Judaism .001

Reform Judaism's Conservative Shift

Leaders of Most Liberal Branch To Toughen Conversion Rules

By Hanna Rosin
Washington Post Staff Writer

Leaders of Reform Judaism will adopt stricter guidelines for religious conversion today, embracing more traditional rites that American Judaism's most progressive and popular branch has historically rejected.

Reform Jewish rabbis said they expect to adopt standards at their annual meeting in Monterey, Calif., that suggest converts commit to keeping a Jewish home, an effort that includes following Jewish dietary laws. Women will be asked to immerse themselves in a ritual bath—known as a *mikveh*—and men will be asked to undergo circumcisions.

The change is, in one respect, an extraordinary reversal for a movement that was founded in 1885 to allow Jews to blend into American life by explicitly rejecting many distinctly Jewish practices as "entirely foreign."

But the new direction is in keeping with Reform Judaism's history of responding to American trends. In this case, the guidelines reflect an overall shift toward orthodoxy on the part of many religious Americans, a pull strong enough to attract even the most liberal wing of American Judaism.

"A century ago the thrust was to be comfortable being Jewish and an American," said Rabbi Charles Kroloff, president of the Central Conference of American Rabbis, the Reform organization hosting today's meeting of 1,800 rabbis. "Today the thrust is: How do

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Reform Judaism Is Getting More Strict

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we express the uniqueness of our faith?"

The new conversion guidelines are part of a shift in direction unveiled two years ago, when Reform rabbis revised their "Statement of Principles" to place greater emphasis on *mitzvot*, the religious laws that govern Jews' daily lives.

The conversion guidelines are still voluntary, and individual rabbis can use their discretion in applying them. About 1.5 million Jews belong to Reform congregations, and most American Jews who do not belong to a synagogue identify with the Reform movement.

Reform synagogues convert about 5,000 people each year, the majority of whom are preparing to marry Jews. But the new guidelines are likely to affect more than just new converts. Traditionally, the requirements for converts have defined the various branches of Judaism. They have been a source of strife when converts to Reform synagogues have been rejected as Jews by more conservative branches.

"Conversion is really important in defining us," Kroloff said. "After all, it would be hard to expect things of a Jew by choice that you would not expect of you and your family. That would be dishonest."

The new guidelines are contained in a 15-page document of specific instructions that are strikingly similar to the rites of other branches of Judaism. They do not include the traditional Jewish principle of rejecting a convert three times to test his sincerity, as other Jewish movements do, but adopt some elements of that skepticism and scrutiny.

The new standards suggest that rabbis require converts to attend religious services regularly, marry Jews and raise children as Jews. They suggest that rabbis not accept intermarriage as an immediate reason for conversion, but instead inquire whether the person has separate spiritual reasons to convert.

Sometimes, the guidelines seem like a direct response to critics of Reform Judaism. Taking an "Introduction to Judaism" class is not enough, they say. Instead, rabbis should meet with potential converts every two or three weeks for at least a year, questioning their motives and teaching them about Jewish practices.

The convert would then be questioned by a *Bet Din*, or panel of three learned rabbis, to test his or her knowledge and commitment to Judaism.

Men would be circumcised or, if they were already circumcised, would undergo a symbolic circumcision, in which a drop of blood is drawn from the penis.

The move toward orthodoxy does not sit well with all Reform congregations. Some are split between adherents to the founding principles of the Reform movement and adherents to what has come to be known as "contemporary Reform"—the new traditionalism.

"There is a tension between people on both sides," said a rabbi of a large local synagogue who did not want to be identified. "The trick as a rabbi is to walk the line, to use some liturgy from both the classic Reform and contemporary Reform, without having anyone from either side walk out the door."

Leaders of the two other main branches of Judaism welcomed the changes, but with hesitation. Leaders of the Conservative branch said the guidelines would go a long way toward meeting their concerns about Reform conversions.

"Anything that increases adherence to [Jewish law] will make it simpler for us," said Avis Miller, a rabbi at Adas Israel synagogue in Washington and former chairman of conversion and outreach for the Conservative movement. Miller said he often must perform additional rituals for new members or converts about to marry a Jew who was converted in a Reform synagogue.

"And it will help us maintain *kol Israel*"—or the unified Jewish community, he said.

Leaders of Judaism's Orthodox branch were more skeptical.

"Unfortunately, this doesn't get us to the point where the Orthodox will accept the conversion," said Rabbi Barry Freundel of Kesher Israel in Washington. "The fact of discussing things with someone does not satisfy the Orthodox requirement of observance before someone converts."

Both rabbis stressed that because the guidelines would be voluntary, they would have no guarantee of how a conversion was performed.

