# 1

I AM TRYING SO HARD

"I am trying so hard and learning so much. I have found a home and its doors are wide open."

The journey starts here! The startled-deer eyes in my self-portrait, the first painting of the series, tells it all. Am I doing the right thing? Can I really give up the religion of my childhood and my parents, forever? I had no idea I was so nervous until I painted this self-portrait and then - wham! - there it was, right out there in the open. I must have been hiding it. I remember being so excited and reading everything I could get my hands on. I jumped into my conversion studies head first: there would be a years' worth of Hebrew Classes and an Introduction to Judaism class, as well as periodic meetings with the Rabbi. Then, there would be papers to write, difficult questions to answer, an examination by the Beit Din (a Rabbinical Court), and, finally, immersion in a Mikva. Was I ready for all this? You bet. I loved it all. A more gung-ho converting person you couldn't find.

#2

HEBREW IS NOT JUST A LANGUAGE

"Hebrew is not just a language and I'm beginning to feel its power and see glimpses of a greater truth."

I had always thought I was good at languages - but Hebrew?! Goodness, it was hard. It made Spanish look like a dialect of English. I worked hard at it (to the amusement of my Hebrew school children) and eventually the squiggles became sounds, then words, and then I could even follow along in services - sort of. I even learned what some of the words in familiar prayers meant. This, to me, made them much more approachable and friendly. During this time I remember imagining myself as a sort of hybrid neo-female-pseudo-Jewish scholar (Can you imagine that?) carrying around my stacks of books, with Hebrew words running around in my head.
#3
THEY EXIST ONLY IN MY MIND

"They exist only in my mind, my Jewish Grandparents, but they led the way, and somewhere, they are smiling."

Oh, the history of Judaism! And I didn't have one. I was beginning by this time to feel a loss: no immigrant great-grandparents, no family recipes for
noodle kugel, no round of Bar Mitzvah parties as a 13-year-old. What kind of Jew would I make without all that? Would I feel like an imposter? Those feelings were the beginning of Leah and Israel, my imaginary grandparents. (I borrowed Israel and his face from my husband's old family album - Richard does have real Jewish great-grandparents!) I recently learned that all converts to Judaism are given Abraham and Sarah as their very own adoptive ancestors at the time of their conversion. I like that, a lot.

#4
IN A DREAM I AM ALONE

"In a dream I am alone, I am the last Jew. In grief, I light candles even though it is not Shabbat. After a long time I understand that it is up to me to carry my Torah. I am Evelyn P. Arvey, Jew."

I woke up in a cold sweat from this harrowing dream. I believe it is about standing up and letting the world know that I am choosing Judaism - and acknowledging that it is not always easy. It had been getting clearer and clearer to me during this time what it is like to live as a Jew in a Christian world. Of course, it was Christmas and sweet old ladies at the grocery store were asking my son what Santa was going to bring him. Micah, at only 4 years old would answer politely: "We're Hanukkah people, Santa doesn't come to our house". My husband and I must be doing something right!
#5
TORAH

"And ye shall seek me and find me when ye search for me with all your heart."

This is the inscription on the Torah which is the focus of this painting. Although this painting is not a self-portrait like the others, I am in it just the same. As I began to feel more comfortable in Jewish services certain things stood out. The passing of the Torah is my favorite part of the service and it never fails to move me. It is an outward, physical sign that the Torah is meant for all. And what does the Torah mean to me? It is a continual and growing presence in my life, and these words have special meaning for me: "...and you shall find me when you search for me with all your heart."

#6
THE MIKVA

This painting, in its calmness and solitude, is what I imagined the moment of conversion to be like. I did not write words on this painting for a reason - I believed the immersion into the water would be a heightened spiritual experience, beyond words, which I would only share with my son. This would be the moment I was waiting for: when I walked in I would be a post-Christian, almost-Jew; and when I walked out I would be, finally and gloriously, Jewish.
#7
THE TWINS: BEFORE AND AFTER

Will I really be a different person after my conversion? How can that be possible? This painting is a double self-portrait, like a double exposed photograph of the same person (me) taken just before, and just after my conversion. I imagine the "converted me" encouraging and supporting the "not yet converted me", insisting that all will be fine and that I will get through it all with flying colors. Even the dreaded Beit Din. I feel her presence.

#8
I AM A JEW

"I am a Jew. I am also a woman, a wife, a mother, an artist, a friend, a daughter, a student, a teacher. I am a work in progress. I continue to learn and change and grow."

The end of a journey, or the beginning of a new one? This, the last painting of the series, was finished only days before my conversion. It shows a far different person than the first painting done almost a year before! The anxieties, the wondering - all are gone now. What is left is a feeling of deep contentment and the knowledge that a rich Jewish life awaits me.