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Psycho-social Issues in Conversion*

Dennis S. Ross

Introduction: The State of the Problem

When facing the prospective convert, rabbis meet religious and psycho-social issues. Over the years, rabbis have usually addressed the convert's Jewish beliefs and practices, yet have sometimes overlooked the emotional and interpersonal dilemmas inherent in changing one's religion. Typically offering the convert an academic introduction to Judaism, rabbis may not have provided much support when the convert spoke to the non-Jewish parents or explained the conversion to the children. As a result of recent research, publicity, and programs falling under the generic term "Outreach," rabbis are becoming more responsive to the convert's human relations situation.

Most rabbis find it a challenge to attend simultaneously to Jewish requirements and to the prospective convert's mental health needs. In seeking guidance, the rabbi will find many relevant studies of conversion scattered throughout the literature; no single written resource speaks to all of the concerns. This article partially fills the vacuum by bringing together a variety of studies on conversion — focusing on the conversion sparked by a marriage, "the conversionary marriage." Sources for this article include classic rabbinic texts, Jewish publications, demographic research, and mental health literature on conversion, as well as participant comments and archival statistical data from the "Seminar for Prospective Converts: Introduction to Judaism," of Westchester County, New York. I will also refer to remarks of prospective converts offered in private session. (All material in the latter case will be disguised to conceal the identity of the speakers.)

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according to the opinion of the one who says they are all proper converts.

Two talmudic agadot further document rabbinic acceptance of such a convert. In one agada, a non-Jew seeks conversion to enjoy the privileges of priesthood and, despite an initial rejection, is eventually admitted:

So he went before Shammai and said, "Convert me and appoint me the high priest." But Shammai, using the builder's measure in his hand, chased the man away. The man went to Hillel and Hillel converted him. 10

The second agada refers to a prostitute who

... came to the academy of Rabbi Hyya and said to him, "Master, instruct me for the sake of my conversion." "My daughter," he replied, "perhaps you have your eye on one of the disciples?" 11

She answers affirmatively. Nevertheless, in the end, Hyya accepts her conversion.

Why do Hillel and Hyya allow such conversions? Tosafot remarks:

Hillel knew that, in the end, this conversion would serve the sake of Heaven. And thus it was with the prostitute who approached Rabbi Hyya in order to marry that student. 12

The Jerusalem Talmud also dispels a good deal of the reluctance about the validity of a conversion for marriage or some other "worldly" objective:

Rav said, "They are converts according to law and they [the rabbis] do not discourage them as they discourage converts at first. They accept them and welcome them with kindness. Perhaps it is for the sake of Heaven." 13

Maimonides compares the conversion out of "love for the Torah" with the conversion out of "love for a Jew." In the conversion for marriage, the convert is not immediately considered a ger tzedek but suspect, and can eventually earn full acceptance: "Whoever converts for the sake of some worldly thing is not a righteous convert..." Yet regarding such a convert, Maimonides remarks: "While the court did not repulse them, at any rate after their immersions, it did not welcome them until their conduct could be observed." 14 And, according to Maimonides, the "after-the-fact" discovery of the desire to stand under the chupa is not grounds for banishment of one who has already converted:

Even if it becomes known that one converted for some ulterior motive, since there has been circumcision and immersion in a ritual bath, that person is no longer a heathen but remains suspect until his righteousness is clear. 15

If there emerges an "after-the-fact" doubt over the sincerity of the conversion, the Jewish community is nevertheless advised to let the convert document an honest desire to live as a Jew.

What about the prospective convert who, prior to conversion, admits a romantic attachment to a Jew? A commentary to the Tur appears to prohibit the conversion of one in love with a Jew:

[When marriage is presented as a motivation] beforehand one is not to convert them because of the personal advantage [that will result from conversion], but [if the motive is discovered] after the fact, they are converts.

