

With intermarriage and assimilation on the rise, converts could give Judaism a much-needed shot in the arm. But a rabbinical ruling half a world away is shaking things up for Jews by choice here at home



The Conversion Conundrum

BY MICHAEL KAMINER ■ ILLUSTRATION BY EDEL RODRIGUEZ

ON A SUNNY FRIDAY LAST MAY—Holocaust Memorial Day, as it turned out—thousands of Orthodox men and women woke up to learn they were no longer Jewish. All of them had converted with the help of a prominent Israeli rabbi named Chaim Druckman. All of them were living Jewish lives in Israel. But a ruling from the High Rabbinical Court—in which a Druckman convert was deemed insufficiently observant to stay Jewish—wiped out all of his conversions with the stroke of a pen.

Insiders familiar with Israel's hardball religious politics recognized the decision as an ultraright power play. But the damage was done. Converts, many of them new immigrants, panicked about their legal status in Israel, where Jewishness determines everything from birth to burial. Confused calls flooded hotlines and aid groups.

Here in North America, the ruling had a very different effect. For one thing, the action enraged many converts, who typically take a polite stance around rabbinical politics. "It hurts," says Sarah Schiffer, a 57-year-old Florida engineering associate who converted in 1971. "After years of struggle, to think your identity and that of your children could be overturned because of some rabbinical disagreement! »

This is not how Judaism is supposed to treat the stranger.”

The decision also angered some rabbis, who saw it as out of step with the letter and spirit of Jewish law. “Terrible behavior,” says Rabbi Judith Hauptman, who teaches Conservative rabbis-in-training about conversion at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, in New York City. “[The Rabbinical Court] wants to engage in infighting and cut each other off. The Talmud would call this *sinat hinam*—baseless hatred. They need to remember the Temple was destroyed because of how Jews were treating each other, not how others were treating us.”

Perhaps most notably, the ruling has emboldened conversion activists, a loose league of lay leaders, rabbis, and academics lobbying to change what they consider an outdated, insular, and counterproductive process. “Proper conversion is about empowering people, not hocus-pocus,” says Rabbi Celso Cukierkorn, a Miami-based proponent of accessible conversions who helped pioneer an online conversion process. “If you convert, will you encounter people who behave moronically toward converts? Certainly. But you’re not there to change them. It’s to change yourself.”

If it sounds as though a ruling nearly half a world away hit uncomfortably

close to home, it may be that American Jews are still trying to sort out some very complicated baggage surrounding converts.

Orthodox adherents refuse to recognize conversions by other denominations. The Conservative movement is just coming to grips with intermarriage and recognizing non-Jewish spouses. Reform Judaism welcomes the curious through outreach programs, but its work has raised questions about conversion standards.

“My very traditional friends keep asking me when I’m *really* going to convert,” says Chicago public relations executive Leah Jones, 31, whose blog, “Accidentally Jewish,” chronicles her days and nights as a single Reform Jew. “They think an Orthodox conversion would make me legitimate. I used to get angry about it. But you pick your battles.”

REELING FROM a perfect storm of assimilation, intermarriage, and apathy, even the most protectionist Jewish leaders are recognizing the need to welcome committed prospects who happen to have been born into different faiths. But a legacy of persecution has endowed us with a lasting, if subconscious, fear of outsiders. Caught in this web of ambivalence are converts

themselves. Many are already coping with unsupportive families, skeptical friends, and painful self-doubt; while they often receive a warm embrace from the synagogues or temples where they study, many Jews by birth don’t exactly roll out a welcome mat.

“Some American Jews like to think the Ashkenazi culture they inherited is the most authentic form of Judaism,” says Laura Wiessen, a New York-based filmmaker whose current documentary project, *More Beloved by G-d*, profiles converts. “Even if Jews aren’t interested in religion, they cling to the fact that they’re culturally Jewish to look down on converts.”

Diane Tobin, who converted through a Conservative *beit din* (rabbinical court) in 1982, agrees. “We as a people have an internalized oppression we need to overcome,” says Tobin, the founder of Be’chol Lashon (In Every Tongue), a San Francisco-based organization that advocates for racial and ethnic inclusiveness in Jewish life. “We fear the stranger. We’re suspicious. Others have rejected us, so we want to reject. We turn away the convert three times before conversion. It’s unnecessary.”

