WHY I LOVE JEWS BY CHOICE
RABBI DAN MOSKOVITZ

The first conversion I ever 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), which he would listen to between our biweekly visits, and he would slowly write questions and responses for our in-person meetings.

I was a student rabbi, traveling 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 *Ve'ahavta*, which his daughter Blair had been studying for her bat mitzvah. *"V'shinantam l'vanecha"* — "and you shall impress these words upon your children," the passage proclaims. 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 has a story like this and many more. At Shavuot, as we remember the story of Ruth, the first convert, we also remember that every student who comes to us for conversion is different and has a unique and very personal story, but three paths to Judaism seem to be the most frequently traveled.

One is that of the spiritual seekers looking to fill a void in their spiritual identity that either their religion of birth or life experience has not satisfied. I witnessed a powerful example of this in Chuck, a hard-nosed Korean War veteran and former POW who came to me determined to become a Jew.

Chuck was that rare blend of scholar-soldier, an avid reader of philosophy and theology by night, as he trained with his Green Beret unit by day. After being captured behind enemy lines and tortured in a Korean POW camp, from which he later escaped, Chuck found himself pondering why people can be so filled with hatred and violence toward one another. Though not a pacifist, Chuck, like many veterans, saw a pointlessness to war and conflict that was hard to dispute, given all he had been through on the battlefield. It was during his period of attempting to reconcile his experiences that he started to reread the Bible with fresh eyes. He told

me the only part that made sense to him was the Old Testament. And so, when he came to me, we started by studying the commentaries and Talmud (Jewish law). One day he turned to me, fixed me with a gaze I am sure he reserved for troops under his command, and said, "This is it, this is the only system that makes sense; this is the path toward peace."

I didn't know if I should convert him or salute; I guess in the end I did both.

A second path to becoming Jewish is often blazed by the bar/bat mitzvah-aged child of a non-Jewish parent. As a Reform rabbi, about 30 percent of my congregation at Temple Judea in Tarzana is made up of interfaith families. Many times over the years, the non-Jewish parent of a bar/bat mitzvah student has approached me or my colleagues about conversion as their child prepares to be called to the Torah.

They are sparked by the warmth of Jewish tradition, the idea of wanting spiritual continuity in their family or, quite powerfully, because they are learning alongside their child about the beauty and relevance of Judaism. Their process reinforces my belief in the progressive Jewish approach to interfaith couples: By holding the door open to chuppah, and participation in synagogue life, we create the possibility that they — through their children's studies, no less — will find a path to Jewish identity. I cannot begin to describe the feeling of standing on the bimah as the now-Jewish parent chants the Torah blessing for the first time before the child reads his or her bar/bat mitzvah portion.

A third path, which may be viewed by some as prototypical, is when the non-Jewish partner of an engaged couple comes to me for their wedding. While for me, conversion is not a precondition for doing their wedding, I do encourage and promote it. Miraculously, those who choose to enter the Jewish people around the

time they enter into marriage often create two Jews, not one, in the process. The Jew by Choice is filled with a passion and need to express his or her new Jewish identity in very religious/symbolic ways, and the spouse who was born Jewish experiences Judaism with a fresh set of eyes. Through the eyes of their beloved, they see things they've missed, or never encountered as a child growing up in the religion. Suddenly, it is the Jew by Choice who is insisting they light Shabbat candles, attend services regularly and become involved in the synagogue. Presently, some of the most active couples in our congregation have followed this path.

One of my favourite examples is the story of Joshua and Christina (not their real names). Joshua was born in Israel and raised in the United States; prior to meeting Christina, his bar mitzvah was pretty much the first and last time he stepped foot in a synagogue. When he called looking for a rabbi for his wedding, Joshua proudly identified himself as a cultural Jew and explained that

having Jewish wedding was important to him only as a way to honor the memory of his mother.

He gave me clear instructions over the phone before we met not to make the ceremony too Jewish. His fiancee, Christina, was raised Mennonite in the Midwest, and Joshua was one of the few Jewish people she had ever spoken with. She grew up with parents who were devout members of their church, but, from the time she was a teenager, she had always felt something missing in her faith and did not practice their beliefs.

In our monthly meetings about the wedding, Christina asked more and more questions about Judaism, which, to Joshua's credit, he did not dismiss. One day, she asked if she could start meeting with me one on one. Those meetings led to her enrolling in an introduction to Judaism class, which Joshua decided to attend with her so they could spend more time together (they were newlyweds, after all). At the end of the course she

converted, and now they come together to synagogue nearly every Shabbat. Joshua is part of our weekly Torah study and sits on a number of temple committees, and Christina helps facilitate our young couples group and mentors others in the conversion process. A few months ago, I was privileged to name their daughter in our sanctuary. In her young life, their child has already been to synagogue more than Joshua had been in the 20 years before he met Christina.

It is because of stories like these that rabbis often say that one of the most inspiring and fulfilling aspects of our calling is to work with Jews by Choice. Every student we study with amazes and astounds us because, through their eyes, we see Judaism as something new, full of hope, promise, wonder, fascination and awe.

I did not have to wait to become a rabbi to observe the profound impact that choosing to be Jewish can have on another person. I guess you could say that making Jews

is our family business. My maternal grandmother, Vera Kipnis, became 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, continued the work that my grandmother began. My mother tutored students in our home, believing that Judaism was dished out with cookies, soups and sandwiches as much as through 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 knew our people had them hooked for good. In any given week, I would come home from school to witness a student crying tears of joy as he or she uncovered a part of the soul that previous religion, faith or lack thereof could not touch.

With every student my family has worked with through the years, the question lay before me: If I were born into another religion, would I have chosen to study and become Jewish? Could I leave behind family heritage 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 Shavuot, "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 times with internal tsuris 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 even 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, who 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 one another's homes or davening in one another's shuls, or attending one another's funerals. Then there are the 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 someone who could chose to be anything else, anything other, but instead chooses this path, this people, this faith.

V'shinantam l'vanecha, 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.