Little Tommy (who was Jewish) was doing very badly in math. His parents had tried everything - tutors, mentors, flash cards, special learning centers - in short, everything they could think of.

Finally, in a last ditch effort, they took Tommy down and enrolled him in the local Catholic school.

After the first day, his mother was amazed to see him come home with a very serious look on his face, not even stopping to kiss her. Instead, he went straight to his room and started studying. Books and papers were strewn all over the room and little Tommy was hard at work! She was in shock when she called him down to dinner, he ate in silence then marched back to his room without a word and in no time
he was back again, hitting the books as hard as before.

Finally, the day came when little Tommy brought home his report card. He quietly laid it on the table and went up to his room. With great trepidation, her hand almost trembling, his mom looked at it and to her great surprise, saw that little Tommy had gotten an "A" in math.

She could no longer hold her curiosity. She went to his room and asked, "Son, how wonderful! Congratulations! Well done, but what was it? Was it the books? The discipline? The structure? The uniforms? What WAS it? The nuns??"

Little Tommy looked at her and said, "Wellllll, on the first day of school, when I saw that guy nailed to the plus sign, I knew they weren't fooling around..."

Jewish Spirituality

All Jewish spirituality centers on Torah, the accumulation of several thousand years of Jewish wisdom. As Rabbi Lawrence A. Hoffman, a leading authority on prayer and liturgy, describes it, Torah "is synonymous with learning, wisdom, and love of God. Without it, life has neither meaning nor value." Usually identified with the first five books in the Bible (the Five Books of Moses), Torah, in a larger sense, means "way of life." If Judaism is the spiritual tradition that best matches your Spiritual Identity you will find that the purpose of life and meaning of God find their supreme expression in Torah.

Judaism is one of the more difficult of spiritualities to describe easily. It is a living tradition that includes religious rituals and beliefs as well as a code of ethical behavior. It also incorporates and reflects the ancient and modern history of the Jews as a people with rituals, ceremonies, and celebrations. Its adherents today include people of every race and most nations—and every Spiritual Type.

Several movements exist within Judaism today, and each represents a particular attitude toward ritual, liturgy, theology and tradition. Each movement ordains rabbis ("teachers," or spiritual leaders) and has temples or synagogues in all major cities in North America.

> "Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. Take to heart these instructions with which I charge you this day. Impress them upon your children. Recite them when you stay at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you get up. Bind them as a sign on your hand and let them serve as a symbol on your forehead. Inscribe them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates."
>
> —Deuteronomy 6:4–9 from the Torah, the Jewish affirmation of faith

An important belief in Orthodox Judaism is that the Torah used today is the same as the Torah that was given to Moses on Mount Sinai; as divine revelation, its requirements are not meant to be reinterpreted in any fundamental way in light of later events. The other three Jewish movements view a human component as being present in Torah, thus making it valid to reinterpret Torah for each era. Each of these three movements—Conservative, Reconstructionist, and Reform—places different emphases on the important Jewish concepts of God, Torah, and Israel (the Jewish community).

A Jew You Should Know: Abraham Joshua Heschel (1907–1972)

Abraham Joshua Heschel was born in Poland, a descendant of a long line of rabbis of the mystically inclined Hasidim, a spiritual movement within Judaism that began in Eastern Europe in the early eighteenth century. He studied Talmud, Hasidic teachings, and *kabbalah* as a youth, and attended the University of Berlin. Emigrating from Nazi Germany in 1938, he ultimately settled in the United States, where he became professor at Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati and then at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America in New York. Heschel taught that God is passionately concerned with all creation, and the nature of true religion is humanity's response to God's bond with it. The root of Jewish observance is in human response expressed with love and devotion. One of Heschel's most beloved books, his 1951 *The Sabbath* (Noonday Press, 1996), focuses on the holiness of time, an important principle for all Judaism. Since Judaism had not given the world any holy places outside the Land of Israel—such as special temples or enormous cathedrals—he wrote, its Sabbath and various holidays created palaces in time, temporal refuges from the pressures of the world.

Books

Gillman, Neil. *Sacred Fragments: Recovering Theology for the Modern Jew.* Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1990.

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Heschel, Abraham Joshua. *The Sabbath.* New York: Noonday Press, 1996.

Kertzer, Rabbi Morris N. *What Is a Jew?* Revised by Rabbi Lawrence A. Hoffman. New York: Macmillan, 1993.

Kushner, Lawrence. *The Book of Letters: A Mystical Hebrew Alphabet.* Woodstock, Vt.: Jewish Lights Publishing, 1990.

