

Conversion to Judaism

frequently asked questions

interfaithfamily

Supporting Interfaith Families Exploring Jewish Life

artist: aaron douglas (1899-1979), "the creation"

A: **Q:** Does Judaism seek converts?

A: In the Greco-Roman era, thousands converted to Judaism. This ended with the fall of the Roman Empire, when Jews who sought converts were sentenced to death. Today, all branches (denominations) of Judaism welcome those who sincerely choose Judaism, whether it is because they have fallen in love with Judaism or with a Jewish partner.

A: **Q:** Why would someone convert?

A: Each individual has his or her own reasons for converting. You may be on a spiritual search and feel a connection to Jewish teachings or culture. You may want to share your partner's religion. Perhaps you have decided to convert to Judaism so that your family will have the same religion and you want to learn along with your children. Others find Judaism through a college course or friends. For some, choosing Judaism feels like "coming home."

A: **Q:** How do I know if Judaism is right for me?

A: Choosing a new religion is a serious decision and needs to be given time and attention. Learn as much as you can about Judaism and Jewish culture from friends, lectures, museum exhibits and classes on basic Judaism. As you learn, try out Jewish customs and rituals and see how they fit. Check out the synagogues in your area and attend services. You will find a variety of styles and substantial differences in level of formality, length of worship service, music and rabbinic leadership as you explore the different Jewish denominations.

Q: If I take a basic Judaism class at a synagogue, will I be expected to convert?

A: No, you will find a mixture of those who have decided to convert, those who are curious and exploring Judaism, as well as Jews by birth who are interested in learning more about their religion. Interfaith couples often attend to learn together. There are no assumptions or expectations that the students will convert.

Q: If I become a Jew, how will I relate to my family?

A: Conversion is not meant to erase your memories or the strong connections to family and friends. Although some family members may initially be hurt or confused by this decision, they can be reassured by your clarity that you are not abandoning them or their values. Even though you will not share the same religious beliefs, that does not mean you cannot share holidays. Including your family of origin in Jewish holidays and visiting them to share their holidays can help them to learn about Judaism and demonstrate that different religions need not cause a rift between you.

Q: If I decide Judaism is for me, what do I do to become a Jew?

A: Everyone who converts to Judaism does so with the help of a rabbi. You will want to meet with several rabbis that you like, after seeing them at worship services or at a class. The rabbi you select will be your teacher and your guide into Judaism, supporting you throughout the lengthy conversion process, so take your time as you make your choice.

Although rabbis' approaches vary, most will require at least one year of study, during which you will attend worship services. You will witness Jewish lifecycle rituals such as baby namings and bar and bat mitzvah ceremonies. You may also witness a congregation's welcoming rituals for new Jews. You will start incorporating Jewish practices and customs into

your home life, as so much of Jewish celebration takes place around a table full of food! Since Judaism is also a culture, you will want to listen to Jewish music, read Jewish literature and see Jewish art and films.

Q: How will I know when I am ready to convert?

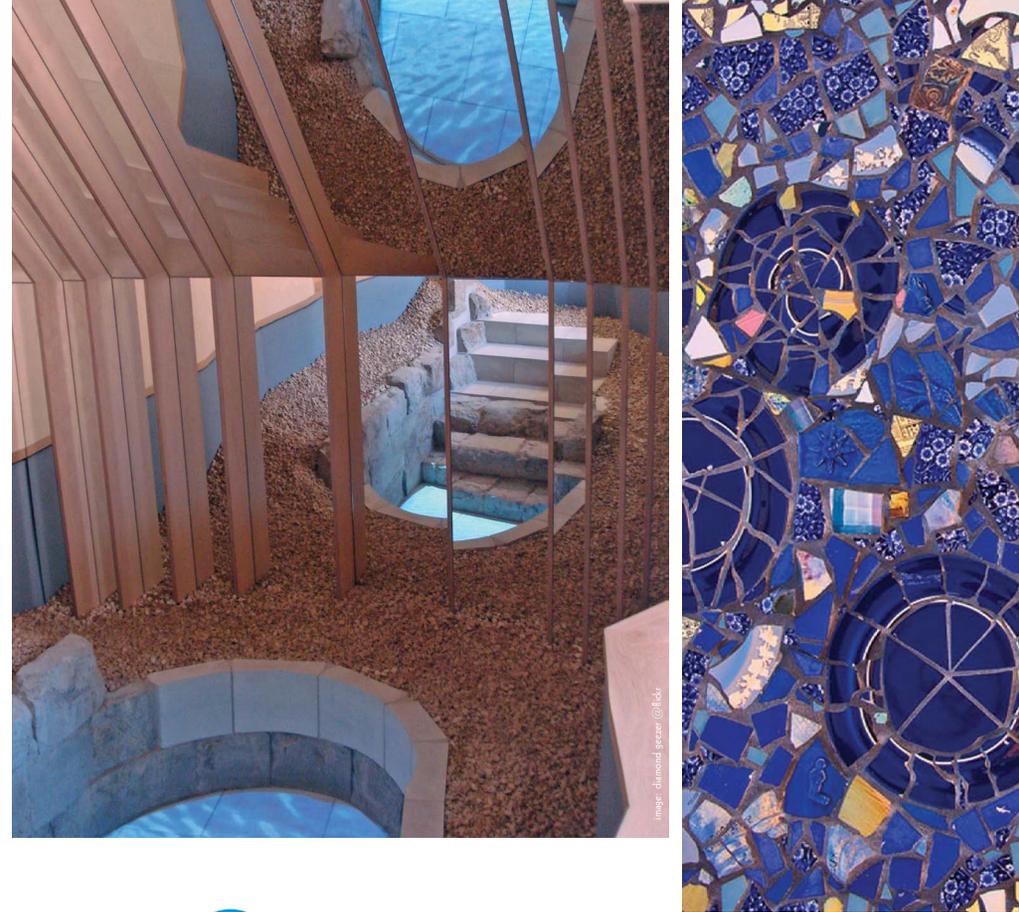
A: After months or years of thought, study, argument, doubt and growth, you and your rabbi will agree that you are ready to make a lifetime of Jewish choices. Both men and women will need to choose a Hebrew name. This name will be used when you are called to read from the Torah, when you are married (if you are not already) and when you die. It does not replace the name you have; it is an additional name that identifies you as a Jew.

