The very first conversion that I performed as a rabbi was for a 45 year old father of two, who was in the final stages of liver cancer. John, who was born to a Jewish father but raised Protestant by his Christian mother was so stricken with his disease at this point in our yearlong studies that his eyes could not focus to read and it was difficult for him to speak more than two or three words at a time. To complete our studies I would make cassette tapes for him (yes it was that long ago) to listen to between our bi-weekly visits and he would slowly write questions and responses for our in person meetings.

I was a student rabbi, travelling twice a month to a far off pulpit in rural central California to lead services, teach religious school and to meet with John. The community had maybe 100 Jewish families, and early on I asked John, a mathematics professor at the local community college why he wanted to affirm his Jewish identity, and why now as he was in the midst of chemotherapy with a bleak prognosis. John, pointed to a phrase in the *v'ahavtah*, which his daughter Blair had been studying for her Bat Mitzvah. "*V'shinantam lvanecha*, and you shall impress these words upon your children" the passage proclaimed. John who knew he was dying, turned to me and explained, "so they [his children] will never forget how important being Jewish is to me." John died before he could hear his daughter chant those words at her bat mitzvah, but their memory echoes through his family, community and my rabbinate to this very day.

Every rabbi who has been privileged to study with Jews by Choice (I prefer the term to conversion) has a story like this, and many more. The single adult who arrives at synagogue one Shabbat and lingers after the oneg to tell a story of newly discovered affinity for Judaism, how they have always felt something missing in their religious identity and Judaism is that missing piece. The fiancée who has spent years attending seders and shabbatot with the Jewish partner's family and who was welcomed with such open arms that they feel the embrace of Judaism. The non-Jewish spouse who *schleps* their child to bar mitzvah tutoring each week and hears in the lessons with the cantor a call that speaks to their soul. My colleagues I am sure would agree that one of the most inspiring and fulfilling aspects of our calling is to guide individuals as they seek to enter the Jewish people. Every student that I study with amazes and astounds me, because through their eyes I see Judaism as when one first discovers the love of their life, full of hope, promise, wonder, fascinating and awe.

Fortunately I did not have to wait to become a rabbi to observe the profound impact choosing to be Jewish can have on another person. I guess you could say, making Jews is the family business. My maternal grandmother Vera Kipnis (z"l) was the first private conversion tutor in the San Francisco Bay Area more than 70 years ago. She tutored students for their studies with rabbis from across the movements and for as long as I can remember my mom, Patti Moskovitz can continued the work that my grandmother began. My mother tutored her students out of our home, believing that Judaism was dished out with cookies, soups and sandwiches as much as it was with Torah, Talmud and tradition. Her students were frequent guests at our Shabbat table and held a place of honor every year at our family seder – where if our family singing didn't scare them away, we know our people had them hooked for good. Weekly I would come home from school to hear a student crying tears of

joy as they uncovered a part of their soul that previous religion, faith or lack there of could not touch.

With every student my family has worked with through the years, the question lays before me, if I were born another religion would I choose as they do to study and become Jewish? Could I leave family and traditions I have known since birth? Could I say to parents and grandparents, as the biblical Ruth does in this week's reading for Shavuoth, "Your people shall be my people, your God shall be my God, where you go I will go."?

Modern life is already so packed with competing priorities and demands; why add to those the problems and challenges of leaving one's family of faith and tradition to cling to another? And not just any faith, but Judaism a small, minority community fraught at time with internal *tzuris* and an external experience of contempt in the eyes of so many. Would I be Jewish if I didn't have to be?

Yes even Rabbis ponder this existential question, maybe we ponder it more than others as daily we see the Joys and Oys of Jewish life. We wonder about the families that come in and out of synagogue after B'nai Mitzvah like it is a revolving door – one day, one generation will they not come back? We look at the survivors and children of survivors who sit uncomfortably in synagogue – endured horrors we cannot even begin to understand – what is the source of their faith? We counsel the families who use Judaism and Jewish practice as a wedge between them, not eating in each other's homes or *davening* in each other's *shuls*, or attending each other's funerals. Then there is synagogue politics, the high cost of being Jewish and the reality that at any given time in history someone is out to wipe us off the face of the earth. And yet in the face of all that, in spite of all of that in walks a successful, accomplished, intelligent and thoughtful adult who says simply but profoundly, "Rabbi, I want to become Jewish." We should all be so fortunate to see Judaism through the eyes of one who could chose to be anything else, anything other but instead chooses this path, this people, this faith. *V'shinantam l'vanacha*, indeed! The Jew by Choice impresses in so many ways, on their children for sure, but hopefully on each and every one of us, old and young alike.