

KEY TOPICS FOR THOSE IN THE PROCESS OF CONVERSION SESSION MODELS

The topics that follow fall into three basic categories:

1. Internal issues of religious commitment and change of identity, (God)
2. Family issues, (interpersonal relationship), and
3. Community acceptance and belonging (peoplehood).

The questions that follow each title suggest the range of concerns in each area commonly expressed by those considering conversion. However, there may also be significant changes in store for the Jewish partner of someone who converts. As facilitator, you must remember to modify these questions so that they also reflect the voice of the Jewish partner of one who converts. As you plan your sessions, be sure to touch on each of the three categories listed above, shaping the specific focus in accord with the content of the Introduction to Judaism class in your area, your rabbi's preferences for areas reserved for one-on-one counseling, and the needs of your group. It is recommended that you start with sessions I and II as listed.

Introduction

I. Introductory Session

Goal: To introduce participants to the overall goal and design of the group sessions, to introduce group members to one another, and to begin to set the agenda for remaining sessions.

Time: 2 hours

Materials: pencils and paper, coffee and cookies

- A. (5-10 minutes) Welcome everyone and introduce yourself briefly to the group. Review the purpose of the group sessions and the schedule that you've set. Touch on the following points:
- Your excitement about guiding them in the process of discussion that you hope will be helpful for them, as it has been for others, whether or not they ultimately choose to convert;
 - potentially life-changing process, both for those who are considering conversion and for those who've been Jews all their lives;
 - Confidentiality and mutual respect for various points of view are groundrules for discussion. Their honesty and openness will enable all group members to get the most from this experience; and
 - Purpose is mutual exploration of sometimes difficult issues in expectation of learning from each other. The goal is not enticement to conversion. The purpose of this first session is to begin to get to know each other and to set an agenda for future meetings, so that these sessions will respond most fully to the concerns of the group.

Ask for questions. Then ask group members to join you in a Jewish way of marking new beginnings (*shehecheyanu*).

- A. (1 – 1-1/2 hours) Introductions. Choose a way for participants to introduce themselves to one another that will make people feel comfortable. Remember to leaven the seriousness of purpose with humor. Particularly if your group is large, you may need to limit the length of each person's statement. For example, warn participants that they each have 5 sentences to say their piece.
- Ask participants to introduce themselves by naming their earliest Jewish memory and

- stating what brings them to the group? How did you come to be sitting here tonight?
 - Vary the method by breaking into groups of 2 (unknown to each other), learning something about each other including the questions in #1, and then introducing each other to the group.
 - If your group already knows each other, consider dividing them into 3 groups—Jews-by-birth, not-yet-Jews, and Jews-by-choice (if any). Ask those who are not Jews to arrange themselves in order by how close to or far from conversion they feel. Jews-by-choice can arrange themselves by how long they've been Jews, as can Jews-by-birth. (Ask for comments on the experience.) Then ask people to introduce themselves with a brief statement about what brings them to this group.
- *Note to facilitator: This part of the session will tend to run long. Watch the clock and control the length of introductions if necessary.

C. (15 minutes) Setting the Agenda. Comment on the fact that it's obvious that there's much commonality and equally much to share. Invite each participant privately to write down all the questions and concerns they have about the process of becoming Jewish (for themselves or their partner.) What would they like to discuss during the next sessions? Their list of questions (that can be added to) will form the basis of the agenda, with a few items added in by you if you feel it necessary. You will compile the list with no attribution and distribute it to participants for an agenda. "This group is for you!" In addition to their concerns about the process itself, ask participants to list any areas of Jewish knowledge or practice that they would like to know more about. This second list can be used in several ways: invite guests for part of a session to teach various topics, ask group members to take turns studying and teaching, or convey student desires to the Introduction to Judaism teacher or administrator.

D.(10 minutes) Planning Ahead. Introduce the idea of "Car Talk," that they should take note of what issues come up for them during the time between sessions and you'll start with that next time. Thank them for their openness and honesty, which will ensure they get the most from their time together. Announce the topic for next time: religion and peoplehood.

Internal issues of religious commitment and change of identity (God)

I. Religion and Peoplehood: A New Choreography

Goal: To enable participants to appreciate the close connection between religion and peoplehood in Judaism and to recognize the difference between Judaism and Christianity in this regard.

Sample questions: What do I have to believe to be Jewish?

Why is my partner so intent on having a Jewish family when he/she never goes to synagogue?

Jesus has always been an important part of my life. What prayers can I say?

Is Judaism a religion, a culture, or what? How can a person convert to a new ethnicity?

Jewish partner: Why is it so difficult to answer my partner's questions?

(See the Religion and Peoplehood Outline prepared by Arlene Sarah Chernow as a resource for this session.)

*III. Steps to Conversion: What's the Blueprint?

Goal: To answer participants' questions about the process of conversion from the ritual and procedural perspectives and to explore concerns about the process. (This session must be coordinated with Introduction to Judaism, which may cover conversion as part of the life cycle series.)

Sample questions: What do you have to do to convert?

How long does the conversion process last?

Should one be completely free of all ambivalence before converting?

How much solid knowledge (re history and practice of Judaism, as well as Hebrew) must

one have before converting? Or are intent and emotional readiness more important?
Is there a standard conversion process in Reform Judaism?
Jewish partner: How can I be supportive? Is my partner doing this for me?

Interpersonal issues (relationship)

I. My Family

Goal: To discover commonalities and differences in the ways families respond to a conversion announcement; to normalize aspects of family reaction and the anxiety of the prospective Jew-by-choice; to learn or try on different coping mechanisms.

Sample questions: How can I tell them about my decision? Is it necessary? Will they disown me?

How do I address their pain/anger/feeling of loss?

