modern criteria of appropriateness.¹¹

Advocacy of conversion to Judaism has been perceived of as antithetical to Judaic principles. This popular perception—particularly strong in South Africa—is based on the fact that as Christianity established itself as the state religion of the Roman empire, the church pushed for legislation that would effectively ban Jewish proselytization. The Jewish leaders then responded by turning a necessity into a virtue and developing a principled nonproselytization religious policy.

The precise development of Jewish religious attitudes toward conversion is a complex subject, but recent research confirms that biblical and early talmudic attitudes were much more accepting than medieval attitudes.¹² The emancipation of European Jews in the eighteenth century suddenly allowed a much greater degree of social integration than had previously been possible, and this created a whole new social dynamic that is still being played out more than two centuries later.

From the 1960s onward, Jews in Western, English-speaking countries have seen a rapid rise in the intermarriage rate. Although such rates varied from country to country—and even from place to place within each country—South Africa's intermarriage rate remains low by international standards, but it too has risen substantially. This rate includes only those unions where a Jew marries a non-Jew. In cases where non-Jews embrace Judaism before marriage, the marriage is regarded as a Jewish-Jewish union and hence would not be considered an intermarriage.

* * *

In South Africa today, most Jews-by-Choice—of those individuals who choose to convert to Judaism through a spiritual enlightenment—are women seeking to embrace the religion of their boyfriend or fiancé in anticipation of marriage. This requires us to readjust our conception of the term conversion in order to understand the phenomenon of conversion to Judaism in the South African context.

In South Africa, there are only two denominations of Judaism: the Orthodox, the earlier and more numerous, and the Reform.¹³ Orthodox Judaism holds the belief that God gave the Torah at Mount Sinai. This revelation consisted of both the written Torah—the five books of Moses—and the oral Torah, which was later written down in the form of the Talmud. The rabbis have been handed down the divine tradition in an unbroken chain of transmission from Sinai;¹⁴ the rabbis interpret Jewish law in line with this divine transmission, elucidating the religious teachings of the earlier sages, but never consciously abrogating a previously ordained law.¹⁵

In contrast to this, Reform Judaism views Judaism as an evolving religious tradition. Most Reform Judaic thinkers would see each period of Jewish history as producing important religious insights, as well as a specific literature, culture, and creative expression. Reform Jews must evaluate the four thousand years of Jewish tradition and accept those aspects of the tradition that are spiritually meaningful for each individual and each community today.¹⁶

Orthodoxy has always been the dominant form of Judaism for most South African Jews, and most would therefore prefer that if their grown-up child is to marry a convert, that the conversion be carried out under Orthodox auspices. But most Jewish parents in South Africa even today—in dramatic contrast to most American Jewish parents—would be extremely concerned if their child became romantically involved with a partner from a non-Jewish background.

In South Africa, the community historically was very homogeneous, and intermarriage was—and still is—severely frowned upon as a break with Jewish ethnic identity. Further, the Jews were part of the white minority which, until 1994, was the privileged racial group in the country. The Apartheid government promoted separated ethnic and racial identities for all the various sociologically distinct groups, and this included the Jews. Each ethnic group was encouraged to preserve and nurture its group cohesion, so the opposite of the melting-pot phenomenon developed. Rejection of intermarriage was thus consistent with, rather than in opposition to, the basic ethos of the social dynamics of South African society.

When Rabbi Moses Cyrus Weiler arrived in 1933 as the first Reform rabbi in the country, he understood that it was crucial to nurture the South African Jewish ethnic identity. A movement accepting too many converts would be perceived by the general Jewish community as lacking in Jewish atmosphere and would not be supported.

Weiler was concerned that if Reform encouraged conversions, the entire movement would become stigmatized as the place for converts, whom the Orthodox would not accept, and most people who were born Jews would avoid affiliation with the Progressive movement. For this reason, he prohibited all conversions for the first five years after his arrival.¹⁷ This blanket refusal to convert anyone for any reason was, of course, difficult to reconcile with Progressive religious thought. When Lily Montagu complained that a particularly devout prospective proselyte was not being allowed to convert, the leader of the Liberal Jewish Movement in England and the president of the World Union of Progressive Judaism wrote to Rabbi Weiler to object.

