Steps and Process for Conversion to Judaism
Under the Supervision of Rabbi Reuven Taff

Contents of Information Packet (to be reviewed by the Candidate before initial meeting with Rabbi Taff):

Steps and Process for Conversion to Judaism (Pages 2-5)

1. Application Form for Mosaic Law Conversion to Judaism Program (Pages 6-7)
2. Declaration of Faith Document (Pages 8-9)
3. Conversion Progress Report Form to be completed before each private meeting with the Rabbi (Pages 10-12)
4. Article on Conversion written by Rabbi Alan Silverstein (Pages 13-24)
5. Article entitled Legal Perspectives on Conversion (from ITIM, The Jewish Life Information Center in Israel) (Pages 25-26)
6. Book List (Pages 27-31)
7. 100 Questions on Basic Judaism (to be completed by the end of the conversion process) (Pages 32-35)
8. Essay Questions (to be submitted by the end of the conversion process) (Page 36)
9. Outline for Bet Din (Page 37)
10. How to Choose a Hebrew Name (Pages 38-39)
11. Guidelines and Preparation for Immersion in a Mikvah (Pages 40-46)

Conversion to Judaism is a very important decision for anyone considering this life-changing process. It is required that anyone wishing to become a Jew by Choice set up an appointment with Rabbi Taff. Prior to the meeting with the Rabbi, it is advisable for the candidate to review all 46 pages contained in this Packet. It is suggested that the first document to be read in this packet should be the Declaration of Faith (Pages 8-9). The steps for conversion to Judaism under the supervision of Rabbi Taff are within the Halakhic guidelines of the Rabbinical Assembly, the organization of rabbis affiliated with United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism.
Listed below are the required steps for conversion:

- Initial Meeting with Rabbi Taff (email the rabbi at rabbi@mosaiclaw.org). You may also follow up with his secretary, Coral Wilson, at cwilson@mosaiclaw.org.

- Following this, the Candidate arranges a separate appointment with an Orthodox Rabbi to gather information about Orthodox Conversion. The Candidate must ask the Orthodox Rabbi the following three questions:

  1. **What are the steps and process for an Orthodox Conversion?**

  2. **If I convert to Judaism under the supervision of a Conservative or Reform Rabbi, will I be accepted by you and by the Orthodox Jewish Community as a Jew?**

  3. **If I convert to Judaism under your (an Orthodox Rabbi’s) supervision, and at some time in my life decide that I am more comfortable in a Conservative, Reform or Reconstructionist synagogue, how will that affect my Orthodox conversion? Can my conversion be rescinded?**

If, after meeting with an Orthodox rabbi, the Candidate desires to proceed with the conversion process with Rabbi Taff, the following three books must be read:


Upon reading these three books, the Candidate must schedule an appointment with Rabbi Taff to discuss the books. Following the discussion, the Rabbi will convey to the candidate if he/she will be officially accepted into the conversion program.

- If yes, the Candidate schedules an appointment with the Rabbi, which will be devoted to a ‘Personal Inventory’ of the candidate’s life, from birth to the present.

- The Candidate agrees to be immediately engaged in formal study of Judaism, immersed into Jewish life, following the observances as specified in the “Declaration of Faith” (found in this Packet.)

- The formal study of Judaism requires registration and regular attendance in the community-wide 18-week *Introduction to Judaism Course* sponsored by the Greater Sacramento Board of Rabbis and the Jewish Federation of the Sacramento Region (http://jewishsac.org/introductiontojudaism). Should it be geographically difficult to attend these classes, Rabbi Taff will suggest an on-line program of study. The Candidate also agrees to attend Adult Education Classes, lectures, scholar-in-residence programs and any
other Jewish education programs scheduled at the KOH Library and Cultural Center or other venues on the Mosaic Law campus. It is strongly encouraged that the candidate also enroll in classes at The Florence Melton School of Adult Jewish Learning (http://www.meltonsacramento.org/).

- The Candidate agrees to begin studying and mastering how to read Hebrew. An online Teach Yourself to Read Hebrew CD and Book Set can be purchased from Amazon through the following website: https://www.amazon.com/Teach-Yourself-Hebrew-Ethelyn-Simon/dp/0939144115/ref=sr_1_2?keywords=teach+yourself+to+read+hebrew&qid=1563477928&s=gateway&sr=8-2

- If possible, it is highly recommended that the candidate enroll in a beginning Hebrew reading course offered occasionally by Mosaic Law Congregation or any other similar program offered in our community.

- **Attendance at Shabbat, Holiday and Daily Minyan Services:** It is required that the candidate maintain regular attendance at Shabbat and holiday services in the Friedman-Lichter Sanctuary. Candidates are also required to attend Daily Minyan Services as often as possible in the Pearl-Cohn-Finegold Bet Midrash located in the administration building. The schedule of these services can be found on the synagogue’s website: www.mosaiclaw.org.

- It is also required that the candidate attend *one of each* of the following life-cycle and community events:

  1. A Baby naming Ceremony
  2. A Brit Milah Ceremony
  3. A Bar/Bat Mitzvah
  4. A Jewish Wedding Ceremony
  5. A Jewish Funeral and Burial
  6. A Shiva Minyan
  7. A Jewish Unveiling Ceremony
  8. Community-Wide Yom Hashoah Commemoration
  9. Community-Wide Jewish Heritage Festival
  10. All Night *Tikkun Leyl Shavuot*

Rabbi Taff will alert the candidate as to the dates of the abovementioned life-cycle ceremonies and community events.
• Israel

The Land of Israel is the Jewish National Homeland. The history, faith, religion, culture and identity of the Jewish people have always been tied to this land which bears our name, from its ancient name of Judea to its modern name of Israel. Israel and Jerusalem hold the deepest, religious significance for Jews; this is the land of our ancestors, the heritage of our children. It is essential that Candidates for Conversion to Judaism understand the importance of our connection to Israel and *feel* that connection. To accomplish this, consider making a trip to Israel and stay informed by reading Israeli Newspapers and other Jewish periodicals such as:

The Times of Israel  
[https://www.timesofisrael.com/](https://www.timesofisrael.com/)

The Jerusalem Post  
[https://www.jpost.com/](https://www.jpost.com/)

The Algemeiner  
[https://www.algemeiner.com/](https://www.algemeiner.com/)

Jewish Journal  
[https://jewishjournal.com/](https://jewishjournal.com/)

J---The Jewish News of Northern California  
[https://www.jweekly.com/](https://www.jweekly.com/)

• Kashrut – Keeping Kosher

The Conservative movement's understanding of Kashrut is generally the same as that within Orthodox Judaism. However, on issues where leniency is possible, The Rabbinical Assembly’s Committee on Jewish Law and Standards consistently allows the lenient views as an acceptable option.

For those candidates accepted into Mosaic Law's Conversion to Judaism Program, it is expected that Kashrut will be adhered to through the entire process and continued to be observed when the conversion process has concluded. It is understandable that for some candidates, this requirement can be challenging. It is best for the candidate to begin slowly and increase his/her level of Kashrut observance over time.

More information on the Jewish Dietary Laws (Kashrut) can be found at:  

[http://www.jewfaq.org/kashrut.htm](http://www.jewfaq.org/kashrut.htm)
Candidate understands that there is no set time frame for when the conversion process shall be completed. All will depend upon the candidate’s progress and the Rabbi’s assessment of that progress.

When Rabbi Taff has determined that the candidate is ready to appear before a Bet Din (a Jewish Legal Court of three witnesses who examine the candidate’s knowledge and sincerity), a date will then be scheduled for the Bet Din to convene. The Bet Din is usually scheduled on a weekday morning or evening or on a Sunday morning and the entire proceeding can take anywhere from two to three hours, followed by immersion in a kosher Mikvah (ritual bath) at a future date. After the immersion in the Mikvah, a brief ceremony is held where Certificates of Conversion in both Hebrew and English are presented to the Candidate.

Male candidates who have already been circumcised surgically are required to perform the Mitzvah of Hatafat Dam Brit. This is done immediately after the Bet Din Proceedings before immersion in the Mikvah. If a male candidate has not had a circumcision, then the candidate must contact a urologist to schedule the outpatient procedure prior to the convening of the Bet Din.

All candidates conclude the process of conversion (after being accepted by the Bet Din) with immersion in a kosher Mikvah. Since there is no Mikvah available for immersions for the purpose of conversion in Sacramento, all conversion-oriented immersions are held in Oakland, California. A Mikvah fee in the amount of $50.00 is required prior to the immersion, payable to Beth Jacob Congregation. The address of the Mikvah is: Beth Jacob Congregation, 3778 Park Blvd, Oakland, CA 94610. Rabbi Taff will make the appointment and will notify the conversion candidate of the date and time of the Mikvah appointment.

For a female immersing in the Mikvah, there may also be a fee of $100 (for a female Mikvah attendant) and $200 ($100 each for two of the witnesses who will be present and who will sign the conversion documents). The fees for the witnesses and female Mikvah attendant are only if the witnesses and female attendant will be from the Oakland Jewish community. There is no fee for the rabbi or for any witnesses or female attendant that the rabbi may bring from Sacramento.

There are no additional fees for the conversion process, other than registration fees for classes and book and material fees. At the end of the process, each candidate is encouraged to make a contribution to Mosaic Law Congregation in honor of this momentous occasion.
Application Form for Mosaic Law Congregation’s Conversion to Judaism Program

PLEASE PRINT CLEARLY OR COMPLETE THIS FORM ON YOUR COMPUTER AND ANSWER ALL QUESTIONS IN BOLD FONT, AND EMAIL THIS AS A MICROSOFT WORD ATTACHMENT TO rabbi@mosaiclaw.org, or mail to Rabbi Taff c/o Mosaic Law Congregation, 2300 Sierra Blvd., Sacramento, CA 95825 or FAX to Rabbi Taff at (916) 488-1165.

