AM I JEWISH YET? – A DISCUSSION ON CONVERSION

Name of Congregation: Temple Sinai
Address: 2808 Summit Street
          Oakland, California 94609
Phone Number: (510) 451-3263
Number of Members: 870
UAHC Region: Pacific Central West Council
Rabbis: Steve Chester, Andrea Berlin
Outreach Chairperson: Dawn Kepler

Brief Description: The format of the program consisted of a panel of three Jews-by-choice (who have been Jewish for 10 to 20 years) speaking about the growth of their Jewish identity. All three panelists were members of Temple Sinai.

1. James: James converted to Judaism 20 years ago, before his marriage to a Jewish woman. His future wife had discussed with him her desire that their family share one faith. James was not attached to his Christian faith and concurred with his fiancée’s desire for a single faith family.

2. Marie: Marie had a Hispanic and Asian heritage. She was raised as a Catholic. Despite a strong family tradition of Catholicism, Maria did not feel attached to her faith. After meeting her future husband, Simon, she began to explore Judaism. She had converted some ten years previous to the workshop. Maria described how having a shared faith had helped her and her husband through family losses.

3. Alice: Alice converted to Judaism 18 years before the program. She had not been raised with any faith, but from her teen years she had investigated various religious traditions. While in college she was drawn to Judaism and took several classes through Hillel. She had converted before her marriage to Jewish man.

All three panelists talked about their personal growth in Jewish identity. Each, in fact, described a moment when they felt they had “arrived” and felt fully Jewish. Following their opening remarks the facilitator opened the floor to discussion.

Program Goal: Our goal was to provide Jews-by-choice with an opportunity to discuss the evolution of their Jewish identity and the various ways that identity can develop and deepen. The dialogue also permitted those considering conversion and those who had recently converted to discuss and understand that Jewish identity is a process. We wanted to show that conversion is a a journey, not an event.

Target Population: Those considering conversion, Jews, and Jews-by-choice at any stage in the process.

Number of Participants: 20

Number and Length of Sessions: One 2-hour session

Staffing Required: Facilitator, panelists
**Total Cost of Program:** $210.00. ($160.00 to produce and mail the flyer and $50.00 for coffee and bagels.

**Source of Funding:** Outreach Fund

**Fee for Attendees:** Free

**Logistics:** The chairs were arranged in a circle with the panelists seated together. The facilitator was seated across from them. Coffee and bagels were set up on a side table. The program was offered during Hebrew school, which allowed parents to come while their child was in class.

**Instructions to Facilitator:** Keep panelists’ presentation to 10 minutes maximum, so as to leave time for questions and stories from participants.

**Evaluation of Program:** Participants related several powerful and moving stories. One woman described her anxiety as a Jew-by-choice, fearing that born Jews would discover her “lesser” status. She had converted some 30 years earlier and also described the moment at which she felt she had arrived - when she felt accepted. A man who was born Jewish, but raised with little or no Jewish education, reflected on his own sense of his developing Jewish identity. A third participant told of how she converted before her first marriage but had never been accepted by her first husband’s family. She married a second Jewish man and had been completely accepted. During the workshop she seemed to see for the first time the full love of her current extended Jewish family and was able to free herself from years of resentment.

The program helped both born Jews and Jews-by-choice to see conversion and Jewish identity as a process.

**Follow up:** Participants were put on the mailing list. They will receive Outreach mailings and the temple bulletin. We offer an outreach event approximately every other month. Since a number of participants were temple members, the real benefit was that they felt more a part of our congregational life.

**Publicity:**

- Flyers were mailed to interfaith couples and Jews-by-choice in the congregation as well as past participants of Outreach programs.
- The program was listed in the temple bulletin.
- Free calendar listings were sent to the local Jewish newspaper and the local secular newspapers: *The Jewish Bulletin of Northern California, San Francisco Chronicle, The Montclarion, The East Bay Express*, and the *Oakland Tribune*.
- Bulk flyers were left at Lehrhaus Judaica, the two local JCCs, Hillel, Jewish Family & Children’s Services, and the local Jewish book and gift store.