

ANOTHER RUTH SPEAKS

When I let people know that I am a convert to Judaism, as I often do, I get a variety of reactions. "How do your parents feel about your conversion?" "Don't you miss Christmas?" "When did you stop believing in Jesus?" I often get the feeling that these well-meaning questioners really don't understand what it is like to convert to another religion and especially misunderstand my feelings towards my former religion, Christianity.

I have no need to refute Christianity. In my case I *chose* the Jewish religion, first for my children and then for myself. I see this as a personal decision such as where to live, what profession to pursue, and how many children to have. I chose these things because they were right *for me*, but not because they are right in any absolute sense. I do not believe that others who make different decisions are wrong.

I could switch it around and say that Judaism chose me, if I contemplate the circumstances that led to my meeting and falling in love with, first my husband and then Judaism. My relationship to Christianity was not one of rejection but rather of growing apart. Likewise my relationship with Judaism has not been one of discovering The Truth, rather it has been like a love relationship where you are attracted to so many wonderful things in a person, but (to make it work) you have to recognize that he or she is not perfect and that you will have to take the bad along with the good.

Judaism is a great framework for living and the Jewish people can be welcoming and inclusive. But all Jewish communities have their baggage—lay leaders and rabbis are only human and can be mistaken, misjudge and mistreat, often unintentionally. It is a difficult thing to navigate through institutional waters, when you are trying to find your place within a new religion, while confronting some of the less-than-wonderful features of that religion. I am indebted to my Christian parents who are among the best models for religious integrity that I know. They taught me how religion ought to function and thereby allowed me to have high standards and hold out for the kind of Judaism that was right for me.

Given my personal history, I can hardly take the position that Christianity is totally wrong. My Christian parents were in a very real way my religious role models as I was growing up, and might even be the best models my children have of a serious approach to religious life within our family.

Another question I've been asked is, "What do Jews believe about Jesus?" I do not like this question. It implies that there is some Jewish teaching or doctrine about Jesus. There isn't. Just as there is no doctrine or teaching in Judaism on what to believe about Albert Einstein.

I think the *only* thing one can say for sure is that Judaism teaches that Jesus was not the messiah. Everything else is just what certain individual Jews believe about Jesus. Perhaps he was a great man, perhaps he was not, and perhaps he never existed. I *do* have opinions about this. I just don't think they are relevant to Judaism. They are relevant to Christianity and, to the extent that Christianity interests me, I have some ideas and opinions.

But since Christianity is no longer my religion, these things are no longer in the “Answer To Life, The Universe And Everything” category for me. It's not where I go for my spiritual fulfillment, though sometimes I dabble around in Christian history and find it intellectually stimulating.

I would make two suggestions:

First, be careful about presuming, in a Jewish setting, that a negative characterization of Christianity will go over well with everyone there. Today with the numbers of intermarried and conversionary families in our Jewish communities, Christians are no longer just friends and acquaintances. They are spouses, parents and grandparents. A one-dimensional portrayal of Christianity (good, bad, or neutral) doesn't work when the Christian being portrayed is someone we know intimately.

Secondly, I would be cautious about presuming that all of the problems one finds within Christianity are corrected in Judaism. Judaism is complicated, with many layers and many aspects. Converts to Judaism are sometimes surprised to find that things like the resurrection of the dead and Satan are part of Judaism as well.

Furthermore many of the differences between Christianity and Judaism are ones of emphasis: this life vs. the afterlife--behavior vs. belief etc. In these cases the trick is usually to find the right balance between the two. Both Christianity and Judaism are engaged in a struggle to find the proper balance and both, at one time or another or in certain settings, go too far in one or the other direction.

My worry for prospective converts is that if they left their former religion because they expected perfection, what will happen when they discover that Judaism is not perfect either? A religion without any theological discomfort or baggage is a religion of little substance and little humanity. If we Jews recognize that we are engaged in our own struggles with our tradition, then perhaps we can be generous enough to allow our Christian friends and family members to do the same with their traditions.

--Ruth Levenstein