

A Wider Door: Reimagining Conversion



THE JEWS are few in number: About 15.2 million souls. Slightly fewer than half of them live in the United States, where their population is barely growing. The reasons are complex; the Holocaust, the declining birth rate in Western countries, intermarriage, and assimilation have all played a role. The data suggest that it is becoming more common for intermarried Jews to raise their children as Jewish; still, the American Jewish population is, at most, replacing itself from one generation to the next. Jewish continuity depends on sustaining vibrant Jewish communities. To do that, we must make or find more Jews.

The whole Jewish people stands to benefit from overcoming skittishness around the topic of conversion, better understanding what draws people to Judaism, and improving the conversion process. What inspires people to embrace Judaism? What do prospective converts need as entry points and encouragement? How can Jewish communities support the social integration of converts and deepen

their engagement? And what can the experience of converts teach us about Jewish communities more broadly, about other people we are failing to notice, embrace, and engage—people sitting on the sidelines who want to be part of our communities but don't know where to start?

Increasing the number of Jews should be easy. Judaism is so vital and compelling that it can pretty much market itself, both to a growing number of converts and to unaffiliated Jews in search of community and meaning.

Why do people choose a Jewish life? As a young adult from East Lansing, Michigan, Judaism's appeal to me was clear: It offered a blueprint for a structured, intentional, ethical life that balances work and leisure, indulgence and restraint, individuality and community, *teshuvah* (repentance) and joy. It's a path that requires human, not superhuman, commitment; a path that accepts people as physical beings with natural urges for eating, sex, and rest; that welcomes independent thought; that expects people to err and try again and renew their intentions every year. These points may sound simple, but they can be revelatory for people who grew up without a good balance between aiming for goodness and accepting physicality and imperfection. Judaism offers an affirmative middle path between a culture of rigidity, self-denial, and impossibly high standards on the one hand, and aimless, chaotic license on the other.

The narrative arcs of the Torah can be enormously resonant for people who feel adrift in the 21st century. Abraham and Sarah's path from isolation to connectedness. Rebecca's leap into the unknown. The Exodus generation's move from slavery to freedom to revelation to the project of building a good society from scratch. These stories culminate not only in freedom, but also in commitment: to a new relationship with God, a new body of law, a new sense of purpose in the world. They speak profoundly to people who are struggling, overcoming hardship, seeking meaning and connection.

Who is drawn to Jewish life? Broadening our view beyond the prevailing image of the "young woman seeking to please her

prospective Jewish in-laws” reveals many other people who are seeking models of how to live thoughtfully and ethically in the context of a strong community.

These are often people who stand on life’s thresholds: twenty-somethings designing their adult lives for the first time; new parents thinking deeply about how to do well by their children; single parents who find in Judaism a means of creating a loving, orderly, fulfilling life for their families; older adults stepping back from earlier structures and renewing their search for meaning; people whose lives have been upended by personal tragedy, migration, or divorce. Judaism’s home-based, do-it-yourself elements appeal to those trying to create warm homes and rich family traditions. Judaism’s practice of partnered or small-group text study is enticing to people who are wrestling with life’s big questions.

Designing programs around what people are seeking and that demonstrate Judaism’s humane, comforting, and thought-provoking pathways through universal experiences can be our starting point, both for converts and for unaffiliated Jews, bringing many more people through our doors. We could be offering classes and study groups on relationships, parenting, grief, and healing; hosting programs drawing on secular books that embody Jewish ideas, such as Harold Kushner’s *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* or Wendy Mogel’s *The Blessing of a Skinned Knee*; or drawing attention to popular practices like the “tech Shabbat,” taking a weekly break from technology. In 2010, about 200,000 people strolled through Sukkah City—an assembly of creatively envisioned sukkot scattered throughout Manhattan’s Union Square—exploring ideas of shelter, environment, and impermanence through a Jewish lens. Given that camp and nursery school are necessities for many families, what would it look like to open more Jewish camps and nursery schools to non-Jewish children? Don’t reduce the Jewish content—just open the doors and see who wants to enter. What treasures from Jewish tradition can we offer the wider public, knowing that for some, this may spur a deeper exploration of Judaism or set them on a path to conversion?