How can I navigate family holidays with integrity? What about Christmas?

Will my parents accept and respect my Jewishness?

How do I (can I?) participate in my Christian family's life cycle events? How will I mourn my parents?

How can I include non-Jewish family successfully in my new Jewish traditions and celebrations?

Will they accept my Jewish family?

Jewish partner: Will I be accepted, or seen as if I've stolen their child? How can I participate in Christian holidays? Do I need to?

II. My Jewish Family

Goal: To discover commonalities and differences in the ways Jewish families respond to a conversion announcement; to normalize and understand reactions of family members; to try on various means of coping.

Sample questions: What if my in-laws reject me as a Jew?

What if they reject the authenticity of my conversion?

How can I best deal with my in-laws who are sometimes threatened by my knowledge or feel uncomfortable about my Jewishness in other ways?

What if my Jewish relatives are less observant than I want to be?

I have no Jewish family and Judaism seems to require one. How can I learn and find a place? Can I be "adopted"?

Jewish partner: How can I make peace between my spouse and my parents?

III. Finding Partners for the Journey: Jewish Spouses...Jewish Friends

Goal: To facilitate communication about desire for support and the desire to be supportive but not "pushy;" to explore the seeming ambivalences expressed about conversion.

Sample questions: What if my conversion doesn't seem of interest or significance to my spouse?

My partner seems to feel that I've become "too Jewish." What can I do?

How can I find supports outside my family? How can I network Jewishly?

As I look toward my future life as a Jew, how can I continue to grow Jewishly and become more deeply involved in Jewish life? Will I find a home?

Jewish partner: I didn't expect this. Why do I feel like "the bad guy?"

Community acceptance and belonging (peoplehood)

IV. Jewish Attitudes Toward Conversion: When Politics Become Personal

Goal: To explain the "who is a Jew?" question (check with Intro teacher) and explore the implications for Reform Jews-by-choice and their families; consider ways to cope with the

situation.

Sample questions: How do I answer born Jews who ask me why I would want to convert?

What's this whole "who is a Jew" business? How does it relate to me and to my Reform conversion?

Is Israel really MY homeland too?

Will all Jews accept my Jewishness?

What about my children's Jewishness? What if I converted after they were born?

Jewish partner: Why does Israel matter to me or my spouse? What should we do?

V. Becoming a Minority

Goal: To explore emotional impact of minority status; to try on ways of coping.

Sample questions: What new issues will become important--religion in the public schools?

Jews in the news (pro and con)?

How do you deal with the emotional ties to major American holidays such as Christmas and Easter?

What should I say when people make anti-Semitic comments/jokes?

How can I put my children in the "line of fire"?

Since I've converted I've noticed some subtle, and not so subtle anti-Semitism. How should I respond?

What if it's my own family?

Jewish partner: Will I be putting someone I love at risk? Will he/she blame me if anything should happen?

Bringing it all together (a new beginning)

VI. Transition: Letting Go of the Past (memories/traditions)

Goal: To normalize the process of choosing Judaism, including the sense of loss that is an inevitable part of the process.

Sample questions: What can I keep? What must I let go? Will I still be the same person?

How can I hold onto important memories (e.g. Christmas tree) and share them?

Am I still my parents' child?

If I feel so sad, does it mean that I'm making a mistake in becoming a Jew?

How can I make my partner understand?

Jewish partner: Is my partner doing the right thing? What am I losing?

*X. Transition: Becoming a Jew

Goal: To explore feelings about choosing Judaism and various ways of responding to them.

Sample questions: How will I know I'm ready?

When will I really feel Jewish? When will I know the secret "passwords"?

How do I get from here to there?

Will Israel ever change from State to Homeland for me?

Is it really possible to convert and feel whole?

When will I be able to give something back for all I've received? What's next?

Jewish partner: Can I be helpful? What should my partner expect of me? What am I feeling and fearing about this transition?

*The content of these two sessions may be combined depending on interface with the Introduction to Judaism class and the intensity of questions in the group regarding the actual decision to convert.

Supplementary Topics:

Depending on the particular make-up of your group the following issues may need to be

addressed. Substitute or integrate them as needed.

When There Are Children...

Goal: To normalize the fears and hopes associated with a conversion when children are present; to try on responses and ways of coping with challenges.

Sample questions:

What should I tell my children about my conversion? What should I say? How much should I say?

How can I get my family to support my children's Jewishness?

How can I explain to my children their Jewish cousin's non-observance?

What are appropriate ways to share my past with my children?

I've now chosen Judaism, but my 10-year-old daughter from my first marriage has been raised Christian. How can I deal with this? Can she convert too?

Jewish partner: How can I best participate in these discussions with our children?

Converting without a Jewish Partner

Goal: Validate the observations and feelings of single Jews-by-choice that it's hard to be a single Jew and find a place; try on various ways of coping.

Sample questions:

Others seem to see my motivations as more "pure", but suspect my sanity. How can I escape this double-edged sword?

Who will teach me how to live as a Jew? How do I find a mentor? Can I become an adoptee?

I feel like a minority within a minority. Will I really be accepted?

My spouse isn't Jewish, so I'm converting into an intermarriage. How can I establish a Jewish home without undermining my marriage? Will other Jews welcome me?

A Minority within a Minority (Gay and Lesbian converts; Jews-by-choice of color)

Goal: Validate the observations and feelings of participants; try on various ways of coping.

Sample questions:

Are there any others like me? Has anyone ever done this before?

Will I be accepted? Will I find a home in the Jewish community?

When will the time come that I won't have to explain myself?

Will my children be accepted?

Final session: Be sure to plan ahead for a group Shabbat dinner or Havdalah ritual as an ending point.