

Some Insights For Your Outreach Program

Outreach to Non Jews Who Want To Convert:

In 1972 at age 20 I converted under Rabbi Herbert M. Baumgard of Temple Beth Am in Pinecrest (Miami) Florida (Reform). Currently I attend some services and several special events at Temple Sinai in North Miami Beach (Aventura) Florida. Many years after I converted I married a Jewish woman and fulfilled one of my pledges to Rabbi Baumgard by watching my only daughter become a Bat Mitzvot.

My decision to convert was the product of several factors. (1) High on the list was my lifelong interest in comparative religions. At the University of Florida I found myself drawn to the many course offerings in Judaic Studies (most under the tutelage of Professor Lawrence Mensch - a significant mentor of mine). (2) Most of my friends were Jewish. (3) I attended many Jewish dances, festivities and presentations (I remember Sholom Alechiem and his music so well) (4) For the most part I dated Jewish women and often, through them, was encouraged to observe and participate in various family traditions and rituals. I will always remember mixing up the silverware and the commotion that occurred.

Though I feel that I have done an OK job integrating both the religious and cultural dimensions of Judaism (an ethnic group **and** a religion) I have always been uncomfortable with the fact that I never learned Hebrew. I deeply feel that this affected the progress of my assimilation. Any outreach program **must** consider the critical importance of encouraging converts to learn the language. Physicists learn the language of the subatomic world and lawyers the language of the courtroom. Converts should do the same. And, they should be able to expect and rely on well planned support, guidance, and adult education programs-not flash cards.

Some other observations:

Doubtful Jews: The most frequent remark I heard from Jews when they learned of my conversion was "why on earth would you convert to Judaism". I imagine that many converts hearing such a dismissive remark might turn back. In contrast-and because of my academic studies- I enjoyed discussing religion and heritage with doubtful Jews and still do. Converts are in a unique position to offer a heartfelt reply to the doubtful. They need but recite the many religious truths and cultural activities that led them to Judaism. I have always felt that that for every new convert there would be Jews whose curiosity and reexamination of their own heritage would be piqued. Converts are not selfless. They want to be part of a religion with few dissenters on major points.

Mixed Marriage. Conversion in a mixed marriage shares few traits with single conversions and should be viewed and supported in very different ways. However, because mixed marriages have the frightening potential of fundamentally changing the logistics of Judaism, this is where the strongest efforts must be directed. Often converts marry nonobservant Jews--a recipe for disaster. The ties that hold the convert to the religion loosen and break when Judaism is seldom a topic of conversation or importance. Further, mixed marriages are all often composed of converts for convenience. The goals of their conversion are illusive-spousal harmony and a unified religious upbringing for children, at least on the surface. Though these goals are obviously valuable, mixed marriage couples may well believe that their childrens'religious upbringing can be taken care of at age 13 with a few incantations. The number of converts is important but not as important to Jewish logistics as the number of observant Jews. Obviously each concern influences the other. The more observant Jews there are the stronger the ties of the convert will be. And even better, their children should be in Temple school to learn things the parents won't.

Though I can offer several more comments under this heading, for the time being simply envision a nonobservant Jew and a convert who with their daughter are attending a Friday night service

trying to locate their place in the Torah let alone understand the Cantor and Rabbi. Outreach programs must reach the nonobservant spouse to the same extent and with the same vigor with which converts are brought along. A nonobservant Jew is in essence a potential or new convert. The education of one is of little good without the education of the other.

Circumcision: The topic of circumcision of converts is a serious one and must be addressed head on. The practice must be encouraged-after all it is a commandment of the very Patriarch whose name is adopted by converts. The difficult issue is whether the circumcision of adult converts should be attended in some way by a religious ceremony. Since a hospital is the only proper place for adults, after the circumcision a moyle, perhaps, could visit and invoke the proper blessings. When the convert goes home some families might gather and the Rabbi might choose to visit bringing some significant thoughts.

The three parts of this problem are the fear of pain and loss of physical sensation, the embarrassment of being with others while an intimate procedure is celebrated, and the prevailing view that circumcision is barbaric. The doctor can take care of the first concerns. The second concern-embarrassment-should be left solely to the convert to deal with though I believe that a religious figure should attend at some point after the procedure. The idea that the practice is barbaric is an idea held by Jews and non Jews. In depth education about the practice and its historical origins is certainly necessary.

Name Change: Without argument a non-Jewish name impedes adjustment though it does allow one to listen to anti-Semitic epithets much more frequently than might be the case with a person with a traditional Jewish name. In Jewish settings I have always been bothered by my "Christian Name". Yes, a name can be changed but to do so seems to violate the commandment of honoring your father. I have no practical solution to this problem (one harder for men to deal with than women). I was aided by a ring I was given at conversion bearing the Hebrew markings "Baruch Ben Avram". When I felt uncomfortable, when I felt like an outsider, this ring gave me considerable comfort.

Anti-Semitism In Extended Families: This is a topic I have not seen addressed in conversion publications. The convert should be given a set of tested and time honored tools to use in dealing with relatives.

Thank you for providing me with this opportunity to tell you about my conversion experience and my adult life as a convert.

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