TODAY’S DATE:

FULL NAME OF CANDIDATE:

___MALE  ___FEMALE

ADDRESS:       CITY:      STATE:   ZIP:

PHONE: (HOME)        CELL PHONE:

EMAIL ADDRESS:

MARITAL STATUS:  ____MARRIED    ____DIVORCED    ____ SINGLE    ____WIDOWED

IF MARRIED OR ENGAGED TO BE MARRIED, IS YOUR SPOUSE/SIGNIFICANT OTHER:

___JEWISH BY BIRTH    ____NOT JEWISH    ____ALREADY CONVERTED TO JUDAISM

FULL NAME OF SPOUSE/SIGNIFICANT OTHER:

NAME OF RABBI WHO SUPERVISED CONVERSION OF SPOUSE/SIGNIFICANT OTHER:

YOUR DATE OF BIRTH:        AGE:

BORN AND RAISED IN:

EDUCATION - LAST SCHOOL ATTENDED:

DEGREES:   ____ HIGH SCHOOL    ____ UNIVERSITY (B.A./B.S.)    ____MASTERS    ____DOCTORATE

OCCUPATION:

EMPLOYER:

PRESENT RELIGIOUS DENOMINATION:

CHILDREN:       ____ NO    ____YES

NAMES OF CHILDREN FROM OLDEST TO YOUNGEST, THEIR GENDER AND THEIR AGES:
WHY ARE YOU INTERESTED IN CONVERTING TO JUDAISM?

IF YOU WERE RECOMMENDED BY A RABBI, PLEASE GIVE HIS/HER NAME AND CONTACT INFORMATION (email address and phone number):

HOW DID YOU HEAR ABOUT THIS CONVERSION PROGRAM?

ANY ADDITIONAL INFORMATION YOU WOULD LIKE TO SHARE WITH RABBI TAFF:
DECLARATION OF FAITH

(Should the Candidate be accepted into the Jewish Faith by the Bet Din at the end of the conversion process, this document is read aloud in the presence of the Bet Din and signed by the Candidate and each member of the Bet Din)

I hereby affirm of my own free will and volition, my commitment to the God of Israel, the Torah of Israel and the People of Israel. Irrevocably accepting Judaism, I sever my ties to any other religion with which I may once have been affiliated.

I pray that my present conviction may guide me through life, which I may be worthy of the sacred tradition and fellowship, which I now join. As I am thankful for the privileges thus bestowed upon me, I pray that I may always remain conscious of the obligations, which are mine as a member of the House of Israel.

Today I hereby pledge myself to live the Jewish way of holiness, by accepting the Mitzvot of Judaism now and always, here and wherever I may be. In preparation for this moment I have sought both to infuse my life with Jewish values and to create a distinctly Jewish atmosphere in my home.

Specifically, I declare that I have determined, to the best of my ability to make the following Jewish observances an integral part of both my life and that of my family:

By bringing all children born to me or adopted by me subsequent to this conversion into the Covenant of Abraham, through the ritual of Brit Milah for my sons and through naming my daughters in accordance with Jewish procedure;

By giving these children the best possible Jewish education available to me and to them;

By making Shabbat and Jewish holidays important moments of holiness in my home by lighting candles, reciting Kiddush and Birkat Hamazon and by performing other rituals distinctive for each holy day;

By enhancing my observance of Shabbat and Jewish holidays by avoiding practices which detract from the sanctity of these festive times;

By incorporating Kashrut into my life;

By affiliating with a synagogue upon this conversion and continuing to attend synagogue religious services regularly;

By praying daily, either at synagogue or at home, using the Jewish liturgy as the basis for worship;
By participating in the life of the Jewish community by supporting religious and communal institutions in Israel and the Diaspora;

By identifying with the State of Israel, the center of Jewish hopes and aspirations;

By engaging in Jewish study on a continuing basis I pray that, in all these ways, I may continue to grow in the love of Judaism and find blessings because of my decision to become one with the Jewish People. By joining Judaism and the Jewish People may I add my willing heart and hands to our eternal task of being God's partners in seeking to perfect the world under God's universal sovereignty.

שמע ישראל, יי אלהינו, יי אב אחד

Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, The Lord Alone

Name of Candidate____________________         Date_______________

___________________________________  Rabbi Reuven Taff, 会员
___________________________________  Member of Bet Din
___________________________________  Member of Bet Din
Rabbi Taff meets regularly with each Candidate for Conversion. Before each meeting, the Candidate should complete this progress report and present to the Rabbi to be placed in the candidate’s file. This form can also be emailed to Rabbi Taff (rabbi@mosaiclaw.org) prior to each scheduled meeting.

NAME: __________________________________ MEETING DATE: ____________

CLASSES: ❄️

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HEBREW: ❄️

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SYNAGOGUE ATTENDANCE: ❄️

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SHABBAT OBSERVANCE: ❄️

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KASHRUT: ❄️

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HOLIDAYS:


READING:


JEWISH PERIODICALS:


JEWISH ACTIVITIES:


THEOLOGY:


100 QUESTIONS: ________________________________

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PLAN: _______________________________________

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Are You Considering Conversion to Judaism?
By Rabbi Alan Silverstein
(Rabbi Silverstein is a Past President of the Rabbinical Assembly, the central organization of rabbis affiliated with Conservative Judaism)

One of a series of pamphlets confronting issues affecting contemporary religious life, published by The Rabbinical Assembly November 1992 Heshvan 5753. The views expressed here are the views of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views or policy of The Rabbinical Assembly. The author wishes to express his appreciation to Rabbi Bradley Shavit Artson and Rabbi Avis Miller for their recommendations. Rabbi Alan Silverstein is the spiritual leader of Congregation Agudath Israel, Caldwell, New Jersey.

Perhaps you are considering conversion to Judaism. This interest may stem from reading Jewish books or courses at college, from contact with Jewish friends, a love relationship with a Jew, from an unfulfilled spiritual quest, an awareness of Jewish parentage or ancestry, or a positive image of Jewish religion conveyed by films and the media. You may be wondering - what are the benefits and challenges of entering the Jewish faith? Have others who have chosen Judaism faced the same concerns and questions that you do?

This pamphlet presents a series of questions and answers borrowing from converts' personal testimonies. The intent of this pamphlet is to assist you in answering your own questions. In framing these questions, I was influenced by categories in Jews by Choice: A Study of Converts to Reform and Conservative Judaism written by Conservative Rabbi Joseph Tabachnik and Dr. Brenda Foster. Based upon over 400 questionnaires, Tabachnik and Foster provide the following list of "reasons proposed to explain Gentile [affiliated as well as unchurched Christian] conversion to Judaism." (Note: this is a partial restatement of their total list.)

**RELIGIOUS RELATED**
- Believing Judaism as a better religion
- Identified with Jesus as a Jew
- Felt God leading them down this path
- Felt Jewish beliefs made sense
- Liked Jewish worship
- Liked the realism in Jewish routine practices
- Sense of spiritual or religious need
- Search for a better religious identity
- Serious personal event caused questioning of faith

**MARRIAGE RELATED**
- Concern for religious identity of children
- Desire for a Jewish wedding
- Desire to provide children with a coherent family tradition and religion
- To avoid dissonance in the home
- To please the Jewish in-laws
- To please the Jewish partner
- To share faith and practice with partner
COMMUNITY RELATED

- Admiration of Jewish accomplishments in the face of hostilities
- Desire to belong to a close community
- Desire to be part of an ancient heritage which has withstood the test of time
- Felt Jews lived desirable lives
- Had many Jewish friends
- Identification with the Jewish fate.

Although not every one of the following questions may reflect your personal state of mind, perhaps some of them will accurately portray your feelings and assist in moving closer toward exploring a profound religious decision.

Q: Does traditional Judaism accept converts, or is only the Reform movement liberal enough to be welcoming of Jews By Choice?

A: Don't assume that the traditional segment of the Jewish community does not accept sincere converts. Representing modern Orthodox, for example, Rabbi Maurice Lamm's new volume entitled Becoming A Jew includes a final section, "Welcome Home: We are Keeping the Lights On," in which he articulates the warm affinity of traditionalists for pious newcomers.

"Those who stood at Sinai" [to receive the Torah via Moses] is a phrase that comprises those who are born to Jewish ancestors, all of whom originally converted at Sinai, those whose ancestors heroically converted since that time, and those who will convert today and tomorrow. (p. 417)

Rabbi Lamm and the rest of us in Jewry eagerly await the "return home" of persons whose destiny is to join ranks with the Jewish religious community.

As for Conservative Judaism, we are a huge movement of more than 40% of American Jewry, blessed with thousands of sincere Jews By Choice. Among converts into our ranks, we are proud to number some Rabbis, Cantors, Jewish educators, many local synagogues, Men's Club and Sisterhood Presidents, and countless well respected members of our Boards of Trustees, Committees and Minyanim (those who attend prayer services). The Chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary, Rabbi Ismar Schorsch, in addressing a 1987 national conclave for the leadership of Conservative Jewry observed (regarding the desirability of conversion):

[Conversion is] an instrument that accords with our religious integrity ... Conversion opened up the Jewish community to the Greco-Roman world. There were many non-Jews who entered Judaism because Judaism pioneered the institution of conversion back [then] ... So I wish to make myself very clear. I think that conversion properly used is still the most effective way [in terms of responding to existing interfaith marriages] for us to be consistent with our past ... while at the same time addressing the real needs of the present. (Conservative Movement Conference on Intermarriage and Conversion, March 2-3, 1987)

All suitably prepared and involved Jews By Choice are welcomed by Reform, Reconstructionist, Conservative and Orthodox groups within the mainstream of American Jewish religious life, in accord with each movement's standards of practice.

Q: Will I have to forsake my Gentile family in order to become a Jewish person?

A: This is a sensitive problem which must be treated with care. As Rabbi Sanford Seltzer has written:

It is true that initially one's parents may be hurt and resentful when informed that a son or a daughter has decided to leave their former faith These feelings may exist even when one's family has not been particularly religious ... The impact of conversion to Judaism upon parents and other loved ones should be thoroughly evaluated before one decides to become a Jew. (“On Becoming A Jew,” UAHC)
One of the paramount commandments of the Jewish tradition is the mitzvah of "honoring your father and mother." Judaism opposes cutting off ties with non-Jewish family members. Christian and unchurched relatives ought to be respectful of a convert's new religious needs as well. In her excellent guidebook for new Jews entitled Your People, My People—Finding Acceptance and Fulfillment as a Jew By Choice, based upon hundreds of case studies, Lena Romanoff, a committed Conservative Jew, offers the following advice:

A convert should explain to the family that he or she is the same person as before, with a different religious and cultural orientation. He or she should never criticize or ridicule the family's- and his or her former faith ... Converts should provide details about the conversion process and describe how they intend to incorporate Judaism into their lives ... Parents should not be expected to change their lifestyle because their child decides to convert, but they may be willing to accommodate some new needs. (p. 107)

Rather than sending Christmas cards to you, Christian family members should send Hanukkah greetings, and you should reciprocate with Christmas regards to them. Rather than beginning home meals with prayers to Jesus Christ when you are present, they might more suitably invoke the name of God. You should respect that Christianity is their religion, and they should respect that Judaism is yours. Once such mutuality is achieved in religious matters, your family interpersonal relationships ought to remain warm and respectful.

