

Choosing Judaism

Dear Mom and Dad,

In a few days, I will participate in a ceremony that dates back millennia: The *mikveh*. When I emerge from this ritual bath, I will be spiritually renewed with a new identity and will have officially converted to Judaism.

As I approach this moment, I am aware that you, my parents, may have questions, concerns, and emotional reactions to my new identity as a Jew. Indeed, during my Jewish studies over the past months, even my Jewish friends have asked me why and how I have reached this decision....

I did not come to this decision hastily. Years of soul-searching, pondering and deliberating have gone into it. In Judaism, I have found all of the values and traditions that I have searched for.

I'd like to explain some of the aspects of Judaism that particularly appeal to me. First, is the task of the Jewish People: *Tikkun Olam*, "repairing the world." This decree obliges Jews to live in ways that will improve the state of the world and help bring about the Messianic Age, the highest ideal of peace brotherhood and love. This will not occur unless we engage in *gemilut hasadim*, "deeds of lovingkindness" and closely follow the laws given to us by God. These 613 commandments or mitzvot in the Five Books of Moses include everything from how to conduct business to what to do for a wounded animal. They address how, when and what to eat. There is even a law requiring placing a parapet around one's roof so that someone working on it won't fall and injure himself. Being mindful of these mitzvot lets us contribute profoundly to the world's betterment....

Another significant facet of Judaism is its holidays, festivals and days of remembrance. In keeping with the Jewish emphasis on cycles, tradition and

history, the calendar is full of certain days to help us reflect on our place in the world....

Some holidays in particular will require adjustments for us, particularly in December. For about the same time you'll be celebrating Christmas, I'll be lighting the menorah as I observe Hanukkah...These changes may be awkward at first, but I hope all my friends and family will approach them with a healthy curiosity and embrace this opportunity to learn together...

Everything I have learned- each holiday, feast, story or day of remembrance- has significance for me. I am connected to its history, which I am anxious to share with friends and family.

My beloved parents, if you visit my Jewish home on Friday evening, you will see the Shabbat candles burning brightly. I hope you will join us as we recite the *b'rachot*, the blessings, which celebrate the kindling of these lights and the drinking of the wine. After a blessing over the bread, we can all enjoy a hearty Sabbath meal. I won't be eating bacon when I come for breakfast anymore, but please come over for lox and bagles, anytime!

Love and L'chayim,

Nafshiya

(Berkowitz, Moskovitz, Embracing the Covenant, 31-35)

The letter I just read is taken from a wonderful book entitled: *Embracing the Covenant* that shares the stories of converts to Judaism. Judaism has always placed a special value on converts. As the Midrash Tanchuma teaches:

Dearer to God than all of the Israelites who stood at Mt. Sinai is the convert. Had the Israelites not witnessed the lightning, thunder, quaking mountain, and sounding trumpets they would not have accepted the Torah. But the convert, who did not see nor hear any of these things, came and surrendered himself to God and took the yolk of heaven upon himself. Can anyone be dearer to God than such a person? **Midrash Tanchuma, Lech Lecah 6:32A**

I myself have always enjoyed working with conversion students. They are generally so eager to learn, and the spark of their Jewish souls tends to shine very brightly. Conversion classes are so delightful because participants have a chance to explore practices and beliefs as they share in the individual and collective Jewish journey. The convert to Judaism tends to look at our heritage as a gift to be explored, treasured, protected, and lived each and every day. She often finds a deep sense of comfort, history, and connection in the celebration of our holidays, and the Hebrew of our prayers. He sees kashrut as a discipline that values animal life and teaches about life's limitations. And when he reaches for a certain fork, or refrains from ordering something that is not kosher on the menu, he reminds himself that every choice he makes, from the most profound to the most simple, has the potential to be infused with our Jewish teachings and traditions.

I could read dozens more letters with similar messages told in different voices, but the point across all is the same. Converts often make deeply rooted **Jewish choices**- choices that bring them closer to themselves, closer to God, and closer to the Jewish people.

Perhaps more than anything, it is the choices that converts make, that I find so inspiring. It is clear that converts are open to making Jewish choices because they are, in fact, Jews by choice. Conversion students quickly learn that Judaism values asking questions, studying, and growing in Jewish practice. Built into the fabric of Judaism is the opportunity to struggle, grow, and evolve as a Jew and as a human being. It is that freedom to choose, to question, explore, and grow in this way that often creates such a rewarding and inspiring experience for the convert. As Omri, a former Roman Catholic who converted to Judaism writes:

I have read many Jewish publications, and the phrase "the Chosen Ones" is still somewhat troublesome for me to accept. After everything I have read, it seems that the phrase should really be: "The Choosing Ones!"