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Prospective converts’ initial encounters with rabbis and synagogues tend to feel very high-stakes. The motivations for conversion are often momentous, raw, and deeply private, and it is hard to go public about one’s intention to change a foundational piece of one’s identity. Social anxiety is also high: Who will my people be? Will this new group accept me? How do I avoid embarrassment? At the same time, the exclusive, inward-looking character of Jewish communities can make it hard to enter a synagogue for the first time. Sincere seekers can get scared off easily.

We need a broad variety of accessible, low-key entry points into Jewish communities. I admire the numerous “Introduction to Judaism” classes that synagogues, Jewish learning institutes, Chabad, and other organizations run. But I feel some unease about relying on them as the primary path to conversion—not everyone has the time, transportation, child care, or financial resources to take advantage of yearlong conversion courses. Moreover, Judaism is a religion of *doing*, with practices that pervade daily life and require a lot of individual initiative. Highly structured, all-encompassing, rabbi-led “Introduction to Judaism” courses seem like an awkward fit for Judaism as it is lived day by day. Many people are riveted by the complexity of Judaism, its lay-led communities, and its relative lack of doctrine. How can outreach and the conversion process be made to capture this bottom-up spirit?

I feel lucky that my own conversion process mimicked what Jews

actually *do*: I attended services regularly (switching between a regular minyan and a learners' minyan), took a Hebrew class, went to Shabbat dinners and evening lectures, read a lot, and used the rabbi mainly as a resource and a sounding board. I appreciated the dignity of designing my own syllabus; it pushed me to develop my own Shabbat, kashrut, and davening practices, instead of treating Judaism as an academic subject that I studied once a week. It also helped me meet more people who were actively practicing Judaism than I would have met if I had focused only on an "Introduction to Judaism" course and a learners' minyan.

Some of the biggest challenges facing converts (and many people on the margins of Jewish life) are not educational or spiritual, but social. Those who embrace Jewish life are told, "Don't try to be Jewish alone," but not everyone has this choice. Adult converts often struggle with a limited Jewish social network, especially compared with peers who grew up in synagogues, day schools, Jewish camps, and Hillel. Even those who grew up Jewish but outside these networks can find social integration rough.

All who embark on Jewish living as adults, whether or not they're converts, have similar social needs. Synagogues can adopt creative initiatives such as "Shabbat clusters," which bring together small groups of four to six households that commit to celebrating Shabbat together several times over the course of a year. Shabbat clusters foster authentic relationships that strengthen over time. They can be engineered for similar ages, interests, and levels of observance, or be intentionally heterogeneous. Another practice that helps converts, new community members, and those who live alone is to turn the post-Saturday, morning service kiddush into a full, leisurely lunch to give people a chance to break bread together every week. The consistency of social engagement with roughly the same group of people fosters deep, real relationships.

There is an elephant in the room, which I've saved for the end. The ways in which Jewish communal organizations have traditionally promoted continuity — prizing marriage and especially endogamy

and creating dense Jewish social networks — can feel exclusionary to converts and prospective converts, as well as to Jews from diverse or less traditional backgrounds. Where do converts fit in a vision of Jewish peoplehood that emphasizes hereditary Jewish identity, generational continuity, and ethnic pride? As converts settle into Jewish communities, they often encounter some boorish behavior, ranging from the trivial (no one says hello) to the tenaciously prejudicial (such as the idea that conversion is unnatural and people who want to become Jewish are emotionally insecure, flighty, or weird). It may be time to reevaluate our messaging. Where might our focus on building strong in-groups be making it more difficult for those outside to find a way in?

Rethinking how we reach out to prospective converts is a multifaceted challenge. We need to paint a richer picture of who is drawn to Judaism, connect with them in more creative ways, and articulate a vision of Jewish peoplehood that embraces *all* who wish to be part of Jewish life, wherever and whoever they are. The programs that appeal to non-Jews who are curious about Judaism will also appeal to Jews who are unengaged but curious. Talking more openly about the logistical and financial challenges that many people face in trying to get involved in synagogue or communal life will make Jewish institutions more accessible to all. Prioritizing the social integration of those who are new or otherwise on the margins will enrich all our institutions, making them places that are more vibrant, innovative, and welcoming.

Many souls will be touched by the beauty of Judaism and Jewish community. The more we can find ways to bring new people into lives of Jewish meaning, purpose, and connection, the stronger the future of the Jewish people will be. *