Yet, the Derisha concludes that the conversion of a Jew's lover may be allowed as "... from this one learns that all is according to the discretion of the rabbinic court." 16

The legal issue is one of concealment of the motivation, not the motivation itself, for the Shulchan Aruch distinguishes deception — which would disqualify the convert — and honesty about motivations — which would not:

In the case of a male [prospective convert], investigate the possibility of his desire for a Jewish woman; in the case of a female, investigate the possibility of her desire for a Jewish man. If no effort to deceive is found [italics added], then explain how hard it is to be a Jew. 17

Rabbinic Judaism does not unconditionally welcome a convert for marriage — the motivation is acknowledged and the convert is suspected — yet we do not often see such conversion discouraged. The rabbis, apparently believing that the full impact of conversion is visible only after the fact, generally allow conditional acceptance of the one seeking secondary benefits of Jewish affiliation. With the help of time, one converting for marriage may well demonstrate appropriate "righteousness" in the eyes of the responsible rabbinic authority. As Mayer and Avgar demonstrate, the "conversionary marriage" initially contains some affinity for Judaism. The non-Jew's attitude toward Judaism and the Jewish people may have led to the selection of a Jewish spouse in the first place.
How shall a rabbi today deal with the non-academic conversion? The contemporary literature provides a perspective.

Loftand and Skonovd claim that most religious conversions fall under one or more of six "conversion motifs" or models: intellectual, mystical, experimental, affectional, revivalist, or coercive. An examination of the six conversion motifs may be helpful in understanding the conversionary marriage.

In the first, intellectual motif, conversion follows private academic investigation of the new religion. Through such cognitive activities as reading books, watching television, and listening to lectures, the intellectual convert comes to believe the new religion to be the right religion. Initially, there are few, if any, emotional ties between the convert and those already of the religion.

The second, mystical conversion, follows an emotionally intense, inner religious experience. Often, mystical converts cannot express verbally or think logically about religious feelings, since such feelings arise from their subjective, personal encounters.

The third, experimental conversion develops over a relatively long period of time. A tentative process, taking months or even years, the experimental conversion allows the opportunity to "try out" the new religion and to accept it — or to reject it. Gradually, the convert reaches an intellectual agreement with the religion's tenets, feels comfortable with the rituals, and develops social relationships with co-religionists.

The fourth motif, the affectional conversion, stems from a strong emotional attachment to a member or members of the religion, not to the religion itself. The affectional convert, through experimental religious practice, may later on come to believe in the religion.

The revivalist motif, the fifth, is marked by a profound personal experience that occurs during participation in large-scale, emotion-arousing religious settings.

The sixth, coercive motif (also called brainwashing), requires total control over the individual's living environment, uncertainty over one's personal future, social isolation, and physical deprivation.

While it seems the Jewish conversion — with a prolonged, supervised period of study, religious practice, and reflection — should fall wholly into the experimental model, our converts seem to approach us from an affectional motif and then gradually turn to an experimental motif. The formal Jewish conversion ceremony typically occurs about 18 months after the first serious consideration of conversion. During that year and a half, a non-Jew in love with a Jew may develop an intellectual attachment to Judaism, extend social contacts with Jewish people, nurture a desire to perform Jewish rituals, and cultivate a taste for Jewish cooking or an ear for Jewish music. Straus observes that people will approach a new religion "with an experimental orientation, testing it out, rather than blindly embracing it." The pre-marital conversion starts as an affectional conversion and, as an emotional connection to a Jew grows into a love for Judaism, takes a more experimental path. Hiya may have correctly seen the romantic relationship with a Jew blossom into legitimate religious affiliation in na'aseh venishma fashion. After "trying out" Judaism, the convert accepts the religion's rationale, appreciates its utility and begins to love it.

Today, the rabbi should not discourage conversion sparked by marriage. When a conversion begins emotionally and proceeds experimentally, it eventually may work out "for the sake of Heaven." In private session and when appropriate, the rabbi may well stress that the prospective convert's love for a Jewish person carries a nuance of love for Judaism and the Jewish people, a love that neither guarantees nor prevents conversion. If the possibility of premartial conversion is pursued, the rabbi ought to present the candidate with a picture of the typical course of events: a prolonged period of learning, experimenting, self-examination, and consideration of the reactions of a larger family and the community, may or may not lead to a gradual, growing love for Judaism. The prospective convert, knowing little about Judaism, should not commit to conversion "up front." Jewish study may lead to conversion or it may well yield a renewed commitment to the religion of origin. Such an "open-ended" attitude stresses that, above all, conversion is an act of conscience.

C. The Conversionary Marriage and the Family System

The rabbi can foster the Jewish value of family by looking at the conversionary family system — the prospective convert in relation to the spouse, the family of origin, and the spouse's family — and by becoming attuned to the couple's communication, to possible sexism, and to the relationship with the extended family.