Wouk, Herman. *This Is My God: The Jewish Way of Life.* New York: Little, Brown & Co., 1992.

Periodicals

Lilith
The Independent Jewish Women's Magazine
250 W. 57th St., Suite 2432

There are two poles of *how* we believe that are measured here. All of us range between:

- *Faithful-Skeptical*
- *Contemplative-Rational*

Are you more *faithfully* inclined or *skeptically* inclined, *contemplatively* inclined or *rationally* inclined? Here is a brief summary of each of the four Spiritual Type possibilities. Read about the type that includes the two poles toward which you tend and see if you agree:

FR: Faithful-Rational

Often the most self-assured and vocal of all the Spiritual Types, the *Faithful-Rational* person believes with great confidence and is ready to explain to naysayers why what (s)he believes is true. FRs usually rest their faith on the promises to be found in scripture and tradition. They often can quote scripture from memory and see scripture as divine truth. The FR's spiritual life is strengthened most through study, and (s)he usually craves conversation with others to stimulate ideas. Often dynamic leaders, FRs can find great benefit in belonging to a religious community and may even see taking a leadership role in one as an obligation.

FC: Faithful-Contemplative

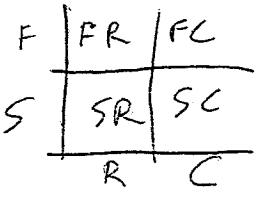
The *Faithful-Contemplative* person believes sometimes even in the face of evidence that (s)he cannot explain away and that (s)he often doesn't care to explain away. Often the most devout and devotional of the Spiritual Types, FCs can be the most dedicated of spiritual practitioners—devoted to daily prayer or meditation, for example. Also the most visionary of the Spiritual Types, FCs believe so strongly in their hearts that they have little interest in dogma or spiritual teaching that seems too intellectual and irrelevant. They can create fascinating spiritual conversations, if you can get them to share their thoughts with you. The FC's relationship to the Divine can sometimes be like a relationship between lovers—intimately personal and also volatile, as FCs can feel at times slighted by the Divine because their relationship is so personal.

SR: Skeptical-Rational

The *Skeptical-Rational* person has little time for spiritual matters. SRs do not believe that dwelling on spiritual things accomplishes much in life. But they often focus on improving the planet, themselves, or their communities with a spiritual zeal. The rarest of the four types, SRs can be very knowledgeable of religion and spiritual traditions, but they do not view that knowledge as offering any evidence for belief. Often the most transitional of the Spiritual Types, many SRs grew up as FRs but have since changed perspectives. Similarly, many SRs go on to become SCs. The most common spiritual practice for SRs is found in their neverending effort to actualize their own full human potential, as well as that of others.

SC: Skeptical-Contemplative

The fastest growing of the Spiritual Types, the *Skeptical-Contemplative* person may not be completely sure what (s)he believes about spiritual things but is interested in discovering what there might be to discover. SCs often do not adhere to any one spiritual tradition exclusively, and they rarely join spiritual groups. They find a variety of spiritual practices and religious traditions stimulating. If they worship, they often do so on their own terms—sometimes participating in religious services but holding on to their own personal convictions in matters of faith. There is an underlying mystical strain in a percentage of SCs as they are intellectually skeptical of all spiritual teaching, but at the same time hold great faith in the guidance of the spirit within them to find the truth.



Religion as Baseball

* Calvinists believe the game is fixed.

* Lutherans believe they can't win, but trust the Scorekeeper.

* Natives circle the bases.

* Hindus go around the bases many, many times before reaching home.

* Yogi Berra says, "It ain't over till it's over."

* Materialists think the diamond is forever.

* Anglicans gave the Catholics a reign check.

* Quakers won't swing.

* Orthodox Christians always have a no-hitter. - They turn the other cheek.

* Unitarians can catch anything.

* Amish walk a lot.

* Pagans sacrifice.

* Jehovah's Witnesses are thrown out often.

* Televangelists get caught stealing.

* Episcopalians pass the plate.

* Evangelicals make effective pitches.

* Fundamentalists balk.

* Mormon teams sign on all their relatives.

* Baha'is think everyone should play.

* Communists are out in left field.

* Buddhists don't believe anyone is keeping score.

* Taoists think the rules are restrictive.

* When Catholics steal a base, they have to go to confession after the game.

* The Lions couldn't touch Daniel leaving the Jews up one.

* Adventists have a seventh-inning stretch.

* Atheists refuse to have an Umpire.

* Sabeans are stuck on first base.

* Baptists want to play hardball.

* Premillenialists expect the game to be called soon on account of eternal darkness.

* Catholics make a shortstop in purgatory before sliding into home.