The mitzvah to welcome the stranger appears more than 30 times in the Torah. “You shall love the convert” (Deuteronomy 10:19); “You must understand the feelings of the convert” (Exodus 23:9). “Our religion is about Abraham, a guy who sat in a tent open on four sides, welcomed everyone, and washed their feet,” says Rabbi Cukierkorn. “The only thing he wanted was for people to thank God for the meal they were receiving.”

The discussions and rules around conversion began to emerge many centuries ago. These discussions culminated in *Shulchan Aruch*, the sixteenth-century codification of Jewish law, which describes three requirements for valid conversions: Converts must accept the Torah and observe all of its 613 mitzvot; perform a mandatory (Continued on page 41)

FIRST PERSON

From Ghetto Girl to Rabbi’s Wife

I was a first-generation American baby born after my parents emigrated from the Dominican Republic. How in the world did I find my way to Judaism? BY ALIZA HAUSMANN



I HAVE ALWAYS been a stranger in a strange land.

My childhood years in Washington Heights, an inner-city New York offshoot of the Dominican Republic, were Rapunzel-esque. I watched the goings-on in the ‘hood from our sixth-floor apartment, which towered over the hilly area. My sisters and I weren’t allowed to play outside because of the drug dealers, the culture, and the language, all of which my mother was sure were *veneno*—poison. According to Mom, Spanish was okay, English

even better, but “talking Ghetto,” the Spanglish slang of the streets, was no good.

I learned about religion watching *The Ten Commandments* over Easter. On Sundays I attended catechism classes at the local Catholic school. At home my mother practiced a blend of Catholicism and Santeria (Afro-Caribbean “voodoo”), taking me to *brujas* (witches) to cure my allergies. I had no idea that only blocks away, in the midst of my Dominican ghetto, there

was a Jewish neighborhood. So how in the world did I find my way to Judaism?

It started with a car ride. My best friend, Igor, a Russian Jew, had gone to Israel an atheist and come

a black *kippah*, soon to be coordinated with the white shirt and black pants that would become his signature wardrobe. I was wearing a halter top and short shorts. All I knew was that Judaism meant I wasn’t allowed to hug him anymore.

“Wow! That’s so interesting. Tell us more!” my sisters chorused from the backseat. And then to me: “You should be Jewish! You always wanted to be Jewish. Remember?”

When I was 13, a visit from a Holocaust survivor to my junior high school had piqued my interest in Judaism enough that I stole the Star of David my mother kept with her cross and wore it every day. I went to the library’s religion section, where I discovered that the Jewish picture of G-d matched the one I’d always had in my head and heart.

“Mom, I want to be Jewish,” I declared one day, running to her in a frenzy of excitement, books in hand. My mother’s lips curled in horror before she reeled her arm back like a baseball

When I discovered Shabbat, I sighed with relief. Shabbat was the first vacation this workaholic had taken in a long time.

back Orthodox. Driving around the neighborhood with me and my sisters, he thrilled us with tales of going kosher, living life as an observant Jew, and scaring all his old friends. He wore



The author before her conversion, top, and 18 months later on her wedding day.

Questions of Faith

Some nuts-and-bolts answers about conversion

HOW LONG DOES CONVERSION TAKE AND WHAT DOES IT COST?

The process usually takes a year or two, but these limits depend on rabbinical assessment and the candidate’s knowledge of Judaism. Conversion is free, and potential converts should steer clear of those who counsel otherwise. There may be a cost for classes, books, ritual objects, and other necessities.

WHAT DOES THE CONVERT STUDY?

A sponsoring rabbi generally outlines what the candidate must learn, which includes topics such as the Torah, Jewish holidays and life-cycle events, Shabbat, keeping kosher, *taharas hamishpacha* (“the laws of family purity”), prayer, blessings, and Jewish history. When there is a Jewish partner, he or she must study with the convert. Orthodox conversions also require that the candidate become active in a Jewish community.

IS THERE A RITUAL FOR CONVERSION?