The policy was reluctantly modified, but Weiler's emphasis on building a movement primarily for born Jews—which would seem chauvinistic and almost racist in today's terms—was critical for the success of Progressive Judaism in South Africa at the time.

The Reform movement of South Africa was, in its heyday, a dynamic and respected religious denomination in the country. But with rising emigration rates after 1976 and a strong trend toward day-school education (all day schools in South Africa are under Orthodox auspices), the percentage support that Reform could claim has declined. The movement has been able to maintain its numbers to some degree on account of the rising numbers of conversionary couples who converted through the Progressive movement and then remained members of their Reform temple.

The South African Reform Movement has in recent years adapted a more lenient policy on conversions, including allowing for a wide

diversity of both beliefs and practices. It follows the World Progressive policy of allowing a diversity of beliefs and practices. As the Central Conference of American Rabbis' (CCAR) recent document on conversion stated, the movement "represents a diversity of views on theology and ritual observance."¹⁸ Therefore, any set of guidelines on conversion "seeks to establish a working consensus of practice within the Reform Rabbinate rather than a set of standardized requirements in matters concerning *Gerim*."¹⁹

The Reform program varies from temple to temple in South Africa to a slightly greater degree than does the Orthodox program, which is centrally run by a national *Beit Din*. Nevertheless, the fundamentals of Judaism that should be taught include ritual observances of *Shabbat*, festivals, and life-cycle *mitzvot* in the home and the synagogue; basic theology and values; Jewish history; liturgy and the Hebrew language. The difference in approach is not so much the subjects that are covered, but rather the non-*halakhic* approach to each topic.

The South African Reform Movement is a constituent of the World Union for Progressive Judaism and is similar to Progressive religious movements in other English-speaking countries. Although in some superficial ways the South African Reform Movement appears similar to American Conservative Judaism, South African Reform is not in reality closer to Conservative Judaism than it is to the World Progressive Movement. As Jocelyn Hellig writes:

Observers often gain the mistaken impression that reform Judaism in South Africa is no different from conservative Judaism in America. Conservative Judaism regards the *halakhah* as binding but permits greater flexibility with regard to its interpretation than does orthodoxy. South African Reform, like Reform everywhere else, emphasises the ongoing nature of revelations, seeing Judaism as dynamic and growing. Judaism, it believes, continues to be adapted by legitimate exponents for its time and circumstances throughout the ages. This process, once passive, has not become reactivated. It views many of the historic developments in Judaism as reforms that were introduced throughout the ages in order to make the religion meaningful for Jews in their particular historical situation. Thus, Progressive Judaism sees itself as being as old as Judaism itself.²⁰

This mistaken impression may be caused by the approximate fifty-fifty Hebrew-English division of prayers, whereas in an American Classical Reform temple the percentage of English would be much higher. But this is a strictly cosmetic difference and, in any case, most Reform synagogues in America are moving toward a Hebrew-

English division of prayers much closer to that of the South African norm than was previously the case.

The two movements thus have extremely different—almost opposite—theologies reflected in their positions on the necessity of the observance of Jewish law. Since Orthodoxy believes that it is a God-given commandment to follow the *halakhah*, there is no possibility that a potential convert will be allowed to compromise on this point. The result is that during the two- to three-year conversion period that the Orthodox *Beit Din* overseeing the conversion requires, the potential convert must slowly begin the observance of more and more of the Jewish law. As each unit is taught, the prospective Jew-by-Choice is then eased into the observance of a whole new category of laws relating to *Shabbat* observance, *kashrut* (the eating of proper food items), and the proper observance of the various Jewish holidays. Thus the length of the program derives from the amount of material to be taught, but also allows time for the prospective convert to integrate him- or herself into the Orthodox community and fully commit him- or herself to the observance of the full spectrum of Jewish law. In contrast to this, the Reform program is one year in duration throughout the country and allows each prospective convert to choose the ceremonies and observances that seem to be most religiously inspiring to that individual. The result is that there is much greater flexibility and far fewer nonnegotiable religious demands.

Over the past several years, the Orthodox *Beit Din* have become increasingly strict with the prospective conversion candidates. The candidate must now express an increasing degree of conformity and a willingness to adhere to Jewish law, including the strict observance of *kashrut* and *Shabbat*.²¹ This is too onerous for most couples, who are completely aware that few in their own communities strictly adhere to those standards. Thus, most couples will turn to the Reform Movement for the conversion.