**Q: Should I be troubled with the prospect that Orthodox Jews will question the validity of my conversion under Conservative Jewish auspices?**

A: America is a land of freedom in decision-making. There are no government-mandated religious authorities. Instead, our country separates church and state. Neither in Christianity nor in Judaism can anyone dictate uniformity of practice. Consequently, many rituals and practices of Catholics are unacceptable to Protestant groups. Evangelical Protestants question the validity of Main-Line Protestant faith commitments. A convert into Methodism maybe regarded as inauthentic by "Born Again" Christians. A neophyte Unitarian might be considered as unacceptable to right-wing Christian faith communities. Mennonites and Amish are regarded as exotic, sectarian groups. Diversity and disagreement is characteristic of American Christian denominations. The same divergence is true among America's Jews.

Orthodox Judaism represents less than 10% of American Jewry. It has its own criteria for valid ritual practice, theology and conversion. So too does Conservative Judaism, which represents the largest number of affiliated Jews in the U.S.A. Our conversions are consistent with the nature of Jewish religion as practiced within our more than 800 congregations and more than one and a half million adherents. Jews By Choice who enter Judaism under the auspices of Conservative rabbis find their status as Jews acceptable to our entire religious movement, as well as to Reform, Reconstructionist and unaffiliated Jews, collectively totaling more than 90% of U.S. Jewry.

In the remote situation that you subsequently become involved in an Orthodox community either in North America or in Israel*, they would not recognize your conversion as valid any more than they would recognize a Conservative rabbi as a rabbi or a Conservative congregation as a synagogue. However, keep in mind that different standards would only be part of a fundamental reorientation for ANY non-Orthodox Jew (born Jew or convert) entering Orthodoxy, a re-orientation in ritual practice, in prayer, in belief, in every aspect of religious life. Just as a convert into a Main Line Protestant group would not be concerned about the opinions of Evangelicals or of Roman Catholics, as a Conservative Jew By Choice you need not worry about the minority views of Orthodox Judaism.

'Note: The civil ("the Law of Return") laws of The State of Israel do recognize the validity of Conservative conversion.

**Q: Will entry into Judaism resolve my personal faith concerns? Not having been satisfied with previous religious affiliations, will I find spiritual fulfillment within Judaism?**

A: Gail Saville, offers an eloquent articulation of the attraction of Jewish beliefs in contrast to her previous faith experiences:

I find great comfort in Judaism. Jewish children are born innocent [of original sin] ... Jewish children are not born with the burden of guilt. They do not come into this world tainted with original sin, but rather blessed with
original purity ... When I was small, I often wondered how God could possibly think I was so terrible. I was too young to have done something wicked enough to make God mad at me. It is a comfort now to learn that God thought highly of me all along.

There are no intermediaries between Jews and God. Jews believe that all people have close, personal access to God. As a Jew, I don't have to go through an ecclesiastical switchboard ... in charge of human affairs to reach God.

A few friends have expressed to me their regret that we Jews have no human savior, no one to take on the burdens of our sin for us. My answer to them is, "Thank God!" When I am in a car, I do not like riding in the passenger's seat, putting my life in someone else's hands. I prefer controlling my own destiny; I prefer to earn my own salvation.

There is also security in knowing that as a Jew I am part of a people and a way of life that has survived and will survive. Nothing so life affirming, so family-and people oriented, with such strong roots and widespread branches, can cease to exist unless humankind itself ceases to exist. As a Jew, I feel secure as a part of something very special, and in a very real sense, immortal. (Gail Saville, "Why I Chose to Become a Jew," Reform Judaism, Fall, 1983, p. 20)

The testimony of a former Protestant minister, Richard Kajut, is equally forceful. He writes: The decision to break with my former Christian faith was the culmination of a lengthy process of religious search and intensive self-examination of my personal beliefs. There was no flash of lightning which prompted my choice to convert. Ironically, it was the desire to know more about the character of Jesus the man, the historical Jesus, which eventually led to the renunciation of my Christian heritage...

During my college years, I spent many spare hours in the religion stacks of the university library pulling texts on the 'historical' Jesus. [Albert] Schweitzer led me to R.H. Charles, Charles to Albright, and Albright to Powell Davies. I graduated soon to Joseph Klausner and Abba Hillel Silver ... A whole new understanding of the ZEITGEIST of the early first century opened before my eyes: apocryphal and pseudopigraphical theology ... Greek mystery religions, Sadducees, centrist Pharisees, apocalyptic Pharisees, Essenes, Zealots, Hillel and Shammai ... If I was to serve the one God of Moses and the Prophets in the manner I was drawn to Him, I could do so only as a Jew. (Originally published in the Jewish Spectator and reprinted in M. Lamm, On Becoming A Jew, pp. 29-30)

For many converts to Judaism, membership in the Jewish community, in addition to comfort with our beliefs, sparks a new sense of spirituality, of religious vitality. Paul Cowan's personal odyssey, An Orphan in History, describes his wife Rachel's spiritual rebirth via conversion under the supervision of Rabbi Wolfe Kelman, the former Executive Vice President of The Rabbinical Assembly. She [Rachel] said that she had been thinking about the idea [of conversion] for months, ever since she discovered that worshipping as a Jew released something inside her which enabled her to think about God; to feel, at rare moments, a faith whose intensity startled her. (Paul Cowan, p. 217)

In a related assessment, one of my own students for conversion into Judaism, Ben Asher, explains: That is precisely why [one]... converts, because of some sort of experience of something spiritual that has never been accessible prior to undertaking this perilous journey. A window was somehow miraculously opened. At the time of 'illumination,' the convert may be in awe as his whole disposition reflects the extraordinary process of transformation going on within ... The Power of God at work. (Conservative Congregation Agudath Israel, Caldwell, New Jersey)
Q: Having been raised as a non-Jew, will I ever find religious meaning in the Hebrew prayers or in sacred sites of Jewish history, such as the Land of Israel?
A: Don't be intimidated by what might seem to be a chasm between Jews and Gentiles in religious vocabulary and experiences. Once a person sincerely enters into Judaism via conversion, Hebrew prayers, *Eretz Yisrael*, and other internal Jewish symbols not only open up to you, but will become enormously inspiring. As Lucy Katzen, a Conservative convert, observes:

> It took time for Jewish tradition to grow and it is logical that it should take time for someone to grow into it. If I had waited for every custom to have meaning before I observed it, I'd still be waiting. I learned instead that customs can grow to have meaning because you observe them. I had to give myself time to make memories and the two years I had when I [prepared for being] converted cannot compare to the ten years of experiences I've had now. (The Newly-Jewish Family: A Newsletter, Jewish Family Service, MetroWest, New Jersey, September 1990)

Emotionally, in *Love Song*, Julius Lester, the involved member of a Conservative congregation, expresses the birth of the love for Hebrew language, ritual, and for the liturgical beauty of Judaism through the eyes of a new Jew. I am in love! What an odd thing to say about a religion, but it is true. I am in love with Judaism, with being a Jew... I am having a love affair with my soul... Knowing Hebrew will give me the confidence to go anywhere among Jews. And Jews are the only ones with whom I can share my great love. (J. Lester, *Love Song*, p. 202)

Joann Boughman, a Jew By Choice, was initially moved during a professional conference in Israel, by the spiritual power of a visit to The Wall (Judaism's most sacred spot, in Jerusalem, at the site of the ancient Temple), and by subsequent encounters with Jewish ritual. I was absolutely overcome with emotion (when I saw the Wall). My knees got weak and I started crying. One of my colleagues had to help me sit down on the pavement... [It was the feeling that] thousands of years had come crashing down on me all at once.

I fell in love with the incredible richness of Jewish tradition and ritual. For example, one thing I always liked about Christmas was the candle lighting services on Christmas Eve, the warmth and beauty of it. Well, (Christians) light candles once a year. I do it every Friday night. (Alyssa Gabbay, "Jews By Choice" in *Baltimore Jewish Times*, June 1, 1990, pp. 52-53)

These powerful spiritual experiences are not at all uncommon among converts to Judaism. For example, Judith Lee traced the evolution of her own receptivity to entering into Judaism to a search shared among people in a Board of Rabbis’ (Conservative and Reform) Conversion Class. In many cases, they were seeking a stronger religious identity. Recounting personal sharing among classmates, Judith writes:

> Those of us who were not Jewish at that time had given a great deal of thought to many things before we decided to come together that [first] night [of class]. We had thought about ourselves and how, despite the fact we were all educated and professionally successful, we were somehow missing a needed sense of individual and communal spiritual connectedness...

We each had felt a strong pull towards Judaism for several years and had sensed that living as a Jew would make it possible for each of us to realize our potentials in accordance with our values, our intellect and our emotions. (Judith S. Lee, *Reconstructionist*, June 1986, p. 15)

Q: Is it valid to initially consider converting into Judaism because of the desirability of being part of the same religion in which my spouse and I have chosen to raise our children?
A: Conversion into Judaism is a serious endeavor and ultimately must reflect sincere commitments on the part of the convert. However, to begin to explore Judaism as a statement of commitment to one's children's religious well-being is praiseworthy. Conservative Rabbi Michael Wasserman, recounts the thoughts of a new Jew, Kathy, one of his students in his Introduction to Judaism course.
Kathy [said] ... that having grown up with parents of different faiths (Catholic and Lutheran), she considers it important to have a single religion in the home so that the children can get a consistent set of religious messages. She wants religion to play an important role in their family life, and is willing to accept Daniel's religion so that she will have Daniel's support in that area. She can take that step, she says, because she does not believe that any one religion has a monopoly on truth. (Michael Wasserman, "The Convert and the Rabbi as 'Stress Absorbers," in Egon Mayer (ed.), The Imperatives of Jewish Outreach, p. 161)

Reflecting a later stage of parenting, Francis Price concludes: My entrance into Judaism dates from the beginning of my small son's religious education... When our son was five and had reached religious school age, I sent him to a synagogue near our home. My mind began to turn to Judaism, not only for him but for myself. I must admit it was purely an academic thing with me [initially]. What makes a Jew a Jew? How does a Jew think? What are his traditions? These and many other questions nagged at me and, for the sake of my child's religious training, I wanted to know the answers. My quest for Jewish knowledge began. (M. Lamm, On Becoming A Jew, p. 15)

Similarly, one of my own students for conversion into Judaism, Diane Gerberg, recalls her own spiritual evolution. I started thinking about my family unit. We were thinking about the education of our son. And I was thinking in terms of all he had to learn in Hebrew. And the thought came into my mind that maybe he should go to yeshiva. And because religion has always been extremely important to me - throughout my life it has always been my standard bearer in a sense, the thing that was very, very important to me - I started looking at my family unit and feeling in a way not part of it. It was a strange sensation that came over me one day where I realized that my son and my husband were Jewish and I was this oddity in the house, I wanted to make my family a unit. I wanted to be part of my family. And I really believed that this was the place to be. To me it was like coming home. (Conservative Congregation Agudath Israel, Caldwell, New Jersey).