1. Opening Communication

Sometimes a new couple will avoid discussion of family religious concerns until well into the planning stages of a wedding, or
even later, the couple enters a “conspiracy of silence,” an unspoken agreement to ignore a highly charged emotional issue:

Ken’s [Jewish] parents expressed only mild reservation about his decision to marry Jenny [a nominal but non-practicing Christian]. “How are you going to raise your children?” Ken’s mother asked. “As Jews, of course,” Ken answered. Then, as an afterthought, he added, “There are a couple of temples in San Diego. I don’t think we should have any problems.” The truth of the matter is that, at that point, he and Jenny had never even discussed that issue. It had not seemed important enough to either of them, and Ken simply assumed his children would be Jewish, just as he was.21

This couple slowly and quietly drifts toward Jewish affiliation, unaware that tacit assumptions and parental prodding could just as readily have exploded into a pitched battle.

In a conversionary marriage — as in a mixed marriage — the rabbi can help the couple come to terms over marriage and religion. How will religion appear in daily household life? How will children fit into the picture? What will the extended family expect and how will the couple react? The rabbi can serve an important role when facilitating clear consideration and honest communication.

2. The Reactive Intended Jewish Spouse

The new Jew’s social system — Jewish friends, the family, the synagogue — is important in orienting the convert to Judaism. Ideally, born Jews provide the convert with information, serve as Jewish models, and offer encouragement. Yet, sometimes the “system” fails to fulfill its crucial role and the convert flounders.

The attitude of the prospective Jewish spouse — the person with the most contact with the convert — is the best predictor of how comfortable and active a Jew the convert will become:

[While] sixty-nine percent of the respondents have been Jewishly influenced by their spouses and fifty-three percent report that their spouses are the most significant Jewish influence in their lives … [by and large] those Converts who have the lowest Jewish identity and identification scores are married to Jews who believe that Judaism is of little or no importance (italics added).22

One study, referring to the “Jewish background, knowledge, and commitment of the born-Jewish spouse,” comes to the same conclusion.23 The Jewish partner offers critical support.

A problem may arise when the born Jew does not encourage — or tries to sabotage — the conversion. Some born Jews feel inadequate when asked to support a spouse’s conversion:

I’m Jewish by birth, and … I don’t know what I am doing … And I’m at a loss because I don’t know how to be a model for someone else when I’m devoid of background myself.24

A born Jew, out of Jewish ignorance, may appear indifferent about a spouse’s conversion when the truth is, the born Jew cares deeply but is unable to act or even put the feeling of “not being up to the responsibility” into words. The convert, in the absence of an overt show of support from a Jewish spouse, may feel neglected and become resentful; a lack of understanding grows into fear and anger. From time to time, a husband’s or wife’s conversion may touch a born Jew’s emotional or intellectual opposition to Judaism; and when a couple is unwilling or unable to put negative opinions into words, husband and wife may “act out” the thoughts through hostile behavior.

In these cases, the rabbi must resist the temptation to take the side of the prospective convert, thereby alienating the born Jew. Instead, the rabbi should acknowledge the discomfort of both wife and husband. By finding one partner guilty and the other innocent, the rabbi serves neither the born Jew nor the convert or the Jewish community. Both husband and wife are in pain; both need compassionate help; both need the opportunity to speak their minds. Does the born Jew feel “devoid of background”? Perhaps someone in the family or synagogue can help the couple learn about Jewish rituals. Has the born Jew an intellectual disagreement with Judaism? Perhaps the born Jew can support the spouse’s conversion — separate and apart from personal religious objections. By refusing to scapegoat the ambivalent born Jew and by showing sympathy for both partners, the rabbi may well help the couple support each other in Jewish learning and growth. When difficulties between conversionary marital partners are great, the rabbi should consider referral to a family therapist.

3. Sexism and Conversion

Many more women convert than men. In Huberman’s study, women converts are in the majority by approximately two to one (66 percent vs. 34 percent).25 Mayer and Sheingold find that 27 percent of non-Jewish women married to Jewish men convert while only 14 percent of non-Jewish men convert.26 Seltzer’s sur-

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ve of 227 participants in Reform “Introduction to Judaism” classes in Boston, Philadelphia, New York, and St. Louis shows nearly three-fourths of the participants to be women.27 The majority of Mayer and Avgar’s converts — 86 percent — are women.28 And the Westchester “Seminar for Prospective Converts” has seen 81 percent women but just 19 percent men.

