

Reform Judaism's Conservative Shift

Leaders of Most Liberal Branch To Toughen Conversion Rules

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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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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 *mitzot*, 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 *Beit 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 Keshet 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, "Welllllll, on the first day of school, when I saw that guy nailed to the plus sign, I knew they weren't fooling around..."