Omri continues:

It is often said that "if you put two Jews into one room and ask them the same question, they'll have three opinions." I firmly believe that: The freedom this implies, the freedom to choose *my* beliefs, *my* worship, *my* God, is what has made my choice to live as a Jew so meaningful. (Berkowitz, Moskovitz, Embracing the Covenant, 13)

Omri, like many converts, understands that Judaism is about making choices. But he also understands that Judaism cannot be meaningful, cannot have relevance, and cannot be useful to someone unless they are willing to make those choices.

When I am meeting with a couple and one of them has converted, it is often the case that the convert is the more Jewishly engaged or enthusiastic of the pair. Why is that? Perhaps it is because choosing to live an active Jewish life is not easy. Perhaps it is because the person who converted is already well versed in making difficult choices and is not afraid to make those choices. Perhaps it is because the Jew by birth was not given as much guidance as the Jew by choice. Whatever the reason, I know that Jews by choice can, and should, be teachers and role models to Jews by birth. Jews by birth can, and should, be Jews by choice.

I want to share the story of one such Jew, a Jew by birth who became a Jew by choice. Her name is Lee Meyerhoff Hendler and she wrote a book called [The Year Mom Got Religion](#) that details her journey to living an active Jewish life. She shares the following reflection:

Up to age forty, I was aware of being Jewish, but I didn't have a comprehensive view of Judaism that allowed me to integrate it into my daily life.

No lasting convictions arose to suggest that my fundamental identity or my life choices could be primarily influenced by, or permanently shaped by, being a Jew...And of course, among the people I admired I had very few models of a Jewish life that might be lived in this fully integrated way. I grew up in a loving, orderly home that was rich in intellectual, political, and physical activity- but religiously- ritually and spiritually- deprived, deeply American but marginally Jewish, genuinely decent but barely observant.

All this registered with stunning ferocity during an early session of the woman's Torah study group I belong to. We were discussing the nature of our identity as American Jews when our teacher, Rabbi Joel Zaiman, asked the disarmingly simple question, "If someone asked who you were, would you say an American or a Jew first?" My response was immediate but truthful- "an American." Right away, I was ashamed of my answer because I knew it was the "wrong" one and most of the class had instantly volunteered the "right" one. Shame was immediately compounded by anger at Rabbi Zaiman because the question itself was so unfair...What a cheap shot! How dare he pull the old loyalty oath skeleton from the closet! How manipulative!

Vacillating between rage and shame, I suddenly realized how skillfully Rabbi Zaiman had demonstrated that while the rest of the world might not care about my answer anymore, I did. The point was that privately we make these choices all the time. At that moment, I was appalled that my family's history and success in this country had conditioned the "American" response in me. Not only was it the response I was ready to volunteer, it was the response I believed in. Today, four years later, my answer is "A Jew first, but now I want to learn how to be both at the same time." (Hendler, The Year Mom Got Religion, 35-36).

I imagine that Hendler's experience is not unique. There are many Jews who have yet to discover a successful and serious way to integrate their Jewish and American identities. And that is largely because in order to do this, one has to be willing to make the choice to do so. In order to discover the power,

wisdom, and beauty in our tradition, you have to be willing to make this choice. The truth is that everyone of us in this room can choose to be an American, choose to be a Jew, or choose to be both. In the United States, in 2011, we are, as Omri said, the choosing people.

The challenge, of course, is that choosing Judaism, choosing Jewish, is not always so easy. Choices, by their very nature, involve sacrifice. The family choices that we make, the financial choices that we make, and the professional choices that we make, can all be extremely difficult. The Jewish choices that we make are no exception. Choosing to pray, to celebrate Shabbat, to observe Kashrut, to be honest in our business dealings, to reach out to those less fortunate than us, to make time to study and learn the ways of our tradition, or to send your kids to Hebrew school and Hebrew High School, are not always easy choices to make. **But the easy choice, is not always the wisest choice and it is certainly not necessarily the most valuable choice.** The most meaningful and rewarding choices in life are often the hardest to make. The choice to get married, for example, may seem easy at first- but a healthy approach to marriage understands that a lot of work is involved. The choice to have a child may seem simple, but the realities of having children are often anything but that. And yet most people

would likely say that their marriage, and their children are the most precious things in their lives.

Let us consider some difficult Jewish choices. I'll offer one specific example: making the decision to strictly observe Shabbat is without a doubt difficult—at least at first. At first glance one might focus on all of the limitations and challenges: no writing, no TV, no phone, e-mail, or texting. No shopping, travelling, or even cooking. Going to services for two to three hours and struggling with Hebrew and prayer. All of these limitations can seem difficult, or even impossible. But people who have chosen to take on Shabbat observance, whether just one piece or the whole package, will attest to the incredible rewards of Shabbat. The way in which observing Shabbat can transform your life into one with balance, perspective, appreciation for all of God's creation. The new opportunities to connect with your family and friends. The gift of rest from the crazy rollercoaster that we call life. Choosing to observe Shabbat is no doubt extremely difficult, particularly in today's world. But the rewards this choice can bring ultimately outweigh the challenges.