In discussion with unconverted men married to Jewish women, Huberman explores the reasons why fewer men convert. First, some men are deterred by rabbinic circumcision requirements. The men said they would have converted had there been no such demand. Second, some men, knowing that all branches of Judaism recognize as Jewish the child of a Jewish mother, believe they have nothing to gain from conversion. Third:

American society still has patriarchal or “sexist” elements. A number of men feel that they as males should not have to relinquish their identity by converting. In the case of intermarriage, these men expect the wives to take on the males’ identity, as symbolized by the women taking on the males’ last names — a standard American practice.29

While it is not right to pressure an unconverted male spouse, or to change Jewish ritual demands solely to increase the number of converts to Judaism, it is appropriate to raise the possibility ofisexism. Is a woman converting out of conscience or to be compliant? What would happen if she did not convert to Judaism or if the Jewish man converted to her religion? The rabbi may also stress that, in the event of divorce or the death of the born-Jewish spouse, the children and the convert will be expected to remain Jewish.

4. The Extended Family

As appropriate and necessary, the rabbi can help the convert consider the conversion as a response to personal family history and the current family situation, and help smooth out rough spots in the relationships.

Many converts are pained by a negative parental reaction to the conversion. Huberman discovered that

... the overwhelming majority [of parents] express clear and unequivocal resentment and opposition, and indicate that converting to Judaism is folly and that the idea should be jettisoned. The majority of respondents ignored this parental admonition, but were very much affected by their parents’ feelings...30

Given an occasional convert’s desire to see only the positive side of the future spouse and the Jewish religion, combined with non-Jewish parents’ rejection of the idea of conversion, a Jewish family’s attempt to “put on a good face,” and the convert’s distancing from the non-Jewish parents and alliance with the Jewish in-laws, the seeds of future heartache may be well sown. Some of this frustration may be avoided if the rabbi helps the convert get an honest picture of the family of origin, the Jewish family and Judaism.

The rabbi begins by observing and assessing the convert’s attitude toward the non-Jewish family. Is the convert saying, “This conversion is my way of getting back at you, Mom and Dad!” or “I am changing religions, but I certainly still love you!”? In the first instance, by “throwing the conversion in the parents’ face” the convert may be attempting to retaliate for a perceived old wrong.

Horowitz maintains that, in “punishing” the parents for childhood injustices, the convert overreacts to prior life experiences. Such a conversion, according to Horowitz, contains seeds of “unfinished relational business.” If the rabbi does not help the convert come to grips with that unhappy past, the convert may well be setting the stage for future failure.

Even when a candidate claims he has no religion or religious upbringing, the question of origins and family background must at least be raised... Even when it seems simpler to ignore one’s past, the convenience of doing so — as contrasted with the often intense effort required to face it — will be purchased from the future at great cost.31

The rabbi can help work out an accord, assisting the convert in looking back and sorting out the good from the bad. After all, that same personal history helped bring the convert to the point of the conversion — something the convert may be able to view with gratitude.

Kukoff suggests the convert assure the parents that they are still loved, that all they did for the child is still appreciated and nothing will ever change that history. Conversion is not a matter of one side “winning” and the other “losing”; it is an act of conscience. The rabbi can help the convert clarify Jewish identity, establish a Jewish home, and be open with the non-Jewish family about what all that means. Above all, the rabbi can stress that conversion is a severance of religion, not relationships.32

Landau cautions against exaggerating the number of new Jews seeking to “punish” the family of origin through conversion. She
notes that people often convert out of an honest love for Judaism and the Jewish people.33

In general, when considering the conversionary family system, the rabbi can stress that conversion is a matter of conscience, not something one does to please a spouse or to retaliate against parents.

Over and over again we were informed that one should convert for oneself: "I think it is important to convert for yourself — don't do it just for others. Don't convert because someone wants you to, but do it because you feel it's something you really want." Although almost one in four converts converted to please their spouses or in-laws, the respondents pointed out that a greater commitment is necessary.

Said one convert:

Anyone who intends to convert to Judaism or any religion should not if the only reason is to make the in-laws happy. Also, marriage to someone of the Jewish faith is not an adequate reason for conversion. There must be a stronger and higher commitment. To do it to please is a poor reason and not a lasting one. Don't do it for any reason unless it is what you want to do.34

II. Religious and Communal Issues

Many converts encounter complications, separate and apart from marital concerns. For instance, conversion usually demands that the convert develop a new way of conceptualizing religion and challenges the convert in sometimes less than satisfying encounters with Jews and non-Jews. The rabbi can be of aid when broader religious and communal situations confront the convert.

