

# *Journey Into Judaism*



**JEWS-BY-CHOICE**  
SHARE PERSONAL INSIGHTS  
INTO THE CONVERSION PROCESS.



Over the years, in the course of guiding students registered in the ever-popular Baltimore Board of Rabbis' (BBR) "Introduction To Judaism" course, the Board has developed a deeper understanding of the many reasons prompting some of our students to contemplate conversion to Judaism.

Thanks to a generous grant from the Jacob and Hilda Blaustein Fund for the Enrichment of Jewish Education, BBR partnered with the Jewish Outreach Network of Jewish Community Services (JCS) to conduct some in-depth interviews and surveys of former students in our course. What we learned from them was very telling. We hope that their thoughts and feelings as captured in this modest publication will help you as you further your own spiritual journey. Hence the name of this booklet: "Journey Into Judaism."

You will discover how some were able to resolve issues they have had with significant others in their lives, e.g. family of origin, friends, etc. You will also read their suggestions on how to derive maximum benefit from the Introduction to Judaism course. Some students shared with us what helped them to feel more comfortable and connected to Judaism and the Jewish community. Others shared general tips or advice they believe would have been helpful to them while on their journey to Judaism.

We hope their personal reflections will enhance your own personal journey. Should you want more information to help you grow in your understanding of Judaism, or should you want to discuss your quest and/or concerns in greater depth, please contact your sponsoring Rabbi or the Jewish Outreach Network of JCS at 410-466-9200.

May your journey be a rewarding one — intellectually, spiritually, and emotionally.


Rabbi Michael Meyerstein  
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR  
BALTIMORE BOARD OF RABBIS


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SENIOR MANAGER  
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## What prompted me to consider conversion ...


2  Having grown up in an interfaith family my mother made a strong effort to educate her children in the religion of her step-father who was the only grandfather we ever knew. Judaism was part of our upbringing in a Christian home. I started my path at thirteen reading the Reform *siddur* (prayer book) after my grandfather's death. I found a living, energetic religion where questions were encouraged and tradition was alive and relevant. Throughout my adult life I read and continued returning to the Reform *siddur*. My grandmother converted in the 50s when conversion was not as embraced as it is today. Not knowing how I would be accepted, it was not until I was reading the Harvey Fields "A Torah Commentary for Our Times" that I realized though not born a Jew, I was a Jew. I called a Rabbi the very next day. **W.W.**


 A desire to make a serious commitment to a tradition with which I deeply identify. **H.R.**

 Sounds trite, but I just finally had time to do it. My father's family is Jewish, and I had always been interested in learning about it. **L.H.**

 I began to learn about Judaism when I felt that my relationship with my Jewish boyfriend was becoming serious, as a way to understand a part of him. During that process, I felt an immediate connection to what I was learning, and as our relationship progressed and we discussed marriage, we both agreed that a two religion household would not be best for us. After we became engaged, I decided that I should investigate converting. **G.Z.**

 It was just a little "voice" inside me pushing me along to learn more, and then I found that I was in alignment with what I was learning. **A.C.**

 I feel at home being Jewish. I found a way to express feelings and a pattern of life and thought compatible with my own intellectual thought and emotional state. Judaism closely identifies with my innate desire to reach G-d through goodness, beauty, and truth. I find it easy to assimilate culturally. In adopting the culture, I see things that I want to put into my life; an understanding of my spiritual longing, philosophy, and literature. I now have one code of living: to please G-d, know G-d, and serve G-d. **L.R.**

 I grew up as a Catholic in Germany and went to Catholic school and therefore had a reasonable knowledge of the entire Christian bible. Whatever observance level I had, which was not very high to begin with (at least by U.S. standards), went down to nothing after coming to the U.S. and experiencing the way Catholicism is practiced here. Oddly, an ad for Israeli dancing prompted me to try out the dancing and I found that I liked it a lot. The dancing in turn triggered a strong desire to learn a bit more about the core values/beliefs of Judaism. This extremely basic knowledge let me realize that if I removed all the beliefs/matters in Catholicism that I was struggling with and did not believe in, what was left was Judaism. For me, personally, it was like finding home. **E.A.**



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*What I found helpful in resolving issues, if any, with significant others in my life (such as family of origin and friends) ...*



🌿 This was not an issue for me. My brothers were delighted and supportive. I would say, however, that if anyone has issues about conversion and attends the Baltimore Board of Rabbis classes they would easily develop a level of comfort. **W.W.**

🌿 Issues related to my conversion? There were no real objections raised. **H.R.**

🌿 I had absolutely no issues - everyone was supportive and happy for me. **L.H.**

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🌿 In my experience, my decision seemed to go over pretty well with the others in my life. I think this was in part because it was a process. I didn't announce one day that I was converting. People knew I was learning and connecting with what I was learning. Another factor was the fact that my family of origin knows that I do not act rashly about too many things and so they were able to respect the time I must have spent on the decision. Also, they (the majority of my family of origin) are not practicing actively in any religion and so they didn't feel threatened like some people might. A few people asked questions about my decision, and, in my opinion, were satisfied by the answers I gave.

