Conversion Mentoring Handbook

The one who brings another under the wings of the Divine Presence is regarded as if he or she had created that person.  

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I. Mission Statement

The Conversion Mentor Program was established to offer individuals in the process of conversion and those who have converted to Judaism an additional source of personal support. The support will be provided by a trained group of mentors. Conversion mentors will give Jews-by-choice a non-threatening peer to turn to for conversation and information, someone who understands the process of becoming a Jew.

The program planners are aware that each relationship between a mentor and a Jew-by-choice will differ based on individual needs and personalities. This manual was written to assist the rabbi/s, mentors and Jews-by-choice by clarifying the role of the conversion mentor, suggesting flexible models for the relationship, anticipating questions, and by providing resources and suggestions for the mentor and Jew-by-choice.

The manual is hole-punched for a three-ring notebook. Each mentor is encouraged to add his/her own notes, lists of favorite books, recipes or list of field trips. Mentors can make photocopies of sections or pages of the notebook to share with Jews-by-choice.

Each participating UAHC congregation will fine-tune the process to meet the congregation’s specific needs and character, size and location.

Rabbis select mentors; Arlene Chernow, Regional Outreach Director, and the members of the Regional Outreach Committee provide training; and finally, rabbis will match the mentor with the individual Jew-by-choice.

We hope that this manual will help to give Conversion Mentor Program a structure. Think of it as a basic recipe. We know that each congregation will add their own sweet spice. Enjoy the process and keep us posted on your innovations.
II. Adapting the Program

Each community and congregation that participates in the Conversion Mentor Program will adapt the program. Various communities offer UAHC "Introduction to Judaism" courses, other congregations offer "Basic Judaism" classes, and some rabbis work individually with conversion candidates. The assumption is that mentors will not be responsible for the basic Jewish education of the Jew-by-choice. The mentor will be a friend and role model, a sounding board, a person who can be asked questions that may seem too basic for the rabbi. Mentors are encouraged to refer questions that they feel they cannot /should not answer to the rabbi.

Congregations and rabbis that choose to participate in the program will offer individuals in the process of conversion a mentor; the individual can say yes or no. This is a critical part of the program. A pairing will not take place unless the idea appeals to the individual. Rabbis will invite congregants to be mentors and will do all of the pairing.

This handbook assumes a one-on-one relationship; the idea however is not written in stone. Several mentors may decide to have a pot luck Shabbat dinner, each one inviting their Jew-by-choice. It is possible to mix and match, have some one-on-one meetings and some experiences with several mentors and Jews-by-choice. A congregation that has a large, successful program may wish to plan an annual Shabbat dinner for all of the families involved in the program.

A close look at the individuals converting to Judaism and taking "Introduction to Judaism" courses indicates a growing diversity in population. In addition to the couples taking the course prior to marriage, we see:
- Individuals who have been living a Jewish life for years
- Singles who have come to Judaism through personal exploration
- Individuals with one Jewish parent or grandparent
- Individuals entering a second marriage (often with Christian children)

In addition, we are also seeing diversity in terms of sexual orientation and race. Rabbis should keep this diversity in mind when creating pairs. It is not necessary to create mirror image matches, but sensitivity to this diversity should be taken into account when recruiting mentors and creating pairs.

It may be helpful to think of conversion in terms of change. Change theory usually refers to three stages: 1) Letting Go 2) Transition and 3) New Beginning. Stories about conversion usually seem to fall into these similar categories: A) "The moment of speech," which includes telling friends, family and meeting with a rabbi. B) "Transition," the process leading to conversion which includes formal education, often a full year of the Jewish calendar, excitement, discovery, mastery, sometimes a series of ups and downs a few doubts and questions. C) "Standing alone as a Jew," the time immediately after conversion.

Each participating rabbi will decide at which point in the process the pairing takes place. If a congregation has a trained Outreach Fellow, he/she may work with Jews-by-choice during the process of transition and suggest a mentor as the next step (at the end of the "New Beginnings" program). Again, nothing is written in stone; a rabbi in a congregation with a trained Outreach Fellow may suggest a mentor for a shy potential Jew-by-choice at the "moment of speech."