Q: Is it reasonable to begin the encounter with Jewish study and Jewish religious practice as a response to experiences which I encountered among my Jewish spouse's extended family?  
A: Whether for children or in-laws, no one should enter Jewish life solely in response to others. However, it is entirely commendable to first explore Judaism because of powerful feelings of family, whether with Jewish in-laws or with other new relatives.

In A Certain People, author Charles Silberman interviewed many Jews by Choice who had been drawn into Judaism after becoming comfortable with Jewish family settings. The Passover Seder, Hanukah celebrations, festive weddings, sensitive mourning customs, Bar/Bat Mitzvah festivities and similar memories evolved into a growing comfort with Jewish religion. (p. 308) Dolores, a convert to Judaism, tells writer Susan Weidman Schneider:

"It probably sounds a little macabre, but it was going to Jewish funerals [of her husband's extended family] that first attracted me to Judaism. There was no open casket, which I liked, and the Shiva [seven days of mourning] seemed very civilized and psychologically sensible." (Susan Weidman Schneider, Intermarriage, p. 201)

Also responding to in-laws, an English Jew By Choice writes about his own changing motivations: The project [of conversion into Judaism] ... was one about which I had felt not the slightest tremor of religious or transcendental sentiment ... I had undertaken it with reluctance, only to meet the needs of my future wife's parents ... I approached the matter, therefore, with diffidence and embarrassment ... Yet to my surprise, the nature of the experience itself was such that these feelings were changed into interest and respect...

...I began a modest course of study, learned by heart a number of prayers and she explained the significance of the Jewish festivals ... As Passover was due, I was taken through the Haggadah ... I was charmed by the way it [the Seder] involved children ... [and] that for Jews, it is in domestic matters that religious and aesthetic
Q: What about my spouse? Is it unreasonable to feel attracted to Judaism as a result of my love for my partner?
A: Here too, it is perfectly understandable to become interested in Judaism through the eyes of a lover, a fiancé, or a spouse. Perhaps ultimately this quest may lead to religious fulfillment and conversion into Judaism on its own terms. Lois Lederman, a Jew By Choice, shared with Lena Romanoff, an assessment of her entry into Judaism in the context of intimacy with her husband, Hershel.

When I fell in love with Hershel, I wanted to know everything about him—his interests, his ideas, beliefs and hopes... For instance, he introduced me to the world of opera...
I came to Judaism in much the same way. It was Hershel's love for his heritage that influenced me to explore it for myself. Although it was my love and respect for him that sparked my initial desire to discover Judaism, in the end it was my decision. Although I have not adopted all of Hershel's interests—tennis for instance, I just can't get into--I came to believe it vital that we share something as important as religion...I know the entire process has brought us closer to each other. It is a part of our life we will always share with each other and our future children. (Romanoff, Your People, My People, p. 54)

Q: Am I justified in considering conversion because I am attracted to the positive qualities of the Jewish people throughout history, The State of Israel, etc.?
A: Judaism is more than simply a creed, it is also a religious communion to fellow Jews around the world and throughout time. As Conservative Rabbi Simcha Kling writes in a primer for converts, published by The Rabbinical Assembly, Embracing Judaism:

A convert to Judaism not only adopts a new theology and different ritual practices but also joins a different people. To be a Jew means belonging to a unique historical community. The community is neither racially nor genetically defined, since those born outside it may become fully accepted members. Yet it is a community in which history, culture and tradition have been transmitted through family...People not born into the community need to learn its history, culture and traditions. (p. 6)

Elsa Rosenberg attributes part of her motivation for becoming a Jew to encountering the reality of the Jewish historical community as a volunteer in Israel: One month stretched into eight months, working on a kibbutz [a collective farming community]. It was one of the most rewarding and memorable periods in my life. My consciousness was expanded about what being Jewish is all about. I learned more about the principles and moral values of the people for whom I felt an increasing affinity. (Elsa Rosenberg, "Why People Choose Judaism," Reconstructionist, June 1986, p. 19)

In similar fashion, writer David C. Gross relates the testimony of an African-American convert, attracted to collective Jewish perseverance in the face of oppression: Jews have become strong over a thousand years of oppression and I wanted to become part of that strength...I wanted to become a Jew because it gave me a great strength. I wanted to become a Jew because I felt it gave me the answer to an inner peace in life...I wanted to become a Jew because it was the answer to a life filled with confusion and uncertainty. Judaism gave me security and understanding. (David C. Gross, The Jewish People's Almanac, pp. 511-512)

Q: This comment by a Jew by Choice of African-American background leads to the question: Can you convert into Judaism if you're Black, Asian, Hispanic, or of some other non-white ethnic or racial group?
A: Judaism offers a religious life-style and fellowship which binds together Jews around the world of countless racial and ethnic groups. The State of Israel has accepted and rescued Jews from Europe, from Ethiopia, from Arab lands, from Latin America, from the Orient, from India, in total from over 100 varied communities worldwide. Local synagogues should be equally colorblind. Our tradition teaches: "Kol Yisrael Arevim Zeh Lazeh (The fate of all Jewish people is intimately bound up with one another)." When someone
of color converts into Judaism, they are fully accorded all honors and privileges. Demonstrating this acceptance into a Conservative congregation is the following anecdote recalled by Professor Julius Lester, an African-American convert to Judaism. I knew that [after formal conversion] I could no longer stay at home on Shabbat morning and be happy studying [alone]. I needed to be in a synagogue, needed to be with other Jews, singing prayers to God ... So the following Saturday ... I drove the ten miles to the [Conservative] synagogue in Northampton.

From the beginning of the preliminary service I knew that I had found my home. If I had any doubts that B'hai Israel was truly my home, they were banished when the gabbai, the man who passes out the aliyot [ritual honors], whispered in my ear, 'Kohen or Levi?'

'Irael,' I responded.

'Shlishi,' he responded.

'What's your Hebrew name? 'Yaakov ben Avraham.' He patted me on the shoulder and continued around the congregation. (Love Song, p. 201)

Q: Am I alone in feeling a desire to become Jewish as part of a search to reconnect with my Jewish ancestry?
A: In an age of openness, more and more cases are coming to the fore of persons with Jewish roots, who are now reestablishing ties to their Jewish heritage. Rabbi Allen S. Maller has written about meeting many "Jews By Choice who have discovered Jewish ancestors-[sometimes as much as] three to five generations removed ... If converts really are the incarnated souls of lost Jews from previous generations, a great deal of their behavior is easily explained." (Allen S. Maller, Reconstructionist, June 1986, p. 23). As an example of this pattern, in the very same symposium within the Reconstructionist, Jew By Choice Elsa Rosenberg recollects that after her grandfather died, “Going through his books and papers, I discovered in a footnote to our family genealogy, that centuries ago in Austria there were Jews among my ancestors. This seemed an almost providential confirmation of my instinctive turning in this direction.” (p. 20)

Quite common today are households in which one parent is Jewish. The adult children may have been raised as Christians or with no religion. In her article evaluating the experiences of similar adult children of interfaith marriages who ultimately converted into Judaism, journalist Charlotte Anker reports a wide range of findings. Why do [these adults] ... choose to be Jews?...

The Shoah [Holocaust] is clearly an impetus - one born of grief and a resolve akin to that which impels born Jews to return to tradition. But the Shoah has a special meaning to [adult children of interfaith marriages]...

They know intensely, that being only half Jewish would not have allowed them to escape. 'I knew I could be killed because I was Jewish [said one such woman] ... I knew there was no getting away from being Jewish; it's always with you.'

Other [adult children of mixed marriage] ... are drawn by the spiritual elements of Judaism, observing that born Jews often take for granted the spiritual pull of Judaic rituals...

[Or similarly representative of motivations for conversion into Judaism] a recent trip to Israel at the age of forty triggered in [one such person] ... a desire to learn about her Jewish side and perhaps make a choice ... It was 'a question of finding what heritage to identify with ... Israel blew me away ... It was an extremely emotional experience.' (Charlotte Anker, "The Children of Interfaith Marriages Speak Out," Moment, 1991.)
Q: Should I be troubled that the stimulus to explore Judaism was sparked but by Jewish friends, whose religious lifestyle seems so appealing?
A: In a society in which many non-Jewish people have close friendships with Jews, such affinity is a wonderful way to see the strength and beauty of Jewish living.