My mom expressed sadness about Christmas, not from the religious standpoint, but just the family togetherness and the gift giving - she loves to give presents! I do think if my Italian Catholic grandma were alive, she would have had a hard time with it, just being from the place and time she was. All that being said, what I found helpful was openness to people's questions or concerns,

and having answers for them. In the case of my mom, I reminded her that she could take part in *Hanukkah* and have an opportunity to shop and give gifts, and get together-and that it would last eight days (nights) not just one! **G.Z.**

🌿 Including them in my Jewish life so that they could get used to it. **A.C.**

🌿 I wrote personal letters to the two individuals that found this most difficult. **L.R.**

🌿 I found it extremely helpful to be able to answer their questions as to why I would do this and what the spiritual basis was for my decision. Their questions challenged me to learn even more. I also found being confident in my belief that I was doing the right thing helped me a lot. Otherwise, I did not really have problems with anybody from my close family or circle of close friends. And to be honest, whatever anybody else thinks, I could not care less as I consider that in the end their problem. Now that my actual conversion is several years in my past, my conversion is something that only comes up if I am asked the question "How is it these days to grow up as a Jew in Germany?" which I can't really answer for obvious reasons.


Additionally, I found it helpful, not to be or appear obnoxious/arrogant about being a Jew, but to try to be considerate about other peoples feeling and knowledge base about Judaism which e.g. in Germany is fairly restricted, taking aside the history of the holocaust. **E.A.**


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## *I think you can get the most out of the Introduction to Judaism course by ...*


 Connecting with a wonderful set of instructors as well as the others who are there exploring the conversion process themselves. There is a wonderful sense of community that grows from the Introduction course. Many of the friends I made taking the course I remain close to today. We gather a few times a year to share that friendship and the growth in our lives as Jews. **W.W.**


 More time to have a group discussion. The rabbis chosen were excellent, and so were the very few times (rare) we were able to discuss issues/topics within the group. The exchange between individuals raised Jewish and the would-be converts was rich and insightful. More is highly recommended. **H.R.**

 Doing a lot of reading outside of class **L.H.**

 Not just attending class and listening to the discussions, but by really reading the material and letting it lead you to questions, not just answers. By finding the things you question and talking about them in class or with your sponsoring rabbi, you will help to overcome any lingering fears or make sense of things you don't immediately understand. Also, during the course, you could try to live the way you think you might live if you were to convert. This, of course, would mean different things to different people. **G.Z.**


 Doing the readings and showing up for all the classes! **A.C.**


 Pairing up with a Jew by birth to attend the course with you: Having a significant other to discuss topics and issues outside of the class. **L.R.**


 Not being shy about asking questions and spending the time doing additional reading about Judaism. For the latter, I truly recommend working with your sponsoring rabbi to put together a useful book list. **E.A.**

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## *... helped me to feel more comfortable and connected to Judaism and the Jewish community.*

 Learning Hebrew, working with my sponsoring Rabbi, and attending regular synagogue services helped me. I essentially grew up in the Cross Country area as a child but the connection I had to the community was greatly strengthened by the Introduction course. I found that the time I dedicated to the holidays and *Shabbat* also helped deepen my connection. **W.W.**

 The many authors I have read over the years—Wiesel, Chaim Potok, Levi, Bruno Bettelheim, in addition to the many friends I have made in the 20 years of searching for a connection to something greater. I would also add that Rabbi Steven Fink, Sally Fink and the staff of Temple Oheb Shalom made me feel especially welcomed. ... They were naturally welcoming and I felt that at long last I had found a spiritual home. Combined, this helped me to feel more comfortable and connected to Judaism and the Jewish community. **H.R.**

 Everyone I met at *shul* was very welcoming and friendly. **L.H.**



🌿 Rabbi Fink, my fiancé's family, most of the instructors in the course-as far as people go. Attending services regularly, going to places with a strong Jewish customer or client base, celebrating holidays- are some of the other things that helped. G.Z.

🌿 My rabbi, Jon Konheim, helped me to feel more comfortable and connected to Judaism and the Jewish community. A.C.

🌿 Attending *Shabbat* Services at a local Reform Temple and observing religious holidays and festivals. L.R.

🌿 There is actually not just one single person who helped me to feel more comfortable or connected to Judaism and the Jewish community but a number of people, mostly from the synagogue that I attended during the learning process. I have moved out of the area and am now only there for occasional visits, which I always enjoy tremendously. However, a special thanks goes to Rabbi Sonnenschein who I worked with and who helped me along the way with answering all my questions and recommending Jewish sources to read. E.A.

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*It would have been helpful for me to know ... about the conversion rituals.*

🌿 Through the course and my own research I knew what to expect and felt prepared. W.W.

🌿 To have actually "rehearsed" the actual ceremony. It was absolutely beautiful and being up on the altar, holding the Torah, touched me in a profound and unexpected way, but I did feel a little lost as to when to do what. H.H.

🌿 I was not surprised, I had read a lot before. L.H.

🌿 I feel that I was prepared pretty well for what to expect by Rabbi Fink. However, I would have liked to have seen the mikvah and checked that out prior to going. G.Z.