Q: What is the conversion ceremony?

A: According to Jewish law, it takes more than a verbal commitment to become a Jew. There are three very personal rituals for men, two for women: immersion in a ritual bath (*mikveh*), the covenant of circumcision (*brit milah*) for men and appearing before a rabbinical court (*beit din*). These acts of renewal and rebirth have a power that is incomprehensible before and hard to describe afterwards. Many converts describe the immersion in the *mikveh* as “transformative.”

Men who are already circumcised undergo a symbolic circumcision in which a drop of blood is drawn. It is known as *hatafat dam brit* (covenant of a drop of blood). Men who have undergone this voice no regrets for a ritual that marks them as a Jew.

Since Judaism is a communal religious system, you cannot become a Jew until other Jews say that you are. When you and your rabbi decide you are ready, the rabbi will convene a religious court of three rabbis or Jewish leaders (*beit din*) who will confirm that you are committed to conversion and have followed a course of study. You will be asked a series of questions about your commitment to Judaism and the Jewish people. This is not an exam; very rarely are people turned away, and only when they confess reservations about becoming Jewish. Then you will immerse in a *mikveh* (ritual bath) as Jews by Choice have done for thousands of years.



Q: Are there different requirements for conversion among the denominations?

A: The different views of the denominations rest on their differing views of Jewish law (*halakhah*). Jewish law mandates the process of conversion to include rabbinically-supervised rituals of immersion, circumcision and a sincere commitment to follow the commandments (*mitzvot*) of the Torah. According to halakhah, any person born to a Jewish mother is a Jew (this designation is known as “matrilineal descent”). The Reform and Reconstructionist denominations also recognize as Jewish those born to a Jewish father (“patrilineal descent”).

Some of the Jewish denominations approach halakhah as an evolving system that has changed, and will continue to change, in response to human history. This means that the Conservative, Reconstructionist, Reform and Renewal movements have all modified the requirements for conversion in some way.

Orthodox Judaism considers halakhah to be the word of God. Changes to halakhah tend to happen more gradually than in other denominations. Currently, there is a trend for those changes to be more stringent than the previous iteration, in contrast to the other denominations' changes. In some cases, the Orthodox community will not recognize as Jews those who converted under the guidance of other denominations.

If being recognized as Jewish by all denominations is important to you, discuss the issue with your rabbi. They might have practical solutions, like ensuring that you have a certificate documenting your immersion, circumcision and appearance before the rabbinical court, or suggest you work jointly with a rabbi from another denomination. Although there may be disagreements among the denominations, we are all part of the larger Jewish family known as *k'lal yisrael*.



Q: What will be the attitude of other Jews once I convert?

A: Anyone can become a Jew by converting. Once someone converts, they become a Jew in every regard. The tradition teaches that Jews by Choice are even more beloved by God for choosing to be Jewish. Most Jews welcome wholeheartedly those who choose Judaism.

Conversion is more common today than ever before. Increasingly, Jewish families count Jews by Choice among their nearest and dearest, and many converts are in leadership positions in synagogues and organizations.

Some Jews by Choice have been told that conversion isn't enough – to be Jewish one must be born Jewish. Remember that Judaism not only welcomes converts, we are taught not to “out” someone as a convert once they have finished the process for they are as Jewish as any other Jew after having gone through the conversion.

Q: How do I tell other people about my conversion to Judaism?

A: Some Jews by Choice take great pride in their decision and can't wait to tell old friends and new ones. Others find that they resent being identified as a convert. Use your own comfort levels as a guide.

Some synagogues treat conversion like all other lifecycle events, publishing announcements and having a congregational ceremony of welcome for the new members of the community. Others choose to keep conversions private. Your rabbi will do their best to do what you choose.

Q: How can I celebrate my conversion?

A: You may choose to bring a few family members or close friends to the mikveh to share your joy. You may be called up to the Torah for a blessing, give a short talk about your new Hebrew name or just be introduced as the newest Jew in the community.

If you do “go public” you will certainly inspire Jews with your commitment to Judaism and remind people who are not Jewish that there is an open door to Judaism for them if and when they want to enter. People who have participated in this formal, public affirmation report that the response from the congregation has been overwhelmingly positive and moving.

It's true that converting to Judaism is a challenge, but it's also an amazing process of personal and spiritual growth and joy. When you're ready, the Jewish community stands ready to welcome you and wish you a hearty *mazel tov* - congratulations!



InterfaithFamily's mission is to empower people in interfaith relationships— individuals, couples, families and their children— to make Jewish choices, and to encourage Jewish communities to welcome them.

InterfaithFamily offers consultation and resources for synagogues, agencies and schools of all affiliations to assist them in their welcome and engagement of interfaith families and all those who are interested in exploring Judaism.

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