So why share all of this on Yom Kippur? Because Yom Kippur is a time when we are to remember that each one of us, as a Jew, is responsible for making choices in our daily lives. The Unetaneh Tokef prayer that we will recite shortly, seems to imply on one level that it is God who decides who will live and who will die, who by water and who by fire. But in actuality, this is a prayer about the power of the choices **WE** make.

Teshuvah, Tefilah, U'Tzedakah Ma'avirin et roah ha'gzerah, Turning towards one another, ourselves and God, Prayer, and Righteous Deeds can mitigate the severity of the decree.

The message of the Unetaneh Tokef is that if we *choose* to behave in certain ways, if we *choose* to apologize to those we have wronged, if we *choose* to work on our relationships, to establish a relationship with God, and to pursue a righteous and just lifestyle, then we will, to a certain degree, control our destiny. Ultimately, it is us, and not God, who are responsible for writing our names in the Book of Life. That is what the *Unetaneh Tokef* prayer means when it says that "*chotem yad kol adam bo,*" God finds each of *our* signatures inside the Book.

So the question for each one of us this evening is: What are you going to write in your book this year when it comes to your Jewish life? What Jewish choices are you going to make? And what are the implications of the Jewish

choices that you will avoid making? How can, and will, you be a Jew by choice?

Is this the year that you choose to come to services more often in search of deepening your connection to God? Is this the year that you choose to bring Shabbat into your life by lighting candles, sitting down to dinner as a family, or taking time to read and study some Judaic material? Is this the year that you choose to watch how you speak to, and about, other people? Is this the year that you choose to begin repairing that relationship that you have been avoiding for too long? Is this the year that you choose to make sure that your kids regularly attend Junior Congregation, Hebrew School and Hebrew High School? Is this the year that you choose to sign up for an adult education class at the synagogue, join a Hazak, Sisterhood, or Men's club program, or come to minyan? Or is this the year you choose to commit to the community-wide Introduction to Judaism class that will be housed at Congregation Torat El? Is this the year that our community's Jews by birth truly become Jews by choice.

We are all, like the converts I began with this morning, Jews by choice. Even attending services tonight, you are making the choice. Whether you are a regular shul-goer, or someone who comes to services only once a year; ALL of us must remember that there are consequences to every single

Jewish choice that we make, and to every single Jewish choice we fail to make.

Let me conclude with a story:

For Louis D. Brandeis, life at Harvard Law School was not easy, although it wasn't the curriculum that made his journey so difficult. For three years, students sat next to him uninvited at lunch each day. They said things like, "Brandeis, you're brilliant. You could end up on the Supreme Court if only you weren't a Jew. Why don't you convert? Then all your problems would be solved." Brandeis listened but never responded.

By his final year of law school, Brandeis's preeminence could no longer be denied. Jewish or not, he was invited to join the honor society. It was an electric moment—the first time that the exclusive society had accepted a Jew. On the evening of the official induction, the room was hushed; the atmosphere was thick. All eyes were on Brandeis as he walked to the lectern. Slowly he looked around the room.

"I am sorry," he said, "that I was born a Jew."

With that, the room erupted in applause. There was an explosion of shouting and cheers.

"We have convinced him," the members of the audience thought. "Finally, finally, he has seen our point!"

Brandeis waited for the excitement to abate. When silence was

reestablished, he began again. "I am sorry," he said, "that I was born a Jew, but only because I wish I had the privilege of choosing Judaism on my own."

This time there was no applause, no explosion of shouting or cheers. This time there was only silence. When the quiet had grown uncomfortable, members of the exclusive Harvard honor society began to stand. However, they didn't walk out. Instead, awed by Brandeis's conviction and strength of character, and his unequivocal choice, the members of the society gave the honoree a standing ovation.

(Three Times Chai, [The Choice That Brings Us Here](#), Rabbi Jeffrey Wohlberg)

Like Brandeis, and like the converts whose stories I referenced tonight, every one of us in this room has Jewish choices to make this year. I want you to know that we, as your synagogue family, are here to help you make these choices as we encourage you to explore the wisdom, beauty, and depth involved in living an active daily Jewish lifestyle. You may be thinking that the distance to travel may seem too far, but as one Hassidic parable teaches, the distance from East to West is not really that far. All that is involved is one step.

What step will you make this year? What Jewish commitment will you make?
How will you transform the Book of YOUR Jewish Life this year? You are the
judge of your Jewish fate. God cannot write in your book for you. The pen is
in your hand. The choice is yours to make.