The UAHC has member congregations that range in size from nine to over two thousand family units; locations include urban centers, suburban areas and isolated Jewish communities. You may have a local Jewish museum or only one store in town that has Challah on Friday afternoon. The size and location of your congregation may also have an impact on the nature of your Conversation Mentor Program.
B. The Model Mentor Year

All relationships are different, including relationships between a mentor and a Jew-by-choice. Yet we have prepared a model year for you to consider.

1. The First Phone Call: The mentor should make the first call. Try to make the Jew-by-choice feel comfortable. Introduce yourself. This may be the time to share a little of your own Jewish journey and involvement with the Temple. The Jew-by-choice may then choose to share some personal information about him/herself. This first phone call does not need to be long; the mentor and Jew-by-choice should consider choosing a time and place to meet.

Alternate suggestions:
   A. The rabbi may arrange for the first meeting, and may or may not choose to be present.
   B. A congregation may plan an event with several pairs of mentors and Jew-by-choice gathering to meet and become acquainted.

2. The First Meeting: The mentor and Jew-by-choice may decide to meet at home, the temple, a restaurant, or even a bookstore. Whatever the place, just make sure that it will be quiet enough to have a conversation. The mentor should begin the conversation. You may wish to have a copy of the "Mentor Relationship Survey" at the first meeting, to mail it to the Jew-by-choice prior to the meeting, or just be spontaneous. If you have not discussed personal Jewish journeys, this may be a good time to do so. If stories have been exchanged, this may be a good time to begin to talk about the process of transition. The mentor may decide to ask questions. This first conversation can serve to establish the ways in which the mentor can help the Jew-by-choice or it may just provide a chance to begin to the conversation.

3. Shabbat Services: Attending Shabbat services may be another comfortable way to get the relationship off to a warm beginning.

Friday Evening Erev Shabbat Services:

In recent years, UAHC congregations have begun to offer a variety of Shabbat evening services. Some congregations offer an early evening option, thus creating the opportunity for congregants to share a relaxed Shabbat dinner after services. Some offer a monthly "Shabbat in Song" or offer Children's Services or a Tot Shabbat. In some cases these options are in addition to the later, more formal Shabbat Service that has become a tradition among Reform and Conservative Jews in the United States. The mentor might make a photocopy of the service outline included in this manual. You should also explain any local customs of the temple.

It may seem to someone new to the temple that everybody else has someone to talk to during the Oneg Shabbat. It is the mentor's role to introduce the Jew-by-choice to people, perhaps potential friends, people of the same age or background.

Saturday Morning Services and Torah Study:

Many UAHC congregations offer a Saturday morning service and/or a study group in addition to Saturday morning services that include a Bar/Bat Mitzvah. Depending on the interests of the Jew-by-choice, this option may be appealing.

4. Shabbat Dinner: Shabbat Dinner can present an opportunity to introduce the beauty and importance of Jewish home observance, and to experience the peace
and joy of Shabbat. This may be the Jew-by-choice’s first opportunity to experience Shabbat in the home.

Do not worry if your Shabbat dinner is not “picture perfect,” if you stumble over the Hebrew, are not a gourmet cook, or even if Shabbat dinner consists of take-out. The most important message is that Friday evening can provide weekly opportunities to experience the importance of Judaism in your life. Shabbat dinner should be relaxed and enjoyable. If your Jew-by-choice offers to bring a contribution to the meal, let him/her participate. This can be seen as an opportunity to talk about your favorite place to purchase Challah, (or perhaps your observance of Kashrut, if that is relevant). Extra copies of Shabbat blessings with transliteration might be useful. Remember no question is too basic (See Book List for books on Shabbat and Holidays).