🌿 That there was very little chance that I would be refused by the Beit Din. A.C.

🌿 Not sure that there was anything that I thought would have been helpful. What was helpful was to read other individuals' personal accounts of their conversions. This was quite moving for me. L.R.


🌿 Well, I think I got all my questions answered including the differences between an Orthodox conversion and the others. The core difference between Orthodoxy and the other prevalent denominations, such as Conservative and Reform came up at the very beginning of my conversion as I pursued an Orthodox conversion. I personally think it would be helpful to reiterate these differences in the Judaism class as one of my classmates had a Conservative conversion but was ultimately attending an Orthodox *shul* with the result that nobody was comfortable with her conversion and did not consider her a Jew; the latter being very frustrating and partially hurtful to her. E.A.




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*Feel free to share a final thought, tip, piece of advice that would be helpful to someone converting to Judaism or considering conversion.*


*This might be something you learned along the way or something you wish you'd known during your journey into Judaism.*


 You cannot be Jewish in isolation, you need to be an active part of the community. The community is there for you, you just need to take the first step.


Learning Hebrew in order to understand not only the order of services but the true meaning of prayer is so important. I also think that students should attend services at least weekly and keep a journal about, growth, comfort, and connection that can be shared in appropriate class discussions. **W.W.**

 Group discussions are extremely helpful with individuals who are not converting solely because of an impending wedding. That said, if that is all that's available, I would recommend that rabbis and others be reminded that not everyone who takes a class in preparation for conversion is doing so because of marriage — I guess what I am requesting is just more sensitivity to those who convert because they truly feel called to the rich tradition, the values and the overall essence of Judaism. **H.R.**

 My final thought is that I was not prepared for the sometimes negative feedback from within the community. I was prepared for criticism and misunderstandings from my Christian family or friends. I was not prepared to be judged on the validity of my (non-Orthodox) conversion, or to hear Conservative Jews say things like “Oh, that’s a Reform temple” like that makes it less serious and therefore maybe less Jewish. I have a pretty thick skin and am not easily offended but those folks are out there. **G.Z.**

 Jewish Community Services, especially Jacki Ashkin, are great resources – take advantage of their programs and offerings. **A.C.**

 My conversion was seamless in all aspects, taking place basically nine months after enrolling into the Introduction to Judaism course. I had numerous long discussions with three individuals, two Jews and one not. I asked numerous questions during this journey. It was like being thrown into the water and then having to learn to swim. These discussions helped me formulate my thoughts; these exchanges were instrumental in centering me spiritually. **L.R.**

 Another thing, that I think is important to consider, as it might have considerable impact on family, is that Orthodox conversions performed in the U.S. may have trouble being accepted as valid conversions by the Israeli Rabbinate. I am actually not entirely sure what the final verdict is and how difficult it is to get a conversion accepted. Anyhow, exploring some sources on the web about this topic might be helpful. **E.A.**





## INTRODUCTION TO JUDAISM

### *Registration Information*

**7**his popular course is open to anyone in the Greater Baltimore community who wants to explore Judaism's rich history and traditions. It is of particular interest to individuals seeking to learn more about Judaism before deciding to convert to Judaism. The course is taught by the area's leading rabbis of all denominations. Classes meet on either Monday or Thursday evenings for 16 sessions, including a class visit to the Hendler Jewish Museum at Chizuk Amuno Congregation. In addition, students have the option to attend a weekly, hour-long, Hebrew reading class at no extra cost.

One aspect of the program that is particularly appealing is the opportunity for students to establish an on-going relationship with his/her sponsoring rabbi for the duration of the course and after. Hundreds of students of all ages have attended this course. Why not join their ranks and begin your journey into Judaism? Registration materials are available from area pulpit rabbis, or by calling the Board of Rabbis office at **410-843-7406**.

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### *Mission Statement of the Baltimore Board of Rabbis*

The Baltimore Board of Rabbis is a powerful moral and religious voice providing spiritual leadership for the Baltimore Jewish community. It is a forum for rabbis to confer about and to promote various aspects of communal issues, to facilitate cooperative programs among congregations and other organizations and agencies, and to serve as a Jewish educational and information resource for the Greater Baltimore community. As an association for rabbis of all streams of Judaism, the Baltimore Board of Rabbis provides opportunities for rabbis to gather for collegial support. The Baltimore Board of Rabbis provides professional development resources for rabbis in their diverse settings.

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### *Jewish Community Services*

Jewish Community Services (JCS), an agency of THE ASSOCIATED: Jewish Community Federation of Baltimore, is a non-profit human service agency which provides a broad range of services to meet the needs of individuals and families in the Greater Baltimore community. JCS offers career services, counseling and therapy, senior resources, addiction services, Big Brother/Big Sister matches, psychiatric services, special needs services, parenting resources, service coordination, community information, legal services, prevention education, volunteer opportunities and teen outreach.

Through the programs and services of Jewish Community Services, families and individuals will be supported in meeting basic needs for economic sufficiency; in living independently; in achieving mental health and competence; and in feeling supported by and connected to the Jewish community in ways that are meaningful to them.