A. Different Definitions of Religion

Converts using concepts and terminology borrowed from the former religion often have trouble understanding Judaism. As an example, where Christianity may stress the importance of the Church and salvation, Judaism stresses mitzvot. In fact, Judaism "requires the whole panoply of Jewish experiences — a Jewish home with Jewish rituals, Jewish music, Jewish art, and Jewish books..."35

Converts may wonder what Jewish "ethnicity" has to do with the Jewish "faith." Even after conversion, new Jews tend to rely on the narrow religious approaches provided by the religion of origin, as non-religious aspects of Judaism — food, language, music — receive less emphasis:

... converts as a group define Judaism in religious terms rather than communal-ethnic terms. To converts, Judaism is basically a religion like their former faith, Christianity.36

Judaism challenges the convert’s efforts at definition, and it is difficult to become what you cannot define.

As soon as converts realize that Judaism is more than "just a religion," they begin to see the ethnic differences — variations in social behavior between the group they are leaving and the Jewish people they are joining. One man of Latin background remarked that both Jews and Latins offer children a good deal of attention; yet members of the culture of his birth were less likely to set and enforce well-defined limits on children’s behavior as often as did many of the Jews he knows. One convert comments:

Judaism is so ethnic. I doubt if I will ever feel really comfortable as a Jew. How can you, a born Jew, understand me — an Italian-Catholic from the North End of Boston?37

On the one hand, the rabbi can stress that conversion is more than just a religious change; the convert will come to experience Judaism as a way of life and will give up some of the received cultural behavior. On the other hand, the convert can choose to retain some of the old traditions.

The rabbi’s support is critical as the convert develops new ways to describe a new religion. The rabbi may help the convert turn to members of the extended family or the synagogue to assist in communicating the ethnic and cultural material so important to Jewish life today.

B. Conversion and Class

Some sources point to economic and social motivations of conversion. One study of 2,689 American converts found that those who switch [religions] settle in religions which match their currently reported socio-economic status more closely than did the socio-economic characteristics of the religions which they left. And there is some evidence to support the idea that upward socio-economic mobility is related to upward religious mobility.38

Another study of 144 converts married to Catholics, Protestants, and Jews noted a tendency for the partner with less secular education to convert to the religion of the partner with more education; conversion will usually be to the religion of the spouse of higher
education and socio-economic status. And another study of 504 Catholic-Protestant mixed marriages also found that conversion will probably “be in the direction of the spouse bringing the highest social status to the marriage.”

While we see evidence of socio-economic trends in many Christian conversions, we cannot conclude that people become Jewish for social or economic reasons. While converts to Judaism have educational and economic backgrounds similar to those of born Jews, no study clearly compares the level the Jewish convert is leaving to the level the convert is entering. In general, conversion occurs in a cultural context and the rabbi would do well to attend to the convert’s perception of “Judaism as a Civilization.”

C. Jewish Communal Issues

The convert, particularly the convert to Reform Judaism, receives a mixed greeting from the larger Jewish community. A social slight or outright rejection can arouse many pained responses in the heart of a new Jew who does not yet “feel Jewish.”

1. Rejection by Jews: Inadequacy and Bias

One half of our respondents [1] do report that Jews are reluctant to recognize converts as full members of the Jewish community. This discrimination burdens converts with a tremendous sense of disappointment.

Some converts, despite their command of basic Judaism, believe they are too ignorant of Judaism to be considered authentic Jews. Jewish self-doubts, combined with a sometimes less than warm welcome from the larger Jewish community, can deepen a new Jew’s sense of inadequacy.

All too frequently, converts claim that no amount of Jewish study or practice can compensate for the deficiency of a lack of a Jewish upbringing.

I am undoubtedly different from those born Jewish. I cannot create for myself a Jewish childhood, nor can I trade in my relatives for Jewish parents and grandparents. With much pleasure I listen to my friends recall their Hebrew school days, Zionist youth activities, Bar and Bat Mitzvahs, but I sometimes also feel deprived of those experiences.