Tom McHale was attracted to Judaism during his college years because of his friendship with some Jewish students. As Lena Romanoff, a therapist and committed Conservative Jew, assesses in Your People, My People: "Religion - or lack of it- was not a matter of priority for him [Tom], yet his increasing contact with Jewish students made him begin to wonder what it was about Judaism that inspired so much loyalty and pride among many of his friends.” Tom reflected that he: envied them [his Jewish friends] when the Jewish holidays came around. They really looked forward to going home for Passover and Rosh Hashanah. I guess they detected my envy, because I was often invited along. I liked what I experienced. (Romanoff p. 3)

Ms. Romanoff concluded that "the more he experienced, the more Tom felt that Judaism could fill a spiritual and cultural void in his life. Eventually, Tom decided that he wanted to become Jewish." (p. 3)

Among those he interviewed for a study on the motives of converts to Judaism, Professor Egon Mayer encountered one eloquent Jew By Choice, who came to Judaism through a Jewish community.
I began to think about converting to Judaism a little bit, when by chance I had an apartment within an Orthodox community during one year of college. I saw that the people had something, a closeness, a bond between themselves as friends, as family, that most non-Jews I knew didn't have. (Egon Mayer, Conversion Among the Intermarried, p.12)

Alternatively, Anne Burg, a convert to Judaism in my Conservative congregation, related to me:
We tremendously enjoy [the congregation]. There is such joy in the rituals. People are so sincere in their observance. Members carry their spiritual vitality into all parts of their lives. We are now coming every week to Sabbath Services and are delighted that families with young children are so encouraged and provided for. The wonderful spirit in [the] ... congregation is very 'catchy' and in a few short months, we went from a family who lit Shabbat candles and went to High Holy Day services to a family who enjoys attending Sabbath services weekly, studying and learning more about the religion, and motivating me to finally convert. (Conservative Congregation Agudath Israel, Caldwell, New Jersey)

Q: Is it either peculiar or unprecedented that my attraction to Judaism was ignited by reading books about the experiences of Jewish people in dramatic settings such as the Holocaust or the rise of the State of Israel?
A: As more and more written accounts of Jewish life become available, many Gentile Americans feel closer to Judaism because of what they read. Some Jews By Choice identify with the fate of Jews due popular books, films, or their study of Jewish ideas in college-level courses. Nancy Winger, for instance, recalls that the beginning of her teenage interest in Judaism stemmed from Exodus, just as other converts have been influenced by The Diary of Anne Frank or by the writing of Elie Wiesel, Chaim Potok and Leon Uris. Winger recalls:
[Reading Exodus] was my first real exposure to the Holocaust. It haunted me. I kept reading and reading about it. Soon I found I was very pro-Israel. I kept taking Zionist positions in arguments with my friends.
[Later on, at college, in Jewish studies courses, Winger] felt that ... sense of being in one place but belonging to another. I felt a hunger to learn more about Judaism. (Paul and Rachel Cowan, 'Our People: Nancy Winger's Story," Moment, April 1983, p. 60)

In a related fashion, Shoshana Lev, a convert to Conservative Judaism, observes:
I passed through Christianity, from the dogmatism of Catholicism to completely undogmatic Quakerism, through atheism and agnosticism, meditation and yoga, and still could not find a vehicle for religious expression. One day I picked up a copy of Leon Uris' Mila 18 and made a shattering discovery: at age eighteen, I didn't know that Hitler had exterminated six million Jews. I had always assumed that concentration camps and prisoner of war camps were the same thing, and that Hitler was just another tyrant. I learned about anti-
Semitism and genocide. I wanted to know what it was about the Jews and their beliefs that made others want to exterminate them. So I went to a Jewish bookstore and there found a little volume by Milton Steinberg called Basic Judaism. At last I felt I had found what I had been looking for: here was what I believed. (Speech at University of Judaism, reprinted in M. Lamm, On Becoming A Jew p. 8)

Also affected profoundly by Uris' Mila 18 was Jew By Choice, Samantha Lindblad:
At age 28 I read a book that changed my life. The book was Mila 18 by Leon Uris. It was about WWII, the Warsaw Ghetto, and it was about Jews.

Jews in the twentieth century? I am sure that somewhere in my subconscious I was aware that some Jews were still around. But outwardly they were always the people of the Bible, depicted by Catholicism and her offshoots as the murderers of God.

But within the pages of this book, a novel incredibly based on a true incident, Jews were just like everyone else. They lived and acted just like others and yet were looked upon with ignorance and treated in mind-boggling horror because someone hated them so much they wanted to kill them all. Why, I asked myself?

After reading more on the Holocaust I turned to books of Jewish belief ... I was surprised to find out how many things Christianity had taken from Judaism...

As I continued to study Judaism my sensitivity and awareness of the world around me grew...
I also found that Jews were not afraid to question God...

But there finally came a day when it [learning about Judaism] no longer seemed insurmountable. A day when the realization finally came that what was needed most to fulfill my desire to become an observing and knowledgeable Jew was time, determination and practice. (Samantha Lindblad, "A Convert to Judaism Tells Her Story," The Jewish Post and Opinion, October 16, 1981, pp. 3-4)

Q: If I am interested in converting into Judaism, is it really necessary if my father was Jewish? Doesn't Reform Judaism recognize patrilineal descent as adequate for Jewish status?
A: Yes, the Reform movement does recognize patrilineal descent. However, there are a few problems with this assumption: First, even within Reform Judaism, Jewish status is not automatically conferred upon the children of Jewish fathers and non-Jewish mothers. Reform Judaism requires that such sons and daughters be raised actively as Jews—brit (ritual circumcision) or baby naming at birth (and no baptism), synagogue membership, religious school, bar/bat mitzvah and other basic Jewish experiences. Furthermore, even if these mainstream encounters do occur, Reform's patrilinealism is not universally accepted within Reform Judaism, and it is rejected by the other Jewish movements. It is a fundamental break with the two other major branches of American Judaism and with Jewish communities (Reform included) elsewhere throughout the centuries and throughout the world. That is why the Conservative movement's Committee on Jewish Law and Standards affirms:

Jewishness is defined through either lineage or through conversion to Judaism... Matrilineal descent [being born to a Jewish mother] ... has been authoritative in normative Judaism for many centuries as the sole determinant of Jewish lineage.

If you are sincerely interested in being part of the entire Jewish religious tradition and future, we welcome your involvement. Nevertheless, we do urge your entry into a conversion program so that you will appropriately become accepted as a Jewish person by the entire Jewish people.
Q: Is it true that rituals such as immersion in the mikvah (ritual bath) and ritual circumcision are required for conversion?

A: Conversion into Judaism should be a profound experience. As Rabbi Ismar Schorsch has stated, "(Conversion] is tied up with many factors of the personality, of the home, of the community, and it is a step not to be taken lightly, not without preparation and not without ritual celebration." (1987 Conservative Movement Conference on Intermarriage). Simply proclaiming that someone has become Jewish at the end of a process of study and religious observance and growth would be a cold, unfeeling transition. Rituals are necessary to mark critical rites of passage-birth, adolescence, marriage, death and conversion. To enhance the power of the moment, traditional Judaism also requires ritual at conversion: the meaningful acts of immersion in the mikvah (a ritual pool) for men and for women, and ritual circumcision for uncircumcised males. As the Director of Philadelphia' Jewish Converts' Network, Lena Romanoff, writes: Many who go to a mikvah as a part of their conversion find it to be a deeply meaningful experience - a spiritual cleansing and renewal; sometimes, even a mystical relief of tension. (Your People, My People, p. 31)

In like fashion, Julius Lester writes about the powerful meaning of ritual circumcision for his entry into Judaism: "After the circumcision ... this is how I feel. Now I am whole ... Only a small bit of skin was removed but it is as if something within me has been set free." (p. 215)

Q: What other procedures are necessary for conversion?

A: The Rabbinical Assembly's Rabbi's Manual (1968) offers the following additional guidelines:

A rabbi, approached by a prospective convert, should acquaint his/herself with the family background and present circumstances of the applicant, and with the motives that prompt him or her to seek conversion to the Jewish faith...

A minimum of six to eight months of intensive study of assigned material should be required for the average applicant for conversion... A longer or shorter period may be required for a specific individual, at the discretion of the rabbi...

During this period of instruction and preparation he or she should be invited to attend synagogue services as often as possible...

[After the conclusion of adequate study and religious growth] two colleagues [rabbis or cantors], or, if that is infeasible, two qualified laymen in the community, should be acquainted with the particular case and invited to join the rabbi in constituting a Bet Din [traditional court of law]. The Bet Din examines the knowledge and attitude of the prospective convert and presides over his or her admission into the Jewish faith.

Q: What's the next step?

A: If any of these answers reflect your own frame of mind, then we invite you to consider a serious encounter with Jewish study and observance. Join an Introduction to Judaism course to learn more about Judaism and whether or not Judaism is right for you. To do so, you are welcome to contact your local Conservative congregational rabbi or the regional office of the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism. In addition to study, the rabbi and synagogue can offer the opportunity to experience Jewish ritual and prayer observances in a communal setting, as well as providing "mentors," people who have already converted to Judaism as well as born Jews who can guide your religious growth as a Jew from their perspectives.
SUGGESTED FURTHER READING

- Lena Romanoff's Your People, My People (Jewish Publication Society) offers helpful insights from the perspective of a Jew By Choice who skillfully directs the Jewish Converts Network of hundreds of couples within the Philadelphia metropolitan area.
- Rabbi Simcha Kling's Embracing Judaism (The Rabbinical Assembly) is a Conservative primer for prospective converts.
- Julius Lester's Love Song is a sensitive and poetic personal testimony to his path from Christianity into conversion as a Jew.
- Rabbi Joseph Tabachnik and Dr. Brenda Forster's Choosing Judaism (KTAV) is a study of the data collected from 400 questionnaires completed by graduates of the Conversion Training Institute of the Chicago Board of Rabbis, surveying the range of motivations, observances and values which accompanied this process.

Also, if you wish to begin your own initial exploration of "Basic Judaism," the following resources are recommended:

The Sabbath - The Shabbat Seder (Federation of Jewish Men's Clubs) by Ronald Wolfson
Kosher Food - The Jewish Dietary Laws (United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism) by Samuel Dresner and Seymour Siegel
Prayer - Man's Quest For God (Scribners) by Abraham J. Heschel
Theology - The Book of Jewish Belief (Behrman House) by Louis Jacob
Jewish History and Culture - Jewish Literacy (Morrow) by Joseph Telushkin.
Hebrew Language - Reading Hebrew (Sephardic) (Behrman House).
ARTICLE REGARDING LEGAL PERSPECTIVES ON CONVERSION

The following article is from the website called ITIM, The Jewish Life Information Center in Israel. ITIM is an independent, non-profit organization, dedicated to making Jewish life accessible to all.

According to Israeli law, all religious conversions, since they pertain to laws of personal status, fall under the jurisdiction of the religious court system. The legal force of a religious conversion depends, therefore, on the consent of the head of the religious community that the person seeks to join. Jewish conversion, consequently, becomes official in Israel only when certified by the Chief Rabbinate. In 1995, the conversion administration of the Chief Rabbinate set up special conversion courts, similar to ones set up in the 1970's by Rabbi Shlomo Goren. These courts were created to deal exclusively with conversion cases, without entirely divesting the regular rabbinic courts of their authority in this area. In 2001, responsibility for running the conversion courts was transferred to the general rabbinic court administration, under the administrative supervision of the Justice Ministry (as of January 2004) and the halachic supervision of the Chief Rabbis and the judges in the appeals court. Since 2004, all conversion issues will be coordinated from the Department of Conversion in the Prime Minister's office.

