COMMITMENT AND RECOMMITMENT: CONVERSION AS A COMMITMENT FOR BOTH CONVERT AND JEWISH PARTNER

Name of Congregation: Temple Ahavat Shalom
Address: 18200 Rinaldi Place
Northridge, California 91326
Phone Number: (818) 360-2258
Number of Member Units: 700
UAHC Region: Pacific Southwest Council
Rabbis: Jerry Brown, Debbi Till, Barry Lutz
Outreach Chairperson: Tania Nathan

Brief Description: Too often Jews-by-choice lament the lack of Jewish involvement or interest by their born-Jewish partners. Our rabbis strongly support the UAHC's encouragement that couples attend the "Introduction to Judaism" course together. As an extension of this principle, the rabbi meets with the couple together several times over the period of preparation for conversion. These meetings are intended to heighten the couple's recognition that a healthy Jewish home life requires a committed, active partnership between them and that Judaism can now become a vital, positive part of their relationship, something that knits their lives together, rather than divides them. These meetings also provide an opportunity for the couple to talk through any problems, disagreements or anxieties they may have about sharing Jewish life in their home, as well as with their extended families and friends.

These meetings supplement, rather than replace, the rabbi's regular one-on-one meetings with the potential convert. In addition, the rabbi meets at least once with the Jewish partner alone. The impending conversion provides a prime opportunity to explore what thoughts and feelings this process elicits in the Jewish partner, his/her reaction to the "Intro" class and other Jewish experiences shared as a couple, and his/her own intentions regarding both Jewish home life and personal Jewish involvement and observance. As the conversion ceremony approaches, the Jewish partner is invited to participate in the ceremony by making a brief "statement of recommitment," either an original composed statement or one provided by the rabbi (see appendix below).

Candidates for conversion are strongly encouraged to have their formal conversion ceremony take place at a Friday night service in the presence of the congregation as representatives of the Jewish people. Through this practice we seek not only to strengthen the connection between the convert and a living, flesh-and-blood Jewish community, but also to heighten a genuine sense of recommitment and reconnection for the Jewish partner, who makes his/her "statement of recommitment" with the congregation as witness. This public statement by both the convert and the Jewish partner often leads to personal connections with members of the congregation who are present and to invitations to get involved in the life of the congregation as well.
(Converts are also given free membership in the congregation for the first year). It also has a profound effect on those present. Jews-by-choice have expressed how such ceremonies reinforced the commitment they themselves had made in becoming Jews; and Jews-by-birth have spoken of how they were moved to a re-examination of their own Jewish identity, commitment and participation.

Through this entire process, conversion is consistently reinforced as a personal decision that the candidate for conversion alone is entitled to make. But that basic truth does not mean that the Jewish partner should be excluded from the opportunities for Jewish growth and growth of the couple's relationship that this momentous life decision brings. Our approach to conversion as a time for "Commitment and Recommitment" invites both partners to make the most of this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.

Program Goal: We have noted that too often Jews-by-choice lament the lack of Jewish involvement or interest by their born-Jewish partners. These Jewish partners were often eager to see their partners convert, insisted on their children being raised as Jews, but then showed no interest in active participation in Jewish life. Our senior rabbi, Jerry Brown, has evolved this new approach to the conversion process and ceremony that not only encourages the Jewish partner's support of the candidate for conversion, but fosters a real enhancement of his/her own sense of Jewish identity and commitment.


Number of Participants: Applicable to one couple or any number of couples.

Number and Length of Sessions: Minimum of two with couple, two with Jewish partner; 4 or more with candidate for conversion (1 hour sessions).

Staffing Required: Rabbi

Total Cost of Program: None
Source of Funding: N/A
Fee for Attendees: None

Instructions to Facilitator: Explore Jewish partner's Jewish experiences, attitudes, background. Encourage taking a new, "adult" look at Judaism, with special focus on the rationale of Jewish practice and the role Judaism can play in enhancing the couple's relationship and family life.

Evaluation of Program: Feedback from couples involved has been positive. We have also seen heightened levels of congregational affiliation and involvement.

Follow-up: No formal follow-up; inclusion in ongoing Outreach and congregational programs.
Appendix:

Suggested Jewish partner’s statement:
As my partner/fiancé/husband/wife, ______________ (partner's name), pledges him/herself to the Jewish faith and people, so do I pledge myself to support him/her in the commitment he/she has made this day, by rededicating myself to my Jewish tradition. May our common commitment to our Jewish heritage always be a source of strength and enrichment in our lives, as we build a life together, hallowed by the faith of Israel.

Converts' Comments on Commitment and Re-Commitment
The first class (Introduction to Judaism) Bob and I attended was the most spiritually uplifting moment in my life. I felt as though a great weight was lifted from my shoulders and I was eager to continue our studies and knew, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that this was the only way for me to live and worship.

I believe that our studies have brought Bob and me to a better understanding of each other and has given Bob back his own faith. He has encouraged me to strive to be a good Jew and has supported this decision totally. Our house is now a united and happier place and we have become even more of a partnership than when we married. We are practicing what we have learned and our family (Bob’s family, most of whom are very devout) have accepted me even more than when I first met them. They have always been kind, loving and sharing, but I feel an increase in their respect and love now.

My decision to convert to Judaism has also been supported by my family in Ohio and by all my friends. I feel very different in my skin now, as I have become totally immersed in the process of conversion. I look forward to August 25th with eagerness that I never felt with Christianity.

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When I finally met with Rabbi Brown to discuss conversion and he informed me I would start by taking an 18-week Intro class I was not thrilled. I thought I could just do it one-on-one and not with a bunch of strangers. Then when we had only two classes left I found myself feeling sad knowing I was going to miss our weekly class.

After attending five or six classes I was thinking to myself that it seemed Craig and I were becoming closer if that was even possible. Then about a week later Craig out of the blue said the same thing. Our religion is now a special bond that we share together.

All in all the last seven months have been very educational, uplifting, motivating and complete with all the new information and experience. I look forward to continuing my new Jewish life with the same or more enthusiasm.