This tendency is particularly pronounced in Cape Town, where Orthodoxy is socially strong but nonobservant in character. In Johannesburg, a much larger number of young Jews are becoming very devout in their belief and practice, so there is much greater support for a truly Orthodox lifestyle. Further, the greater number of Jews may result in a lower percentage of "interdating," and hence there may be fewer couples—percentage wise—who have the need to convert in order to bring the female partner into the male partner's religious community.

In addition, social status has become an even more important factor than before in choice of affiliation, resulting in almost all Jewish-born couples preferring an Orthodox nominal affiliation

rather than belonging to a Reform congregation. The result has been an "exchange of population," with Reform losing almost all Jewish-born couples while gaining conversionary couples (male Orthodox-born and female Reform convert). As a result, the Reform congregations around the country that are still viable—mostly in Johannesburg and Cape Town—are filled with elderly congregants and young conversionary couples. If the Orthodox rabbinate had adopted a more flexible conversion policy, they could have practically wiped the Reform Movement off the map. As it stands, hundreds of couples rely on Reform for the legitimacy of the partner's conversion and—in the approximately 90 percent of cases where the Jew-by-Choice is a woman—for the Jewish legitimacy of the children. In Cape Town alone, we are now performing approximately forty conversions a year, which is about 80 to 90 percent of all conversions to Judaism in Cape Town annually.²²

While this trend has saved the Reform Movement numerically, it has surely stigmatized Reform congregations as congregations of converts. In the South African Jewish context, continuity with the Lithuanian Jewish past is extremely important, and being Jewish is viewed as an ethnicity primarily, albeit an ethnicity expressed in religious terms. Therefore, the perception that most young congregants in Progressive congregations are Jews-by-Choice will further drive away potential born-Jew congregants to Orthodoxy. But I do not believe that it makes much difference—the social pressure to be nominally Orthodox creates this dynamic, and there is nothing much that the Reform Movement can do to attract large numbers of Jewish-born couples. That said, I do believe that clarifying and publicizing a clear and coherent vision of our Judaism can do a great deal in at least helping nominally Orthodox South African Jews to understand Reform Judaism and, more broadly, pluralistic Judaic religious alternatives.

Generally, there are two schools of thought concerning conversion in the Reform Movement in South Africa today. One view holds that it is best to convert as many people as possible, and that this strengthens the movement numerically, as well as providing a sizable income for the congregations. If many converts and their spouses quit the congregation, and others stay as members but are completely inactive, nothing is lost and the converts who are active give the movement an added advantage.

The other view is that the vast majority of the converts who "disappear" immediately following their conversion stigmatizes the Reform Movement terribly in the general Jewish community. This has created the image of the Reform Movement as a place to "dump intermarriage problems" and get Jewish legitimization that the Orthodox will not provide. The fact that the Reform conversion

process is viewed by many in the general Jewish community as a sham harms the image of the Reform Movement.

According to this second view, a liberal conversion policy has destroyed the image of Progressive Judaism as a serious religious movement. Today, we are known for one thing—our conversion. But, in comparison with American Reform criteria, South African Progressive standards for conversion are strong. The movement generally requires weekly classes over one year. In congregations where the rabbis control the process—some congregations have religious affairs advisory committees dominated by lay people—the rabbi may require regular synagogue attendance and other obligations. Nevertheless, many would agree with Rabbi Avidan, who stated, "Because of our liberal conversion policy, we have been inundated with mixed marriages and people who have joined us out of convenience. The intensity of the ideological commitment of the people in the movement has considerably declined. While we still have some people from the past who really care about Progressive Judaism, many of the new members actually nurse a fondness and even a preference for Orthodox Judaism. This is shocking—but it is true."²³