The only officially recognized conversion in the State of Israel is Orthodox-halachic conversion. There are also non-establishment conversion procedures offered under the auspices of the Conservative movement and the Movement for Progressive Judaism. Any conversion performed under the auspices of a Jewish community, in Israel or abroad, will be recognized for civil purposes, as per various High Court rulings. Thus, for registration as a Jew under the Population Registry Law (1965), there is no difference between Orthodox-State conversion and Reform or Conservative conversion (based on Supreme Court rulings: Goldstein 1995 and Na'amat 2002, regarding conversion in Israel; Shas 1989 regarding conversions abroad, which led to the 1992 decision of the Knesset Constitution, Law, and Justice Committee to remove, across the board, the entry of Jewish Nationality in the identity card). Regarding personal status, however, only Orthodox-State conversion is recognized. Any other process may have cultural, educational, or communal value, but it will not receive the recognition of the Israeli Rabbinate. Anyone who converts in such a manner (and for a woman, also her children) will not be able to marry, get divorced, or be buried in Israel as Jews. Conversion performed abroad will also only be recognized by the Israeli Rabbinate if the bet din (rabbinical court) for conversion was Orthodox. The Israeli Chief Rabbinate keeps a list of recognized rabbinical courts abroad and updates it from time to time.
The 1950 Law of Return gives every individual who was born Jewish or converted to Judaism, the right to Israeli citizenship. Narrow readings of this law, which have impeded the naturalization of converts in Israel and abroad, were proscribed by the Supreme Court in 2004. The Law of Legal Competency and Guardianship - 1971, sets 18 as the minimum age at which a person may legally decide to convert. The Law of Penalties - 1977 made it illegal to convert or persuade a minor to convert without the consent of both of his biological parents. If consent is not given, or one parent cannot be located, the Family Court is empowered to give authorization. A minor may only change his religion to the religion of one of his parents. If neither of his parents is Jewish (e.g.: the whole family is undergoing the conversion process together), the court will give conditional approval of the minor’s conversion.
BOOK LIST

The list below is by no means comprehensive. The list is broad, giving the Candidate for conversion a selection of books covering a range of Jewish topics.

1. INTRODUCTION TO JUDAISM

WHAT IS A JEW
   Rabbi Morris N. Kertzer
BASIC JUDAISM
   Milton Steinberg
THIS IS MY GOD
   Herman Wouk
TO BE A JEW
   Rabbi Hayim Halevy Donin
JUST ENOUGH IS PLENTY
   Barbara Diamond Goldin
CHOOSING JUDAISM
   Lydia Kukoff
CLUES ABOUT JEWS FOR PEOPLE WHO AREN’T
   Sidney J. Jacobs and Betty J. Jacobs
INTRODUCTION TO JUDAISM
   Rabbi Stephen J. Einstein
EMBRACING JUDAISM
   Simcha Kling
THE BOOK OF JEWISH BELIEF
   Louis Jacobs
TO LIFE
   Harold Kushner
LIVING A JEWISH LIFE
   Anita Diamant/Howard Cooper
EVERY PERSON’S GUIDE TO JUDAISM
   Stephen J. Einstein and Lydia Kukoff
FINDING A HOME FOR THE SOUL---Interviews with Converts to Judaism
   Catherine Hall Myrowitz
THE NINE QUESTIONS PEOPLE ASK ABOUT JUDAISM
   Dennis Prager and Joseph Telushkin

2. LITURGY

TO PRAY AS A JEW –A guide to the Prayer Book and the Synagogue Service
   Rabbi Hayim Halevy Donin
SABBATH AND FESTIVAL PRAYER BOOK-SIDDUR
WEEKDAY PRAYER BOOK
SERVICE OF THE HEART—A Guide to the Jewish Prayer Book
   Evelyn Garfiel
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<td>WHO WROTE THE BIBLE?</td>
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<td>Richard Friedman</td>
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<td>THE ESSENTIAL TALMUD</td>
<td>Adin Steinsaltz</td>
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<td>JEWISH DAYS AND HOLIDAYS</td>
<td>Greer Fay Cashman &amp; Alona Frankel</td>
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<td>GATES OF THE SEASONS—A GUIDE TO JEWISH YEAR</td>
<td>Central Conference of American Rabbi’s</td>
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<td>LET’S TALK ABOUT THE JEWISH HOLIDAYS</td>
<td>Dorothy Kripke</td>
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<td>JEWISH HOLIDAY FUN</td>
<td>Judith Hoffman Cinir</td>
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<td>THE JEWISH HOLIDAYS</td>
<td>Michael Strassfeld</td>
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<td>LIVING THE HOLIDAYS THE JEWISH WAY</td>
<td>Irving Greenberg</td>
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<td>SEASONS OF OUR JOY</td>
<td>Arthur Waskow</td>
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<td>SHABBAT CAN BE</td>
<td>Raymond Zmerin/Audrey Friedman</td>
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<td>THE JEWISH WAY—LIVING THE HOLIDAYS</td>
<td>Rabbi Irving Greenberg</td>
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<td>THE RHYTHM OF JEWISH TIME—An Introduction to Holidays and Life-Cycle Events</td>
<td>Vicki L. Weber</td>
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<td>PREPARING YOUR HEART FOR THE HIGH HOLYDAYS</td>
<td>Kerry M. Olitzky and Rachel T. Sabath</td>
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<td>ROSH HASHANAH – YOM KIPPUR SURVIVAL KIT</td>
<td>Shimon Apisdorf</td>
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<td>THE SABBATH</td>
<td>Abraham Joshua Heschel</td>
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<td>THE MIRACLE OF THE SEVENTH SAY</td>
<td>Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz</td>
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<th>6. <strong>REFERENCE AND HALAKHA</strong></th>
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<td>THE COMPLETE BOOK OF JEWISH OBSERVANCE</td>
<td>Leo Trepp</td>
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<td>JEWISH CATALOG</td>
<td>Richard Siegel, Michael Strassfeld, Sharon Strassfeld</td>
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7.  HISTORY AND ISRAEL

   MY PEOPLE
      Abba Eban
   A HISTORY OF THE JEWS
      Soloman Grayzel
   JEWS AND GOD AND HISTORY
      Max I. Dimont
   WANDERINGS-CHAIM POTAK’S HISTORY OF THE JEWS
      Chaim Potak
   ISRAEL—A History
      Martin Gilbert

8.  KASHRUT

   THE JEWISH DIETARY LAWS
      Samual H. Dresner

9.  HEBREW

   TEACH YOURSELF TO READ HEBREW
      Simon
   READING HEBREW: A PROGRAMMED INSTRUCTION BOOK
      Adler
   HOW TO READ HEBREW (AND LOVE IT)
      Ducoff
   L’SHONEE I, HAVERI I
      Scharfstein
   A READING AND PRAYER PRIMER
      Persky and Scharfstein
   ALEF-BET: A HEBREW PRIMER
      Shumsky
   PRAYERBOOK HEBREW, THE EASY WAY
      Anderson, Motzkin, Rubenstein, Wiseman
   THE FIRST HEBREW PRIMER FOR ADULTS
      Simon
   INTRODUCTION TO HEBREW
      Greenberg
   INTRODUCTION TO BIBLICAL HEBREW
      Lambdin
   BEN-YEHUDA’S ENGLISH-HEBREW, HEBREW-ENGLISH DICTIONARY
      Ehud Ben-Yehuda / David Weinstein
   THE UP-TO-DATE ENGLISH-HEBREW HEBREW-ENGLISH DICTIONARY
      Shimon Zilberman

10. LIFE CYCLE

   THE JEWISH WAY IN DEATH AND MOURING
      Maurice Lamm
   MAKING LOSS MATTER
      Rabbi David Wolpe
11. HOME AND CHILDREN

GUIDE FOR THE JEWISH HOMEMAKER
Shonie B. Leri and Sylvia R. Kaplan

THE JEWISH FAMILY BOOK
Sharon Strassfeld and Kathy Green

TO RAISE A JEWISH CHILD
Rabbi Hayim Halevy Donin

HOW TO BE A JEWISH PARENT
Anita Diamant with Karen Kushner

12. BIOGRAPHY

IN THE NAME OF SORROW AND HOPE
Noa Ben Artzi-Pelossof

13. NOVELS

THE SOURCE
James Mitchener

THE CHOSEN
Chaim Potok

THE PROMISE
Chaim Potok

DAVIDA’S HARP
Chaim Potok

MY NAME IS ASHER LEV
Chaim Potok

14. FOLK TALES AND HUMOR

ALL JEWISH CARTOON COLLECTION
Mort Gerberg

YIDDISH FOLK TALES
Weinreich Pantheon

THE LEGEND OF THE BAAL-SHEM TOV
Martin Buber

15. TZEDAKAH

TZEDAKAH—CAN JEWISH PHILANTHROPY BUY JEWISH SURVIVAL
Jacob Neusner

THE CHALLENGE OF WEALTH—A JEWISH PERSPECTIVE ON EARNING AND SPENDING MONEY
Meir Tamari

GYM SHOES AND IRISSES (Personalized Tzedakah)
Danny Siegel

THE KABBALAH OF MONEY—JEWISH INSIGHTS ON GIVING, OWNING, AND RECEIVING
Rabbi Nilton Bonder

16. PHILOSOPHY AND THEOLOGY

WHEN BAD THINGS HAPPEN TO GOOD PEOPLE
Harold Kushner
WHAT HAPPENS AFTER I DIE? Jewish View of Life After Death
  Rifat Sonsino and Daniel B. Syme
I ASKED FOR WONDER
  Abraham Joshua Heschel
WHEN CHILDREN ASK ABOUT GOD
  Harold Kushner
MAN’S QUEST FOR G-D—Studies in Prayer and Symbolism
  Abraham Joshua Heschel
JUDAISM AS A CIVILIZATION
  Rabbi Mordechai Kaplan
HALAKHIC MAN
  Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik
CONSERVATIVE JUDAISM (Behrman House Publishing)
  Rabbi Neil Gillman
SOULS ON FIRE
  Wiesel

17. HOLOCAUST

A PROMISE OF A NEW SPRING
  Gerda Weissmann Klein
A PASSION FOR SHARING THE LIFE OF EDITH
  Rosenwald Stern/Gerda Weissmann Klein
ALL BUT MY LIFE
  Gerda Weissmann Klein
SCHINDLER’S LIST
  Thomas Keneally
NIGHT
  Elie Wiesel
100 QUESTIONS ON BASIC JUDAISM

By the conclusion of the conversion process, all candidates for conversion to Judaism must submit their answers to the 100 Questions on Basic Judaism listed below. These questions reflect a microcosm of the breadth of knowledge to which the Jewish People should aspire. All answers should be in BOLD and should be as complete as possible. The questions below can be emailed upon request as a Microsoft Word attachment. When completed, please email the Word document to rabbi@mosaiclaw.org.

