

## "Why Did You Convert?"

"Why did you convert?" I have been asked this question many times before, sometimes out of deep interest and sometimes out of polite curiosity. It is a question I am never quite sure how to answer.

It is, after all, a question that does not (and probably should not) have a completely rational, logical answer. Religion is not like algebra; it's not even some sort of complicated spiritual calculus. At the core of it, faith cannot be deduced from a set of rational principles; it requires a leap of the heart.

The problem was that I didn't feel religious, not for a long time. I had spent years envying my friends who were confident in their Christian belief; I only had doubt to console me. And yet, I was also driven by some need, a quiet longing buried deep, like a song I could not quite hear, a desire for something greater than myself. I wanted to pray and feel like it mattered that I did.

Of course, I felt ridiculous for wanting these things; I felt that it was irrational to think I had any concern for God, or that God had any concern for me.

Once when I was small, I left a plastic purse behind in a restaurant. My grandma patiently took me back, and we found the purse still sitting on the floor where I had left it. Happy to have it back, I told her how lucky I was to have found it. She shook her head: "No, God was watching out for you."

My grandma's response sounded reasonable at the time. But as I grew in experience, I slowly came to the realization that God doesn't rearrange his schedule around my convenience. God doesn't even let me choose at which times these things will work out to my advantage. And so I prayed: O God, I wouldn't mind losing now and then, if only I could choose when I win!

When I first started the process of conversion, I really didn't think that I would ever become a Jew. It was inconceivable to me. As a friend of mine once exclaimed when I told her I was converting "you can't become Jewish; that's like saying 'I want to be Italian' -- you can't just wake up one day and decide to become Italian." But the truth is, I didn't just wake up one day and decide to become Jewish. It was a gradual process that took several years.

I would have to say the day I first considered converting to Judaism was the first time I saw a page of the Talmud. I was talking with my boyfriend (now my husband) about my reason for disliking religion (it's one of those conversations college students are bound to have) and I told him that I didn't like the emphasis in religion on having faith in a certain set of beliefs. I felt that my church had not let me have room to doubt or to argue or to disagree. He said that Judaism did not insist on a set of beliefs; in fact, arguing was part of the tradition. I didn't believe him, so he took me down to a bookstore, pulled out one of the volumes of the Talmud (the illustrated gift set, stored next to the presentation bibles). He was quite proud of himself: "See, this here in the middle is the text, and round the sides are the commentary. They're arguing about the meaning of the text." I was immediately intrigued. I could like a people who would write their arguments along the margins of the text.

That day, I started quietly reading about Judaism, hiding the books under my bed. Eight years later, my husband has been forced to limit me to buying just one Jewish book at a time. I was lucky, actually, because I was able to find what I was looking for: a warm religious community at Temple Beth El, and educational opportunities like an Introduction to Judaism, the Adult Bar/Bat Mitzvah class, and the weekly Torah study. Or maybe my grandma was right after all: God was watching out for me.

The question is sometimes also asked: Could I have found what I was looking for if I had stayed a Christian? The answer probably would have been yes. But it's a moot point now. To paraphrase Robert Frost: I have taken the road less traveled, and for me that has made all the difference. Even so, I recognize that conversion is not the answer for everyone. It is a process a person goes through for their own reasons in their own time. It is, after all, a private choice, probably the most private choice of all. No one can make that decision for you.

So, to answer the question, why did I convert: I converted to Judaism because it provided me

a way to answer the longing that I felt. Or to put it more poetically: I changed my name to Israel because I was wrestling with God.

A year ago, I helped found the Outreach Committee at Temple Beth El to provide support to those who are seeking to know more about Judaism, or who are wanting to establish a connection to Judaism, or who are hoping to find ways to address the needs of their interfaith family. If you are standing on the sidelines, wanting to have some sort of participation in a community of friends, but are wondering where to start, I urge you to join a group [in your area!](#)

By Kari Fields