The Many Voices of Conversion

Congregation: Temple Jeremiah
Address: 937 Happ Road
          Northfield, IL 60093
Phone number: (847) 441-5670
Contact’s Name and E-mail: Susan Ardell, outreach@templejeremiah.org
Number of Member Units: 785
URJ Region: Great Lakes Council
Rabbis: Paul Cohen, Michelle Greenberg
Outreach Chairperson: Susan Ardell
Program Cochairpersons: Anne Richards, Greg Richards

Brief Description: A panel representing four perspectives on Reform Jewish conversion, the rabbi’s explanation of the history and essentials of conversion, audience Q&A, and Havdalah.

Program Goals: To debunk conversion myths, to present real-life stories from varied perspectives, and to open a dialogue on Judaism’s most misunderstood life-cycle event.

Target Population: Potential converts and their families or friends.

Number of Participants: Twenty-three.

Number of Sessions: One.

Staffing: Rabbi, program cochairs, and interviewer.

Total Cost: $34 for fruit tray and wine plus an $18 gift certificate for the babysitter.

Fees: Free.

Source of Funding: Outreach budget.

Logistics: Classroom with four eight-foot tables placed in a rectangle and an eight-foot attractively decorated table for the wine and cheese near the door. A committee chair signed people in; we did not do evaluations in order to respect the privacy of the attendees. This was a mistake as our feedback was incomplete and we needed to phone attendees afterward for their comments.

Curriculum: Rabbi Paul Cohen on keruv: Rabbi Cohen gave a brief history of Jewish conversion and explained the ritual and requirements expected of a conversion candidate. From the rabbi we learned that a potential convert’s sincerity and clarity of conviction, plus an eagerness to study the basics of Judaism are the necessary components to begin the journey. Our panelists echoed the rabbi in reaffirming that conversion (even the steps leading up to the decision to convert or not) is an ongoing process. The born-Jew in a non-Jewish partner’s life is urged to be patient and supportive of whatever decision his or her loved one reaches regarding religion.

Panel: The panel consisted of a convert, a congregant who had chosen not to convert, the spouse of a convert, and the child of a convert. We found no parents of converts willing to participate, so we
interviewed converts regarding their parents' reactions (to their converting) and read these comments as part of the panel presentation. Some parental comments were:

- "I felt like I'd been kicked in the gut."
- "I knew you'd finally get religion."
- "I'm afraid you're going to be different now."
- "The paths to God are many; I am glad you found the one that's right for you."
- "I feel so betrayed."
- "You ale my child, and I will always love you."

Discussion: A committee member, who happens to be a psychiatrist, led the question and answer segment, urging that queries be respectful and thoughtful.

Instructions to Facilitator: Set the date on the temple calendar, reserve the room, and arrange for an invitation to appear in the temple newsletter. Interview the panelists in order to make informative introductions. Arrange for refreshments. Have a committee member greet guests as they arrive and thank them as they leave. This person is also responsible for the sign-in and evaluation sheets.

Publicity: "An Open Invitation" from Rabbi Cohen and the outreach committee was published in the temple newsletter one month prior to the program.

Program Evaluation: Temple Jeremiah honors those individuals who commit to raising their children in a religion that is not their own (Judaism). Our non-converting panelist is a beloved and active member of our outreach committee. She felt our respect and thus did not hesitate to offer her views. Our program fulfilled its goal both in educating those who attended on the specifics of conversion and assuring participants that Rabbi Cohen welcomes the opportunity to explore Jewish conversion with anyone who is curious. This program provided an opportunity for an open, informed, and ongoing discussion of Jewish conversion.

Follow-up: Rabbi Cohen welcomes new Jews at the Shabbat service following their conversion ceremony. This year the committee invited all Jews-by-choice to gather and discuss issues they would like to see addressed at Temple Jeremiah. Enrichment classes, mentoring of new converts, and sensitivity to those who have no Jewish families with whom to celebrate holidays headed the list. Additionally, Temple Jeremiah has committed to send a lay leader to the Outreach Fellows Program.
An Open Invitation

Your friends on the Outreach Committee and I invite you to attend an informal program on Jewish conversion. There is a lot of confusion and misinformation about conversion to Judaism. Many people have said that they did not know it was possible to convert. Others have said that they did not know where to begin. Some have even said that Jews do not recognize converts as full Jews. This program is meant to address these issues, clear up confusion, set the record straight, and help people who might wish to consider engaging in the process of conversion themselves.

"The Many Voices of Conversion"
Saturday, October 25
3:00–4:30 P.M.
Temple Jeremiah
R.S.V.P. to Jackie @ 847 441-5760, x101

You won't want to miss this innovative program. Rabbi Cohen will explain the ritual and requirements for a Jewish conversion. A panel of experts will offer their diverse perspectives on the subject and answer any questions you may have. All this will take place in a friendly and respectful atmosphere. We will begin promptly at 3:00 with wine and cheese and end by 4:30 with a brief yet beautiful Havdalah service, marking the separation between the end of Shabbat and the beginning of the new week.

Rabbi Paul Cohen, D.Min.
Program Chair Persons – Annie & Greg Richards
Program Facilitator – Sharon Greenburg

Adult Ed Catalogue

"The Many Voices of Conversion"
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Do you know what Reform Jewish conversion entails? Rabbi Cohen and the Outreach Committee welcome interfaith individuals and couples who are curious to learn about the life-cycle event we as Jews tend to overlook. Rabbi will discuss the ritual of Reform Jewish conversion, and a panel representing diverse voices of congregants who have dealt with or chosen not to deal with conversion will give you more food for thought. Reform Judaism asks that we make informed choices. The decision to convert or not should be an informed choice as well.

Call Phyllis Z. @ 847 441-5760 for further information.