To authorize the conversion, the candidate goes before a *beit din* (religious court) of three rabbis, who ask questions to assess the candidate’s commitment and knowledge. After immersion in the *mikvah* (ritual bath), the convert again declares commitment to the Jewish people and must forsake all ties to any previously practiced religion.

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FIRST PERSON

pitcher and cracked a slap across my face. Later, various family encounters would teach me that anti-Semitism was alive and well in the world. I put Judaism on the back burner.

At 25, I tried going back to the church. I hoped Protestant Christianity might be less fire-and-brimstone than Catholicism. But the calculation that no Jesus equals eternal damnation didn't sit well with me. So when my best friend started talking, I was intrigued.

Two months later, I was knee-deep in Jewish books and had an appointment with an Orthodox rabbi. No Jesus. No Trinity. No more scary confessions to priests. No nuns looking perturbed when they asked all the students to draw G-d and I held up a drawing of a giant yellow squiggle. "G-d is light." Even at 8, I wasn't drawing Jesus idols.

Over the year I became a constant presence in the synagogue office. I took weekly classes. I assaulted the rabbi daily with questions via e-mail. I read late into the night and listened to educational MP3s on the way to work. I was a human iPod, downloading a lifetime of Jewish learning into my brain.

I saw Judaism as an extension of the personal relationship with G-d I had already honed over years of angry rants and silent wishes aimed at the heavens. I got high on how Judaism could teach me to make every action in my life holy and how to focus on bettering myself for my time on Earth, not as a ticket to Heaven.

Judaism began to color all the areas of my life. I bought my last pair of pants from the Gap and a week later sold them to a fellow teacher at the high school where I worked. I charged knee-length H&M skirts by the dozen. I prayed all the time and for everything. And when I discovered Shabbat, I sighed with relief. Shabbat was the first vacation this workaholic had taken in a long time.

I finally confessed my decision to convert to my father in an international call to the Dominican Republic.

"Dad, I'm going to be Jewish. You're going to have Jewish grandchildren." After a long pause, I heard a faint chuckle escalate into booming sputters of laughter. "You're crazy!"

No, I assured him, I wasn't.

But still I was a stranger. My olive skin was much darker than the Ashkenazi faces I saw at shul. People stared at my curly Afro. When I told my non-Jewish friends that people at shul complimented my "tan," they reacted in disbelief: "But you're so white!"

Six months into my conversion, I met my future husband, then a graduate student at the Jewish Theological Seminary, at a housewarming party for some rabbinical students in Washington Heights. Here, at least, I felt like the consummate insider—Dominican and (almost) Jewish in a neighborhood that had long been home to both groups.

After nearly a year of studying, the rabbi thought I was ready to convert. But first I had to survive Israel. My husband's supportive mother sent me to a *Haredi* (ultra-Orthodox) school. Orthodox Jewish boys dated for marriage, and we couldn't wed until I was "kosher."

In Israel I realized that I was becoming part of a family. Like any family, there is bickering and infighting. Sometimes we can be dysfunctional in the way we tear each other down. But we can also be amazing in the support systems we create: cooking meals for new mothers, sitting shiva with friends, and partying at glorious weddings not to be missed.

Two months later I returned to New York to dip in the *mikvah*. A *beit din* (rabbinical court) of three rabbis asked me questions before shepherding me into the little pool. Fresh from the *mikvah* and clasped in a bear hug by my friend Devora, I was sure that though I had been born to a non-Jewish mother, I had always had a Jewish soul.

Am I still a stranger in a strange land? As I pack my husband's lunch before he heads for rabbinical school, I wonder how many other Dominican Jewish rebetzins are out there. But I've never felt less alone in my life. The story goes that converts, too, were present at Mount Sinai for the giving of the Torah, but we were lost along the way and have had to find our way home. And where is home? Ruth, the most famous convert of all, put it best: "Your people will be my people, and your G-d, my G-d." You said it, sister!

dip in a *mikvah*, the ritual bath; and male converts must get circumcised or have a ritual drawing of blood called *hatafat dam*. Once converts meet those three requirements, they appear before a *beit din*, a religious court traditionally composed of three men.

