

Is Conversion

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Jewish parents and non-

Committed Today, Divorced Tomorrow

By Jonathan Sarna

If all of the converts who have entered the Jewish fold lived in one community, it would be the ninth largest Jewish community in America. Its Jewish population would exceed that of St. Louis, Minneapolis and Cincinnati combined. This is an unprecedented situation not only in America but in all of modern Jewish history. And I am skeptical that it's an altogether positive phenomenon.

This situation is the result, at least in part, of shifting social norms in America. Once upon a time, most people in this country adhered to the faith and ethnicity of their parents: their cultural identity was determined largely by their descent. Today, religious and ethnic loyalties are commonly matters of choice. Identity, to a considerable degree, is based upon consent. According to George Gallup, about one American adult in four has changed faiths or denominations at least once. About one American adult in three, a study by Mary Waters discovered, has changed ethnic identity at least once.

This shift from descent to consent has enormous implications for Jewish continuity. Jews who accept the notion of descent think of their Jewishness as something irrevocable, as much a part of them as their blood

type; Jewishness by consent, by contrast, is something completely revocable, purely a matter of choice. Jewishness by descent suggests a genealogical metaphor: Jews are related to one another through ties of blood. Jewishness by consent implies a marital metaphor: committed today, perhaps divorced tomorrow. Jewishness by descent ties the future of Jewry largely to kinship - the number of children that Jews give birth to. Jewishness by consent links the Jewish future to conversion and adhesion, the ability to attract newcomers and hold on to them.

Can Judaism, not to mention the tra-

ditional conception of Jewish people-hood, be maintained in a world where consent reigns supreme? If the views of converts or the impact of conversion on

American Judaism offer any indication, the future may be very bleak indeed.

Converts tend to emphasize the religious and spiritual aspects of Judaism: they attend synagogue more often than born Jews do, they observe basic home rituals and they look to the synagogue as their spiritual center. But they subordinate the ethnic aspects of Judaism. They are diffident about Klal Yisrael, particularly the idea that Jews should extend special help to fellow Jews in need. And their support of Israel is, statistically speaking, much lower than that of born Jews. These findings are neither surprising nor hard to understand - most introduction to Judaism courses emphasize religion over ethnicity, and more converts come to Judaism from religions that consider universalism more important than peoplehood. But if not surprising, these findings are deeply troubling. There is an urgent need for a vigorous new emphasis on Jewish communalism and peoplehood for converts.

This brings me to a second problem: the views of converts on intermarriage. Frighteningly, in a study several years ago focusing on the behavior patterns of Reform Jewish leaders, about 80 percent of converts or those married to converts reported that they would not feel too badly if their children married non-Jews. Many would not even discourage their children from marrying someone who was not

Jewish. More than 50 percent of converts would not even be bothered a great deal if their children converted to Christianity. And in the new Boston

population survey two-thirds of Boston Jews would not be terribly bothered if their children married out.

Here is evidence of a world of difference between converts and born Jews, and one that augurs very badly indeed for our future. If today, when most Jewish parents still disapprove of intermarriage, we have such a significant intermarriage rate, what will happen tomorrow, when a substantial number will not disapprove? Unless we act decisively, many of today's converts will be one-generation Jews — Jews with non-Jewish parents and non-Jewish children. I say this with great personal sadness, since some of the finest, most

This figure is based on a conservative estimate of 180,000 converts to Judaism in the United States.

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COMMITTED TODAY

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courageous and most dedicated Jews I know are proud "Jews by choice," and the last thing I mean to do is to cast doubt on their sincerity. But the data speaks for itself, and it is alarming.

If unchecked, current trends will lead to what we might call the "denominationalization" of Judaism. Our faith will become just one more option in the smorgasbord of American religion, taken up when it looks inviting and discarded when some alternative faith looks more appealing still. Instead of a population bonded one to another in a familial way, the Jewish population will constantly churn, as eager newcomers convert in and dissatisfied old-timers convert out. The absolute number of Jews in America may remain constant, so long as inflow and outflow keep in balance, but the character of American Jewry will become fluid.

Our Christian neighbors smile knowingly at this picture, for it characterizes the experience of almost all of their denominations. For this reason, they scarcely understand why conversion concerns us. Why not see newcomers as a blessing and converts as a fact of American religious life? Why should a fluid membership bother us?

The reason, of course, is that we, unlike our Christian neighbors, per-

ceive members of our faith as part of a common family known as Klal Yisrael. We see ourselves sharing not only a common faith with fellow Jews but also a common heritage and roots. The ties that link us are, to our mind, primordial, rooted in a tribal past. Even Jews we despise form part of our collective mishpoche. To us, converts are thus not merely "Jews by choice" but also Jews by destiny. They are, henceforward, members of our people, and we expect them to stay that way.

As conversions to Judaism multiply, this traditional understanding of Klal Yisrael becomes more and more difficult to sustain. Increasingly, it is not peoplehood but faith and spirituality that characterize what we believe we have in common. And strong as those ties may be, they do not easily transfer across the generations. Meanwhile, the biological ties that once linked us one to another are dissolving.

What makes this dangerous situation worse is the deep crisis of identity mired in the different standards and rituals for conversion required by each of the three major branches of American Judaism. Hundreds of thousands of identifying Jews — converts along with children of mixed marriages and others — are today recognized as Jewish by

some Jews but not by others. Rabbi Yitzhak Greenberg and others have questioned whether this growing number of "disputed Jews" will call into question the unity of Israel: will there be one Jewish people in America in the twenty-first century or two? The intensive debate and stalled negotiations over Israel's conversion legislation show that a schism over this issue is a real possibility.

It would be ridiculous to say that the unprecedented increase in converts entering the Jewish fold is an unmitigated disaster. From a purely demographic perspective, indeed, it is a great blessing. And though prophecies of gloom and doom have been ever with us, the record of the past suggests that it is wise to treat them with a certain degree of skepticism. However, the significant problems raised by conversion cry out for attention. The future of Klal Yisrael is at stake.

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PRO-ACTIVE CONVERSION

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Conversion must be advocated as equal, an equivalent and desirable choice for the Jewish people. The prevention strategy implies that Jews by conversion are second best.

Does anyone really believe that the non-Jew, a potential convert, does not hear this message: "First marry a born Jew. If that doesn't work out, then and only then, marry a convert, which is better than the disease of a mixed marriage"? Protestations that this is not the message, that converts are fully part of the Jewish people, that the Jewish community welcomes them, considers them the same as born Jews, are a denial of

the messages that are often sent.

Jews should declare with gusto, pride, enthusiasm, certainty and rigor that it is good for Jews to marry other Jews. There need be no shame, apologies or second-guessing about saying that the formation of the Jewish family is a powerfully positive event and that an unambiguous Jewish household provides a rich framework for life. The Jewish community must, of course, help provide that rich fabric and a meaningful Judaism.

To then say that the preferable entrance to that world is through the bloodline creates an implicit inequality in the merit of both the marriage and the family. Judaism must open up its psychological and institutional gates for real. Standards should be maintained for ritual conversion. But the suspicion, testing, second-guessing and reluctance need to be discarded now.

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