* * *

The South African case is different from many other Diaspora communities in that it is a very close community in which most individuals place a high value on Jewish continuity. Therefore, a high percentage of Jewish men planning to marry women born into other religious traditions will ask their partners to convert to Judaism before marriage. In addition, the South African situation is unusual in that there are only two options for conversion—the Orthodox or the Reform movement. Both have central policy-making structures, and both are stricter than in many other countries. The Orthodox are particularly strict and, as a result, as many as 80 percent of all Jews-by-Choice candidates convert through the Reform Movement.²⁴ This is an anomaly in a country where between 80 and 91 percent of all synagogue members are Orthodox. It also has major implications for the future of the Jewish community of the country, since the Orthodox rabbinate does not accept the Reform Jews-by-Choice as *halakhic* Jews. Further, the Jews in the two major urban centers—Johannesburg and Cape Town—are developing dramatically different religious dynamics, and this too is influencing conversion patterns. Finally, conversion is still the favored result of an "interdating" relationship, whereas in the United States, England, and even Australia an intermarriage is more likely to result.

The South African social situation, however, was unique in the Apartheid years, and even before, and so the theoretical research on intermarriage in other Western societies must be applied to the South African situation with caution. As Allie Dubb has written: "The situation in South Africa is possibly unique in one important respect. Unlike the United States and, perhaps, some other Western countries, there is no South African ideal of cultural and structural homogeneity. On the contrary, an ideology of pluralism prevails both between and within the various racial groups."²⁵

Dubb wrote those words almost thirty years ago, at the height of the Apartheid years. We will now see whether the dismantling of the Apartheid racial social structure will have any significant impact on Jewish endogamic and exogamic marriage trends.

The South African Jewish community is a very conservative one,²⁶ and political and social changes since 1994 have not resulted in a move toward liberation. On the contrary, the Jews of this country seem to be moving toward greater rather than lesser insularity. Nevertheless, increasing numbers of young people are marrying partners not born as Jews, and many are pressuring their partners to convert. The result is that the Jewish community is receiving a new influx of people, primarily women. Since the Reform conversions are not accepted by the Orthodox rabbinate, the gulf between Reform and Orthodox will grow wider. The question remains, however, how well conversionary Jews will integrate into the Jewish community, and what impact this phenomenon will have on Judaism in the new South Africa.

Author's Note: This article is dedicated in honor of my uncle Herman E. Moskowitz, with much love.

Notes

¹See Dana Evan Kaplan, "Your People, My People—Conversion to Judaism and Jews by Choice," *Jewish Affairs*, vol. 3 (Spring 1995), pp. 87–89.

²The most recent studies of South African Judaism are Jocelyn Hellig, "The Jewish Community in South Africa," in Martin Prozesky and John de Gruchy, eds., *Living Faiths in South Africa* (Cape Town: David Philip, 1995), pp. 155–176; Dana Evan Kaplan, "Judaism and the Jewish Community in the New South Africa," *Judaism* (Summer 1996), vol. 45, no. 3, pp. 350–360.

³On the history of conversion to Judaism in South Africa, see John Simon, "Proselytism in the South African Jewish Community: The Problem, the Prognosis," in Moshe Sharon, ed., *Judaism in the Context of Diverse Civilizations* (Johannesburg: Maksin Publishers, 1993), pp. 221–238.

⁴Stuart Buxbaum, "Synagogue Marriages in South Africa, 1935–66: An

Analysis of Official Statistics," from papers in *Jewish Demography*, 1973. *Jewish Population Studies*, Jerusalem. The Institute of Contemporary Jewry, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem (no date), p. 182. The entire study is on pp. 171–194.

⁵*Ibid.*, p. 185.

⁶Interview with Professor Allie Dubb, Summer 1995, Kaplan Centre for Jewish Studies and Research, Cape Town.

⁷Writing before the 1994 democratic elections, Gideon Shimoni explains, "If American society can in any meaningful sense be called pluralistic, it is a pluralism of a very different order from than of South African society." Shimoni described American society as *laissez faire* pluralism, and pre-1994 South African society as mandatory pluralism, "for the State actively compels strict social separation." Gideon Shimoni, *Jews and Zionism: The South African Experience 1910–1967* (Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 1980), pp. 1–2.

⁸Lewis Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993). I would like to thank Professor Chuck Wana-maker for bringing this book to my attention. See also the review of this book by Richard Machalek in *The Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, vol. 33, no. 2 (June 1994), pp. 192–193.

⁹The process is described in the Babylonian Talmud in *Tractate Yevamot* and in *Masekhet Gerim*. The modern denominations may alter, add, or subtract from the traditional requirements.