It will come as no surprise to anyone familiar with rabbinical discourse that sages today are no closer to consensus on conversion standards than they were on the day the rules were written. Does "accepting the Torah" mean memorizing all 613 mitzvot? What if the *beit din* includes a woman? How do you judge a convert's intentions to lead a committed Jewish life?

"The Talmud says 'a handful' or 'a number' of mitzvot is okay," says Rabbi Hauptman of the JTS. "At the threshold, you don't demand full observance of converts. You don't require them to observe the rules for *kashruth* fully. Some interpretations place much greater demands on converts. Orthodox rabbis might disagree, but I think that's a misconception."

JEWISH LEADERS are also starting to question a centuries-old taboo against proselytizing, long considered a foundation of our faith. "It's part of the folk culture of Judaism that emerged from a fear of being in a vulnerable position in a foreign culture," says Rabbi Kerry Olitzky, executive director of the Jewish Outreach Institute in New York City, which offers courses, mentor programs, and workshops for Jews by choice and unaffiliated Jews. Indeed, historians note a long Jewish tradition of proselytizing, which only ended in the fifth century under threat from Christian and Muslim rulers.

The prohibition on outreach is outmoded, Rabbi Hauptman agrees. "The challenge facing us now isn't proselytizing," she says. "It's getting non-Jewish spouses sufficiently interested in Judaism, or getting women who aren't converting to at least raise Jewish kids."

Among denominations, the Reform movement has been most aggressive about embracing converts. As early as 1978, the renowned Rabbi Alexander

Schindler proposed an outreach initiative for interested non-Jews and spouses in intermarried couples. In an historic 1993 speech, he launched a \$5 million initiative to engage with "those of our neighbors who belong to no church" and "welcome the strangers who choose to live in our midst."

"Conversion isn't some odd decision made by very few," says Kathy Kahn, Director of Outreach and Membership for the Union for Reform Judaism. "It's a profound life-cycle event that should be celebrated and normalized."

Conservatives, too, are now taking a "much more welcoming attitude toward people interested in conversion," says Rabbi Hauptman. "Some shuls wouldn't put an item in the bulletin if a member's new grandson was born to a non-Jewish parent. All of that is changing."

Attempting to standardize conversion requirements, Reform and Conservative leaders in Los Angeles teamed up to form an alternative "community" *beit din* that crosses party lines. "The compromise for Reform members was conversions done more traditionally. And for Conservatives, the compromise means being more accepting of how people choose to live a Jewish life," says Rabbi Neal Weinberg, director of the Miller Introduction to Judaism Program at the American Jewish University in Los Angeles.

The Rabbinical Council of America, a leading organization for Orthodox rabbis, launched its own effort to standardize conversions in 2006. But its program was positioned as a response to an out-of-control system in which rabbis were making up rules and ineligible converts were slipping in.

SOME OF THE MOST SURPRISING allies in the push to narrow access to conversions are converts themselves. "I think it's pretty obvious that the Reform movement is recruiting, along with some Conservatives. It doesn't fit with one

of my favorite aspects of Judaism," says Avi Montigny, 36, the Catholic-born convert behind JewsByChoice.org, a Web site that aims to connect converts across denominations. "I don't think Judaism's for everyone, and I love the fact that it's not evangelical," he says. "Judaism does not need more uncommitted Jews. We need quality, not volume."

For Malynnda Littky, a 34-year-old African American who was raised by a Jehovah's Witness but now lives as an Orthodox Jew in Israel, the High Court's ruling makes sense. "From what I've read about these specific conversions, the standards were pretty minimal," she says. "The rabbi was using some minority opinions accept-

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ing mitzvot. I do feel sorry for the converts and children, though, especially if they didn't realize the conversions weren't fully accepted."

Ultimately, as it turns out, the ruling may lack teeth: At press time, multiple legal challenges had sent it to Israel's Supreme Court. And while the decision wreaked havoc among the people it affected in Israel, it may eventually lead to more inclusive conversions—and broader definitions of who can become a Jew—perhaps even back across the Atlantic.

"We should be welcoming to people who want to become Jewish," says Rabbi Weinberg. "We've never heard about converts trying to undermine the Jewish people. They enhance us." •