NAME OF CONVERSION CANDIDATE__________________________________________

Date__________________________________________

1. What is the date of the current Jewish Year?
2. What are the three Pilgrimage Festivals?
3. What is a MEZUZAH?
4. How many MITZVOT are there?
5. What is the correct time to light the Shabbat candles?
6. What is the Hebrew date of your birthday?
7. What is a MAHZOR?
8. What is the AMIDAH?
9. How many people are called to the Torah on Shabbat Morning for an Aliyah?
10. What two holy days fall during the Ten Days of Penitence?
11. From what tribe did the Kohanim come?
12. What are the Hebrew names for GOD?
13. Bar/Bat Mitzvah means:
14. What is the meaning of AMEN?
15. What is the meaning of the word MESSIAH? (2 or 3-word definition)
16. Does Kosher mean clean? If not, give its meaning.
17. Are Tefillin worn on the Sabbath? Why or why not?
18. Do we recite the regular Shabbat Kiddush or a special Kiddush if Yom Kippur falls on Friday night?
19. What is the significance of the egg at the Seder table?
20. What is the name of the national anthem of Israel? What is the meaning of its name?
21. What was the English date and Hebrew date of the establishment of the State of Israel?
22. According to the Hebrew calendar Shabbat begins __________________ and ends ____________________?

23. What is the saddest day of the Jewish year?

24. What is the Hebrew date for Tu B’Shevat?

25. What is a MINYAN?

26. What Biblical character was given the name Israel?

27. Is a male permitted to light Shabbat candles?

28. What is the name of the morning service?

29. What is a PIDYON HABEN?

30. What is the title of the one who circumcises Jewish infants?

31. What is Shivah?

32. What is a Ba’al T’kiah?

33. The symbol of peace, a dove with an olive branch in its beak, is mentioned in what Biblical Story?

34. What king built the first Temple?

35. According to tradition, who wrote the Book of Psalms?

36. Who was the first Hebrew?

37. Explain the word TANACH:

38. On what Holidays is Hallel recited?

39. Name three Prophets.

40. What is the name of the seminary of the Conservative Movement?

41. What is the Hebrew word for PRAYER?

42. What is the specific meaning of MAZAL?

43. Translate the word TZEDAKAH:

44. What is meant by the term GALUT?

45. What is G’MILUT CHASSADIM?

46. When do we recite the SHEHECHIANU Blessing?

47. Name the Five Books of Moses?

48. Name the five Megillot?

49. For how many days is Hanukkah observed?

50. What does the word HAVDALAH mean and when is it recited?

51. What is a SIDRAH?
52. What is the usual closing Hymn for the Shabbat service?

53. If you received the Torah honor R’VEE-EE, what’s the number of people called up before you?

54. Why do we eat HAMENTASCHEN on Purim?

55. Who was the first murderer mentioned in the Bible?

56. What was the name of Moses’ brother?

57. Who turned into a pillar of salt?

58. What nation destroyed the first Temple?

59. What nation destroyed the second Temple?

60. What is Hebrew word for BLESSING?

61. What is TROP?

62. If you were greeted with SHALOM ALEICHEM, what would your answer be?

63. What is the Priestly Blessing and when is it recited?

64. List the Ten Commandments (in their order):

(COMPLETE THE FOLLOWING SENTENCES)

65. Remember the Sabbath Day _________________.

66. Thou shalt love thy neighbor _________________.

67. Why was the Patriarch Abraham permitted to serve meat and milk together?

68. What is the meaning of IM YIRTZE HASHEM?

69. From what book of the Bible are most prayers taken?

70. What is the numerical value of the Hebrew letter YOOD?

71. Who was the first woman Prime Minister of Israel?

72. Why are ten drops of wine dipped off from one’s glass at the Seder?

73. Upon which doorpost is the Mezuzah affixed, as one enters the home?

74. Why are the two loaves of bread used for the HaMotzi on Shabbat?

75. What was the name of the Holy Land before it was called Palestine? (Biblical name)

76. Is the Hebrew month a lunar or solar one?

77. How many days are there in a Jewish year?

78. What is a YESHIVAH?

79. What is the specific meaning of the word TREFH?

80. Who was the first President of the State of Israel?

81. Name three U.S. Supreme Court Justices who were Jews?
82. What is HUMASH?
83. What is Aramaic?
84. What was our first house of worship?
85. From what family did the Hasmonean dynasty come from?
86. Is the story of Hanukkah found in the Bible?
87. How does the paragraph after the Shema ask that we love God?
88. How many Hebrew tribes were there?
89. Who was the first Hebrew king?
90. From the name of what city is the word “sodomy” derived?
91. Who edited the Mishnah?
92. To what books of the Bible does the word PENTATEUCH Refer?
93. Why is salt sprinkled on the piece of bread one eats after reciting the HaMotzi?
94. Name three of the four Matriarchs.
95. What was the first command of God to Adam and Eve?
96. What are the four species used on Sukkot?
97. Is Simchat Torah observed in commemoration of our receiving the Torah at Sinai?
98. Why are rolls and eggs eaten in a house of mourning following the interment?
99. Is Simchat Torah ordained by the Bible?
100. Why does a groom crush a glass underfoot at his wedding ceremony?
ESSAY QUESTIONS

Each Conversion Candidate must submit the following three essays to Rabbi Taff at least four weeks before the convening of the Bet Din.

Each essay should be no longer than 2 to 2 ½ pages in length, double-spaced, 14-point font size. Please be sure to include your name and date on EACH page of the essay and email them to rabbi@mosaiclaw.org.

1. Why I have chosen to convert to Judaism

2. The Greatest Challenge(s) facing me as a Jew

3. My Plans for living a Jewish life after conversion to Judaism
BET DIN OUTLINE

NAME OF CONVERSION CANDIDATE:

DATE AND TIME OF BET DIN: TBA

AV BET DIN: Rabbi Reuven Taff

MEMBERS OF BET DIN: ______________, ________________

1) Candidate’s background

2) Questions:
   a. Process which led you to want to convert to Judaism
   b. Beliefs and values in Judaism which you find most appealing and persuasive
   c. Describe your observance of Judaism now and in the future
   d. Describe your relationship with the Jewish People, State of Israel, World Jewry, the American Jewish Community and the synagogue
   e. Describe your understanding of Tzedakah.
   f. Jewish Prayer: What prayers are you familiar with? Attendance at Religious Services
   g. Plans for future Jewish study
   h. Jewish education for your children

3) Candidate is asked to wait outside the court as the Bet Din confers

4) If Acceptable, Candidate returns to read aloud and sign Declaration of Faith

5) If male, Hatafat Dam Brit is performed in Rabbi’s Office

6) Proceed to Mikvah

7) After the Mikvah immersions, Bet Din Signs Certificates of Acceptance into the Jewish Faith

8) A brief ceremony will be held in the Bet Midrash at Beth Jacob Congregation in Oakland in front of the Aron Hakodesh.

9) Presentation of Certificates

10) Mazal Tov!
A Practical Perspective: How to Choose a Hebrew Name

One of the joys of being "like a newborn baby" after the conversion is that you get to pick a Hebrew name—which is easier than you may think.

By Anita Diamant

Jews by Choice have always selected Hebrew names that speak to them personally; Ruth has long been a favorite for obvious reasons. [Ruth, the grandmother of King David, is perhaps the Bible's best-known convert.] Most converts choose a biblical name. There are 2,800 personal names in the Hebrew Bible, and although fewer than five percent of those are in current use, all of them are yours to consider.

Many of the names in the Bible are theophoric, meaning that they exalt God. Names with the prefixes or suffixes el, eli, ya, and yahu all refer to the Holy One: Elisha--God is my salvation; Raphael--God has healed; Gamliel--God is my reward.

Others describe the circumstances of birth or a person's historical role. Chava, Hebrew for Eve, comes from the root word for "life," chai. The name Isaac comes from the word for "laughter" because his mother laughed to learn she would bear a child at her advanced age. The Bible also contains many names that refer to the natural universe: Deborah--bee; Jonah--dove; Tamar--palm tree. Many modern Israeli names continue this tradition: Tal and Tali--dew; Alon or Alona--oak; Oren--fir tree.

The lexicon of Hebrew names was not handed down from Mount Sinai; it has grown and changed throughout history and in response to local customs and fashions. Take, for example, the quintessentially Jewish name Esther, which is Persian in origin and shares its root with the fertility goddess, Ishtar. When the state of Israel was founded, in 1948, scores of new Hebrew names were invented and many old ones reclaimed. Your rabbi should be able to provide you with guidance, lists, even suggestions. Once you find one or two names that you especially like, you might ask the rabbi to help you find some texts about the biblical character or name you've selected.

But you may not have to look any further than your own given name for inspiration. Some names translate beautifully. Regina or Gina, which means "queen," can give rise to Malkah, which also means "queen." If your parents named you David, David (pronounced "Dah-veed") can be your Hebrew name as well. The biblical precedent for this practice is clear: Ruth did not change her name.
Many converts follow the contemporary American custom of selecting a Hebrew name based on the initial letter or sound of their English name. Thus, Robert chooses Reuben, and Mary selects Miriam. But don't feel obligated by an accident of the alphabet. Since Jewish babies are usually named after parents or grandparents, some converts choose a name to honor someone in their own lives. Some rabbis feel strongly that the person you honor should be a Jewish teacher or mentor, or even a historical figure you find inspiring.

But there's no rule that you have to find an orthographic or historical connection between your name and your Hebrew name. This is an area of Jewish practice where there are few rules or customs, so find a name that feels right and has meaning for you. And you needn't limit yourself to just one name; it is increasingly common to choose two or even three. It sounds very impressive to be called to the Torah as Sarah Ora Hadassah bat Avraham v'Sarah.

The following websites have more information about Hebrew Names:

http://www.my-hebrew-name.com/about.php

http://www.jewfaq.org/jnames.htm

http://www.hebrewletters.com/
GUIDELINES AND PREPARATION FOR IMMERSION IN A MIKVAH

This information was prepared by Rabbi Reuven Taff. If you have any questions, please email the Rabbi at rabbi@mosaiclaw.org

What Is a Mikvah?

A Mikvah is a Jewish ritual bath. A kosher Mikvah requires “living water.” This includes rain, lake, ocean, or river water. In indoor Mikvahs, rainwater flows into filtered, purified tap water. A person will immerse in the Mikvah and say a blessing to mark a transition in their life and prepare for a new state of being.