¹⁰Interview with Rabbi Moshe Kurstag, *Av beit din*, South African Union of Orthodox Synagogues, January 1996.

¹¹Interview with Rabbi Hillel Avidan, chairman of the Southern African Association of Progressive Rabbis, April 1996.

¹²On the Second Temple period, see Scott M. McKnight, *A Light Among the Gentiles—Jewish Missionary Activity in the Second Temple Period* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991). On classical talmudic attitudes, see Gary G. Porton, *The Stranger Within Your Gates—Converts and Conversion in Rabbinic Literature* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994).

¹³On modern Jewish religious movements, see Joseph L. Blau, *Modern Varieties of Judaism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1967), and David Rudavsky, *Modern Jewish Religious Movement—A History of Emancipation and Adjustment* (New York: Behrman House, 1979).

¹⁴See Chapters of the Fathers [Pirkei Avot], Chapter 1, Mishneh 1.

¹⁵There is no one volume that sums up the beliefs of all Orthodox Jews. One middle-of-the-road description of Judaism from an Orthodox perspective is Herman Wouk, *This Is My God* (New York: Doubleday and Company, 1959).

¹⁶For a clear explanation of the beliefs of Reform Judaism, see Eugene Borowitz, *Liberal Judaism* (New York: Union of American Hebrew Congregations, 1984), as well as Borowitz's many other books. On the history of the Reform Movement, see Michael A. Meyer, *Response to Modernity—A History of the Reform Movement in Judaism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988).

¹⁷*The Guide of Practice* (Johannesburg: South African Union for Progressive Judaism, 1956).

¹⁸Divrei Gerut, "Guidelines Concerning Proselytism," New York, CCAR 1983, p. 1.

¹⁹Ibid.

²⁰Hellig, op. cit., p. 167.

²¹Interview with Rabbi Moshe Kursag, *Av Beit Din*, South African Union of Orthodox Synagogues, January 1996.

²²These are my estimates. As the rabbi of Temple Israel, Green Point, I am able to observe the changing trends firsthand. The numbers, however, are estimates, as no quantitative study in comparison with American Reform criteria has ever been undertaken.

²³Interview with Rabbi Avidan, op. cit.

²⁴This is my personal estimate. Unfortunately, there is little hard data upon which to base a quantitative study. The Reform Movement did not until recently keep accurate records in many places, and the Orthodox records are not open to the public. Further, the general Jewish community avoids programs or studies on any topic or religious issues in order to avoid an Orthodox boycott of such a program. The result is that most of the crucial religious issues—in particular, the conversion question—are not examined, nor is any attempt made to formulate a communitywide policy.

²⁵Allie A. Dubb, "Jewish Gentile Inter-marriage in a South African City," *African Studies* (Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press, 1970), pp. 111–127. Quoted verbatim from chapter 5, footnote 45.

²⁶The phrase "conservative traditionalism" has been used by Jocelyn Hellig. See her article "South African Judaism: An Expression of Conservative Traditionalism," *Judaism*, vol. 33, no. 2 (Spring 1986), pp. 233–242.

Hineni Berlin–1939

Alvin M. Laster

I am a singer of sad songs,
who answers questions
with other questions;
a shrugger of shoulders,
like a turtle without a carapace . . .
equally vulnerable.

I seem to have an aptitude
for making quick accommodations,
for leaning with the wind,
finding nearest exits,
blending into backgrounds.

I have a mouth that argues
obstinately with my mind
over nothings
in a never-ending game of pilpul,
played without a scroll.

Guilt, the Jewish albatross,
hangs about me where my father
wore his father's prayer shawl.
The weight has bowed my head;
my neck would welcome an exchange.

Back bruised, flesh charred,
I'm not wily, strong, or fleet enough
to escape my ancient chromosomes.
I am like an unbelieving Job,
pleading to a phantom God.

I cannot shake old Abraham
off my back. "Freeloader!
My father carried you before me,
your heels buried in his sides,
fleeing one pogrom after another . . .

"You are my racial memory,
but I will not be your Isaac.
I will walk the world a stranger
and endure the wrath of gentiles,
while I ease my pain with stolen simchas . . .
Hineni!"

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