Lacking a long-term Jewish background, this convert speaks for the many who feel inadequate. Converts also speak of being hampered by...
A Conservative rabbi, conscientious, perspicacious, explains to a young proselyte that his own requirements for conversion will not meet some demands that might be made in the future. If she wants to emigrate to Israel, if her children want to marry Orthodox Jews... He therefore recommends what he himself does not condone, Orthodox conversion. The young woman, thinking of the children she will have, assents, and she and the rabbi then participate in rituals they both find meaningless.58

Will the position of some Conservative and Orthodox authorities seriously affect Reform conversion and "Outreach"? It is still too soon to tell. Right now, the Reform rabbi has an ethical obligation to describe honestly the many possible consequences of Reform conversion. If the convert is concerned that a Reform rabbi's signature will not be recognized by all Jews, the rabbi can suggest and assist in referral to a rabbi of another movement, and/or raise the notion that the pursuit of a Reform conversion today does not disallow an Orthodox conversion in the future.

Not every born Jew will act in the spirit of the Jewish tradition, and the rabbi here has a two-fold responsibility: to help born Jews to be more hospitable through preaching and example, and to prepare the convert for the worst. Sometimes the new Jew will meet unfounded suspicion. Nevertheless, the rabbi should stress that many born Jews are delighted to welcome the convert as a full member of the Jewish people. Furthermore, the rabbi should reiterate that becoming a Jew is a lifelong challenge for the born Jew, as well as for the convert. The rabbi may also note that converts have experiences born Jews will never know: "If you were born Jewish, there is no way that you can understand what it is like to say the Sh'na in services for the first time."49

2. Rejection by Non-Jews: The Fear of Anti-Semitism

Sometimes converts, moving from the perceived safety of a Christian majority to the precarious lot of the Jewish people, express a fear of anti-Semitism. During the hijacking of the Achille Lauro, one prospective convert described the worry of being singled out for a fate as harsh as that of the late Leon Klinghoffer. Other converts are concerned about becoming victims of another Holocaust.

Converts will hear more than academic issues in any narrative of Jewish history that even mentions Jewish suffering. Here the rabbi must be honest: it has happened before; we hope it does not happen again; we offer no guarantees. Nevertheless, our people have enjoyed many good times. There is more to our past than just pain.

D. Saying Goodbye to the Old Religion

Some converts experience a deep sense of loss with the renunciation of the former faith.

In converting to Judaism, I felt guilt. I turned my back on the tradition that nutured me. I felt I might be losing the truth. I suppose celebrating Chanukah not Christmas must cause guilt. Celebrating Pesach, not Easter, causes guilt.50

Landau describes one convert's grief. Long after the conversion ceremony, the convert spoke of the loss of the feeling of protection and security the former religion offered — and a worry that the "old God" would some day seek vengeance.51

Saying goodbye to the old religion also means turning away from once cherished public rituals and private celebrations, and churns up many questions. How does the convert assert new religious practices without hurting the non-Jewish family? How does the convert bring Christmas gifts to the home of a Christian relative and express the wish to receive Chanuka gifts in return? How does the new Jew say "No" to a child's request to sit on the department store Santa's lap and then explain to the child why the Christian grandparents have a tree in the living room? Similar concerns emerge over family life-cycle events, be they at synagogue or at church. The death of a non-Jewish parent, the baptism of a niece, the Bar Mitzvah of a cousin, or the wedding of a sibling may force the convert to define and redefine religious attitudes and practice.

The approaching end of the secular year is an important time for the rabbi to inquire sympathetically about the extended family (Jewish or non-Jewish), to attend to the convert's expectations and worries, and to help the convert determine personal practices. The rabbi can offer reassurance. New family rituals take time to develop; what happened this year does not determine religious behavior forever. Almost every convert finds it a challenge to define a personal religious preference, to live by the limits the preference implies, to make the limits clear to others, and to enlist the support of all family members. The rabbi can make a difference, particularly when reassuring the convert that conversion takes time and patience.

The convert, even the one claiming never to have had much of a relationship with the religion of origin, may mourn the loss of a relationship with Jesus or the Church. Some guilt feelings are normal. An extreme grief reaction may indicate a deeper psychological problem requiring consultation with a mental health professional.
III. Conclusion: The Psycho-Social Side of Conversion and the Rabbi

A. Attention to Emotional Issues

Preparation for conversion to Judaism must deal with psychosocial issues. When the convert looks at religion, the convert re-evaluates many parts of life.

Daily activities and routines that were formerly taken for granted or interpreted from the standpoint of various situationally specific roles are now understood from the standpoint of the convert role.