* The Pope claims never to have committed an error.

* One player refused to shave (Sikh) and he was fined.

* The Sufi base umpire was relieved because he was deep in thought and missed a call.

* Jews in general are waiting for wholesale tickets.

* Law & Order crowd believes ...three strikes and you're in.

"No religion is an island:
there is no monopoly on holiness.
We are companions of all who revere Him.
We rejoice when His name is praised.

No religion is an island:
we share the kinship of humanity,
the capacity for compassion.

The hand of God is extended to all who seek Him.
He is near to all who call upon Him in truth.

God's spirit rests upon all, Jew or Gentile,
man or woman, in consonance with their deeds.

The creation of one Adam promotes peace.
No one can claim: my ancestry is nobler than yours.

There is no monopoly on holiness:
there is no truth without humility.

We are diverse in our devotion and commitment.
We must unite in working now for the kingship of God.

He is near to all who call on Him in truth.
There can be disagreement without disrespect.

Let us help one another overcome hardness of heart,
opening minds to the challenges of faith.

Should we hope for each other's failure?
Or should we pray for each other's welfare?

Let mutual concern replace remnants of mutual contempt
as we share the precarious position of being human.

Have we not all one Father? Are we not all His children?

Let us not be guided by ignorance or disdain.
Let lives of holiness illumine all our paths.

The hand of God is extended to all who seek Him.
Let our deeds reflect that we share the image of God.

Let those who revere the Lord speak to one another,
leading everyone to acknowledge the splendor of God."

Dr. Abraham Joshua Heschel
No Religion Is an Island in his essay
"Poland and the United States."

Subject: Pesky squirrels

> There were three country churches in a small Texas town: the
> > > Presbyterian church, the Methodist church and the Catholic church.
> > >
> > > Each church was overrun with pesky squirrels. One day, the
> > > Presbyterian Church called a meeting to decide what to do about the
> > > squirrels. After much prayer and consideration they determined that
> > > the squirrels were predestined to be there and they shouldn't
> interfere
> > > with God's divine will.
> > >
> > > The Methodist group got together and decided that they were not in a
> > > position to harm any of God's creations. So, they humanely trapped
> the
> > > squirrels and set them free a few miles outside of town. Three days
> > > later, the squirrels were back.
> > >
> > > It was only the Catholics who were able to come up with the best and
> > > most effective solution. They baptized the squirrels and registered
> > > them as members of the church. Now they only see them on Christmas
> and
> > > Easter.

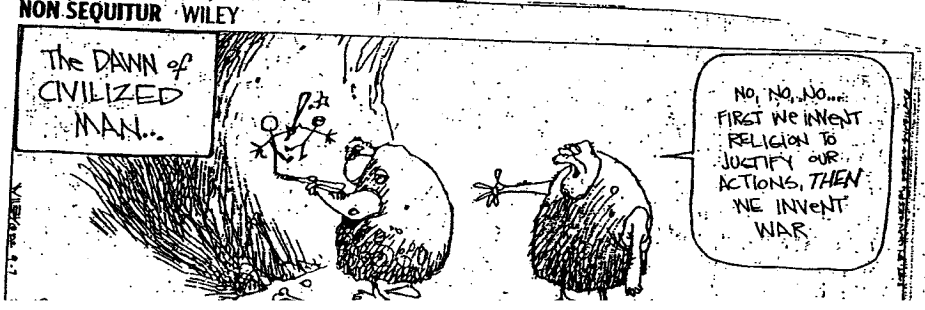
"Based on what we know of (Eric) Rudolph so far, and admittedly it's fragmentary, there seems to be a fairly high likelihood that he can legitimately be called a Christian terrorist."

MICHAEL BARKUN, a professor of political science at Syracuse University who has been a consultant to the FBI on Christian extremist groups, in the Washington Post.

A rabbi is sitting on an airplane next to a Korean guy. After they have been flying together in silence for a while, the rabbi leans over and says, "You know, I've never forgiven you Chinese for what you did at Pearl Harbor."

The Korean looks shocked and replies, "What the hell are you talking about?!?!? It was the Japanese the bombed Pearl Harbor, not the Chinese. And besides, I'm not Chinese or Japanese, I'm Korean!"

The rabbi says, " Korean, Japanese, Chinese, what's the difference?"

A little while later, the Korean man says, "You know, I've never forgiven you Jews for sinking the Titanic." The rabbi looks confused and mad and says, "What are you talking about? The Jews didn't have anything to do with that! An iceberg sank the Titanic!"

The Korean guy replies, "Iceberg, Goldberg, Greenberg, what's the difference?"