The Mikvah is rooted in centuries of Jewish tradition. It is a place where a Jewish person can experience an embodied spirituality. By taking time to connect to the body, the Jewish people, and the earth’s natural water cycles, a person can become rooted in the present moment, even at a time of profound change.

Preparation Guidelines for a Halachic Immersion

If you are planning a halachic immersion, you should complete the following steps in preparation. If you have any questions, please contact Rabbi Reuven Taff at rabbi@mosaiclaw.org.

Bathing---At the Congregation Beth Jacob Community Mikvah in Oakland there is a separate area to shower before one enters the Mikvah. The following guidelines are to be observed:

- Remove any foreign object whose presence would be considered a barrier to immersion (chatzitza). These include jewelry, nail polish, and old bandages (if you have any questions about whether something constitutes a chatzitza, please contact Rabbi Taff)
- Wash the body thoroughly and carefully, including folds of skin, inside the belly button, and behind the ears
- Smooth rough patches of skin (elbows, feet), or make sure the water has softened them
- Wash all hair with warm water and shampoo, combing through to remove tangles
Additional cleaning

- Floss and brush teeth
- Blow the nose
- Clean the outer part of the ear
- Clean the crevices of the eyes
- Empty your bladder
- Clean all nails, and file to make sure that all edges are smooth

Some of the above preparations can be done at home prior to your visit to the Mikvah. Since there is no restroom in the Mikvah area, please use the restroom in the synagogue building (down the hall from where the Mikvah is located) before you shower. When you have finished your preparations, look your body over in the mirror to ensure that it is clean. When you are ready to immerse, place a bath towel around your body and, before you walk down the seven steps into the Mikvah, remove the towel. Proper immersion in a Mikvah requires that the entire body, including all of the hair, must be submerged in the water at one time. When immersing in the Mikvah, no part of the body may touch the bottom or side walls of the Mikvah.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

What is a Mikvah?

The word literally means pool, or gathering of water, and appears in Genesis 1:10, when God gathers the waters on the third day: "And the gathering (Mikvah) of the waters God called Seas. There is an entire tractate in the Talmud dedicated to the Mikvah.

What is the basis of the Mikvah in Jewish history?

Mikvah was used for ritual purification, not only for post-menstrual women, but for men with certain conditions and for priests in relation to the Temple rituals. Men have visited the Mikvah for spiritual purification before the Sabbath and Yom Kippur. Going to the Mikvah was a requirement for brides and converts to Judaism. Finally, it was the custom to wash new cooking utensils in the Mikvah when purchased from a non-Jew to make them kosher for use. Like the ancient Mikvaot, the Beth Jacob Community Mikvah contains living waters. Living water means running or moving water, and comes from a God-given source such as rain, snow, ice, spring water or the ocean. Because the Mikvah is a symbol of spiritual cleansing, transformation and renewal, individuals come to the living waters at times of change in their lives or to commemorate a special occasion.

Is Mikvah an important Jewish observance?

The rabbis said a community should build a Mikvah even before building a synagogue or acquiring a Torah. Indeed, it was permissible to sell a Torah in order to build a Mikvah.
How is the Mikvah used today?

The Mikvah is a positive way for people to focus on their bodies, gain respect, and concentrate on their own needs. Although there is a heavy emphasis in Judaism on the importance of community, coming to the Mikvah is a very private time for reflection and spiritual cleansing. As Beth Jacob Community Mikvah develops new and creative reasons for Mikvah use, they welcome all members of the Jewish community of all ages and life stages who desire the spiritual experience of immersion.

Here are some popular, evolving uses for today's Mikvah:

- Immersion by brides, grooms and partners prior to the wedding ceremony
- Men, women and children's conversions to Judaism
- Honoring personal milestones such as graduations, birthdays, anniversaries and B'nai Mitzvah
- Beginning anew by marking the end of Shiva, divorce, rape, abuse or recovery after illness
- Taharat Hamishpachah, the mitzvah of women's traditional monthly immersion
- Marking transformations in women's bodies such as onset of menstruation, miscarriage, infertility, pregnancy, the birth of a child and menopause
- Educational programs to learn about Mikvah as part of the Jewish tradition

Why did Mikvah fall from common use?

The Mikvah was one of the first areas of traditional observance to be abandoned by immigrants to America, even among those who continued to observe the laws of Shabbat and kashrut. There are several theories for why this happened: facilities fell into disrepair and were thought to be unclean, there were negative associations and memories of Mikvah from the "old country," discomfort with what appeared to be the stigmatizing of women, a lack of Jewish understanding of the mitzvah, liberal Judaism's abandonment of the ritual.

Why would someone go to a Mikvah in our time, when private baths are in every home?

Ritual purification is not about cleanliness -- in fact, one must be clean before entering a Mikvah. Immersion signifies a change in status and belongs to the category of commandments known as chukim (decrees of God), where observance is considered an act of pure faith. Immersion also requires a ritual intention. It is not the water but the intentional act of immersion that transforms or purifies. Finally, the maintenance of a Mikvah is a communal, not an individual, responsibility.
“Kosher” means fit or proper. Construction of the community Mikvah was supervised and certified by the rabbis of the community. The Beth Jacob Community Mikvah is a kosher Mikvah, and meets all Halachic standards and the structure, water levels, content and collection are inspected on a regular basis.

**Is the Mikvah clean?**

Beth Jacob Community Mikvah is kept scrupulously clean. The water is filtered through a special system that heats and purifies the water twice each day: once in the late afternoon for approximately 4 hours and later in the evening for a minimum of 8 hours. That the water in the mikvah has 40 sah of living water, which equates to about 191 gallons. Forty is symbolic of the 40 weeks of gestation, representing rebirth and renewal. The living water must be collected through the force of gravity, such as rain. The rain is permitted to fall into a huge container called the bor, which is under the building. The Mikvah pool shares a wall with the bor, and each shared wall has a hole cut in it which can be plugged up or left open to allow more living water to enter the pool. In order to make the pool legally valid as a Mikvah, it is "seeded" with bor water and then filled with regular, chlorinated tap water. When the hole between the pool and the bor is unplugged so that the waters are touching, the pool becomes a valid Mikvah. There is also a filtration system that filters the water and keeps it clean and warm.

**How is the water purity maintained?**

Beth Jacob Community Mikvah has a water filter/disinfectant system installed in the basement, through which the water to the two Mikvaot flows. There is a supply pipe and return pipe - much like a supply and return air duct. The water is treated with ultraviolet light which acts as an odor free and highly effective disinfectant.

**What is the water temperature?**

The water is a comfortable 85 degrees.

**Is it ever unsafe to immerse in a Mikvah?**

Immersion should not take place if one has any open cuts, sores or communicable diseases (e.g. bronchitis, fever, etc.). It is customary not to enter the Mikvah while menstruating or spotting. Self-dissolving stitches are permitted, but if stitches need to be removed, one should postpone immersion until the stitches are removed and the wound is healed. Other questions can be answered by the Beth Jacob Community Mikvah Rabbi.
Can I go in when I am menstruating?

Beth Jacob Community Mikvah recommends postponing immersion until the completion of the menstrual cycle. However, according to Halacha (Jewish Law), a Mikvah is "Lo Mekubal Tumah" - that is, it does not become ritually impure. Therefore, a menstruating woman does not render the Mikvah ritually impure for other users.

What does immersion actually involve?

The formal ritual is simple and brief. Once in the water, the person ducks under to be completely submerged for a moment or two, then recites a short blessing. The person then immerses one or two times more, according to custom, recites a blessing, and leaves the water. For conversion to Judaism there are three immersions. Blessings are recited after the first two immersions.

What are the rules for entering the Mikvah?

You must be completely clean before entering the Mikvah. Beth Jacob Community Mikvah provides a private area where you can undress, remove all jewelry, wash, shampoo, brush your teeth, and remove all obstacles (physical and symbolic) between your body and the water.

What do I need to bring?

All supplies will be provided.

What if I have a body piercing that doesn't easily come out?

In general, the goal is to remove anything that separates you from the water. However, if you have been wearing a particular piece of jewelry (or acrylic nails) for more than 30 days, according to Jewish law, those are considered a part of your body and do not have to be removed for immersion.

Will anyone see me naked?

That depends. It is traditional for a Mikvah attendant to act as witness to make certain that every strand of hair is under water. In some cases (e.g. healing) you may choose to immerse in private, with an attendant waiting at the door for safety and support.
Can I go into the Mikvah with another person?

Traditionally, Mikvah is an individual, personal ritual. When one immerses at the Beth Jacob Community Mikvah, one enters the Mikvah area directly from the changing room so that modesty is preserved. Friends or family may stand on the deck of the Mikvah to offer support, but males are not permitted in the Mikvah area when females are immersing and vice versa.

Are there any fees associated with the use of the Mikvah?

For immersion for the purpose of conversion to Judaism, Beth Jacob Congregation which houses the Mikvah requests a contribution of $50 for each individual using the Mikvah. Checks (payable to Beth Jacob Congregation) or cash can be brought to the Mikvah on the day of immersion. For a female immersing in the Mikvah, there may also be a fee of $100 (for a female Mikvah attendant) and $200 ($100 each for two of the witnesses who will be present and who will sign the conversion documents). The fees for the witnesses and female Mikvah attendant are only if the witnesses and female attendant will be from the Oakland Jewish community (there is no fee for the rabbi or for any witnesses or female attendant that the rabbi may bring from Sacramento). Should a conversion candidate wish to make a contribution in honor of the occasion to the Rabbi’s Mitzvah Fund at Mosaic Law, feel free to do so, but it is not obligatory.

Mikvah Address and Contact Information:

Beth Jacob Community Mikvah
3778 Park Blvd
Oakland, CA 94610

Phone:
510-482-1147
510-763-7388
1. Immerse. After you hear the Mikvah attendant say the word “kasher”, recite:

Baruch Atah Adonoy Elo-henu Melech HaOlam Asher Kid’shaNu B’Mitzvotav, VeTzivanu Al HaTevilah.

Blessed are You, O Lord our God, King of the Universe, Who has made us holy with His commandments and commanded us concerning immersion.

2. Immerse. After you hear the word “kasher”, recite:

Baruch Atah Adonay Elohaynoo Melech HaOlam, She-he-chianu, v’k’y’manoo, v’h’giyanoo, lazman hazeh.

Blessed are You, O Lord our God, King of the Universe, Who has kept us in life, sustained us, and allowed us to reach this occasion.

3. Immerse. After you hear the word “kasher”, MAZAL TOV!