Moreover, much of this re-evaluation is emotional, not cognitive. Ullman, in a cross-religious study of conversion, found a predominance of emotional conversion motivations over intellectual motivations. Converts to Orthodox Judaism, Roman Catholicism, Bahai, and Hare Krishna more commonly spoke of grounds for conversion as "the people were nice to me," or "the atmosphere was free of tension," than the belief that the new religion taught the truth. A course of conversion that deals with academics and avoids personal and social considerations does not attend to a major factor in conversion.

The need to attend to psycho-social areas becomes more apparent when, so often, new Jews face more than one problem at a time. For instance, under the pressure of planning a wedding, a prospective convert gropes for an intellectual appreciation of Judaism — while the Jewish extended family says "Reform is not Jewish enough." Or, the Jewish spouse expresses the fear that a prospective convert is becoming "too Jewish" in the car on the way to a niece's first communion. The typical conversion takes 18 months from start to ceremony, and a good deal can happen during that year and a half. Many problems brew simultaneously, and the convert may need more help, more time, and greater skills than a rabbi or course instructor can provide; referral to a mental health professional may be in order.

Maller suggests that every prospective convert meet with a psychotherapist to cover the emotional aspects, and stresses that the outside professional be a committed Jew, ostensibly to avoid the possibility that a healthy desire to convert will be unfairly reduced to a psychological aberration. A psychotherapist can also provide assistance when a convert confuses mental and spiritual health.

Some turn to another religion upon the death of a loved one, especially an untimely death which embitters them, or upon the loss of a fortune, or a shattering disappointment in love, or a public scandal or disgrace. In all these instances there are healthier resolutions of their problems available, but the stricken individual is not quite strong enough to face the realities and to work through the problem or crisis patiently. He wants quicker or easier answers in the face of deprivation which his difficulty represents to him and he is unable to make a more mature response. Of such we may say that they are retreating rather than advancing into religion.

Given the possibility of substantial or painful emotional correlates of conversion, it behooves the rabbi to attend to psycho-social issues — and to make a mental health referral, if necessary. Particularly when an individual seeks conversion as a "way out" of a psychological problem, the psychotherapist is ideally the one to help.

B. The Role of the Rabbi

While a spouse is generally the greatest influence on the prospective convert, 34 percent of Huberman's respondents claim the rabbi is an important presence, and 18 percent point to the rabbi as the essential Jewish person. Rabbis were perceived as helpful when they offered academic information, served as Jewish role models, and raised and responded to problems the convert would eventually face. Rabbis receiving negative evaluations were usually those who failed to be available for discussion opportunities. In sum, prior to and after the conversion, the rabbi can be an indispensable resource.

Rabbis can also help after the conversion. The need for emotional support and intellectual information does not end with a ceremony. The rabbi can schedule follow-up meetings on the anniversary of the conversion and, where numbers are large enough, organize an ongoing support group. Above all, the rabbi must reiterate that conversion is a long-term process.

While rabbis do not offer psychotherapy, they should respond to the convert's Jewish and psycho-social needs. Rabbis would do well to deal with matters that go beyond the academic requirements for conversion. Commonly, they can assist the convert in sorting out love for a Jewish spouse and love for the Jewish tradition. Rabbis can be aware of issues raised by the immediate and extended family. They can make it easier for the convert to let go of the old and embrace the new by attending to cultural factors and to the demands of being a Reform Jew before, during, and
after the conversion. Above all, rabbis should stress that becoming a Jew, by birth or by conversion, is a life-long act.

NOTES

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2. The “Seminar for Prospective Converts: Introduction to Judaism,” organized in 1983 by a number of Westchester County, New York, Conservative, Reconstructionist, and Reform rabbis, seeks to meet some of the academic and psycho-social needs of the increasing number of non-Jews either considering conversion or desiring a greater knowledge of Judaism. The 16-week seminar includes 26 hours of academic instruction (Bible, History, Philosophy, Holidays, etc.) with Conservative and Reform rabbis, eight hours of group discussion led by a social worker, and six hours of Hebrew. The seminar provides for the prospective convert’s study, reflection, and growth, and fosters cooperation between members and leaders of the various branches of Judaism in Westchester.


10. Shabbat 31a.

11. Menachot 44a.

12. Tosafot, Yeivamot 24b, after Tosafot, Yeivamot 109b.


17. Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh De‘a, 268:12.


37. Steven Huberman, “From Christianity to Judaism,” *Conservative Judaism*, vol. 36, no. 1 (Fall 1982).

38. Newport, *op. cit.*


42. Ibid., p. 37.


49 Kukoff, op. cit., p. 66.