If the Jew-by choice is in a relationship with a person who is Jewish, this may be his/her first experience with Shabbat in the home as well. In Reform Jewish Outreach, we encourage members of the couple to see the process as a learning experience for them both, a chance for both to grow, an opportunity to add Jewish observance as they are building their relationship.

5. Holidays: You might consider inviting the Jew-by-choice to celebrate holidays, attend services, and/or prepare food. Consider sharing other holiday-related activity, such as building and decorating a Sukkah, if this is your custom, or shopping for Passover foods. You do not need to feel obligated to invite the Jew-by-choice to all of your holiday celebrations or that your holiday observance must be perfect.

Keep in mind that, in addition to the issues involved with the well anticipated “December Dilemma,” preparing for Passover may seem overwhelming, and fasting on Yom Kippur/breaking the fast may not be supported within the person’s Jewish family. For an “occasional” relationship with the Jew-by choice, these may be important times to check in. The subject of holidays can present an opportunity to talk about:

- Transition
- The passage of time
- The importance of setting reasonable goals

6. Additional Suggestions: There are many other things that the mentor and Jew-by-choice can do help to create a Jewish identity. Sharing recipes and cooking can be a great bonding experience. Suggesting novels and books with Jewish content can give the Jew-by-choice insights into Jewish history and experiences. Mentors and Jew-by-choice can also go out to Jewish cultural events, plays, or visit museums. These opportunities may vary according to the community. Example: if you live in an isolated community, you may plan a “field trip” to the closest market that carries Passover supplies. This trip could include a stop at the closest store that has Jewish ceremonial objects. You could also share catalogues, if finding ceremonial objects is a problem in your community. If your community has a celebration to mark the independence of Israel, this may present an opportunity to experience a community event.

C. Alternative Models for Mentoring

The Model Mentor Year is presented as a suggestion. The relationship will vary based on schedules and needs. Each individual is at a different place in his or her journey. Each mentor will have schedule limitations. The Conversion Mentor Program does not take an “all-or-nothing” approach. Here are a few examples of
alternative models that also work well within the conversion mentor paradigm. Feel free to create your own!

1. The Technology Relationship:
It is not always possible to meet in person. Luckily we have alternatives: e-mail, fax machine, and the telephone. Through this model, the Model Mentor Year can still guide you through the relationship, except that the medium of correspondence will be different. You can fax information about holidays or recipes, and answer questions over the phone. You must make it clear at the beginning of the relationship how often you check your e-mail so that the Jew-by-choice does not feel ignored or neglected if you do not get back to him/her immediately.

2. The Panic Button Relationship:
  ✷ "I forgot the Shabbat Blessings!"
  ✷ "I've never asked my boss for Yom Kippur as a day off."
  ✷ "I've put off the discussion, and my mother is coming for the weekend. The first thing she will see is the Mezuzah on my door."

There will be relationships that will only become active when the Jew-by-choice hits a rough spot or difficult moment or question. Most people react differently to situations that they anticipate than situations that take them by surprise. It is possible that both the mentor and Jew-by-choice will meet once or twice and decide that they will call each other as needed. As a Mentor, do not underestimate the importance of "being there" even if you are not called upon often.

3. "Getting To Know You" as a Group:
If the idea of a one-on-one relationship does not feel comfortable, several mentors may decide to gather in small groups for the first meeting with Jews-by-choice for coffee or plan a pot luck Shabbat dinner.

4. Affinity Group:
"Nursery School Moms" or "Let's Meet for Coffee During Religious School"
What about a mentor and Jew-by-choice meeting while your children have a play date?
Perhaps you live in a community in which all families drive a long way to religious school. Sunday mornings may become a special time for a mentor and Jew-by-choice to meet. Most communities have a place to get a great cup of coffee and talk. This may be considered for a one-on-one relationship or a "Mommy and Me" play group.

5. Affinity Group:
Single Jews-by-choice
Single Jews-by-choice may have a special set of needs in terms of Shabbat. If a congregation has a group of single Jews-by-choice and mentor pairings, they may wish to plan potluck Shabbat dinners or make Shabbat dinner plans and attend Shabbat services together. Single Jews-by-choice may feel the need for extra support, particularly if the congregation seems family oriented.
Affinity Group:
Create a model that fits your congregation and your needs.

6. Irregular Meetings:
You may not be able to establish a regular schedule of meetings, such as once a month. In this case, you can still keep in touch by phone or email, similar to The Technology Relationship and/or meet for coffee and discussion. The key here is to not go for an extended period without a check-in call.

7. The Ritual Relationship:
"Services in Hebrew! A full calendar of Jewish Holidays! I am happy with my decision to convert, but there is so much to learn and do. Will you meet me at services?"

This kind of relationship might be an important option for a single Jew-by-choice, one who is shy, one with high personal expectations, or for someone who has entered the community with a partner who does not know much about Judaism.

This relationship may include meeting for services and talking about home celebrations prior to each event. Remember to consider transliteration as a useful tool, if Hebrew prayers and blessings seem to become a barrier.

8. "I'll be there for you during your Bet Din, the Mikvah and at your Conversion Ceremony:"
For some, moments that mark transition present a great amount of joy and stress. These moments may be the time to have a friend who is not a family member to accompany a Jew-by-choice.

9. The Small Community Spontaneous Relationship:
Small communities may choose to create an informal, spontaneous structure for the concept of "Conversion Mentoring."

10. Mix and Match/Create Your Own Model:
Keep in mind that all of the relationships are suggestions. Many aspects of some relationships may work for your pairing.

D. Suggestions for the "Getting to Know You" Conversation

The first conversation between the mentor and the Jew-by-choice may feel somewhat awkward. Here are a few suggestions to get you started:
- In the first meeting, the mentor might start off by telling his/her personal Jewish journey. Whatever the personal story may be, share both the exciting and the difficult moments. Be yourself.
- Remember, this process should be enjoyable. If the mentor has stories that include mistakes that seem funny now, share them!
- After listening to the mentor's personal story, the Jew-by-choice might share what it was about Judaism that first inspired him/her to embark on this journey, fears, experiences or questions. Remember, it may take a while to establish a warm relationship.
III. Frequently Asked Questions

Here are a number of questions that are often asked by individuals in the process of conversion to Judaism or those who have recently converted. It may be useful to think about some of these issues before meeting with your Jew-by-choice. There is a theme to many of these questions. They are not directly related to the content of an "Introduction to Judaism" course, but are about the personal journey of the individual.

A. Relationships with Family
   How will my family feel when I tell them?
   Do you have suggestions for the conversation with my mother?
   How do you think my Jewish family will react?

B. Memories
   Will I ever not miss Christmas?
   How can I create memories for my children if I do not have the memories myself?
   Is it possible to create "a memory bank" as an adult?
   Can I tell my children about my childhood and the happy memories that I have of finding and bringing home the Christmas tree?
   How do I do this without undermining their Jewish identity?

C. "Feeling Jewish"
   Will I ever feel "really Jewish?"
   How long will it take to feel really Jewish?
   Will I ever feel the way that my wife does about Israel?
   I never went to Jewish camp as a child. Can I make up for this?
   There is so much about being Jewish that does not seem to be related to the religion. Will I ever get it all?

D. Hebrew/Prayers
   Am I the only one at services who does not know all of the prayers?
   How does everyone know when to stand up and when to sit down?
   My children are in Hebrew school; to them the Shabbat prayers are so easy.
   How can I introduce Shabbat and not feel embarrassed by not knowing the prayers?

E. Holidays
   How will I learn how to celebrate all of these new holidays?
   I can't remember the story of all of the holidays.
   What about prayers in Hebrew at the dinner table? Will I ever learn them?
   How will we learn to prepare all of the appropriate foods for the holidays?
IV. Mentor Profile

Patient
Flexible
Positive
Pro-active
Supportive
Not perfect
Empathetic
Encouraging
Likes to laugh
A good listener
Non-judgmental
Open to questions