

Doing Judaism: A Convert's Confession

By Joachim I. Krueger

In Jerry Seinfeld's world, a Catholic dentist with a humorous disposition converted to Judaism. Soon after, he not only joked about the Holy Father, but also about Jewish mothers. Seinfeld confessed to the dentist's former priest that conversion for the sake of jokes was offensive to him. Not as a Jew, but as a comedian.

Conversions have unexpected consequences, not only for the converts themselves, but also for those around them. For a communal religion, that should be so. My relatives are befuddled when I spice my German-accented speech with Yiddish or Hebrew fragments.

If I didn't convert for the jokes or the jargon, why did I do it? The short answer is that I converted for my kids.

The brief history is this: After moving to Rhode Island from Berlin in 1991, I lived alone on the East Side of Providence. My friend and neighbor, the late Lee Bergman, introduced me to her friend Harriet Israel. In turn, Harriet introduced me to her granddaughter. Jill was a reluctant date, but Harriet persisted. "If you don't go out with him, I will." It was a victory of matchmaking. Expressing the mainstream Jewish attitude, Jill never asked me to convert. But she insisted that the kids would be Jewish at a time when they were a mere glimmer in my eye. "Let me think about that, Sweetie," was my response. "I'll get back to you." The idea percolated in my mind. A few months later, and without being able to account for my new attitude, I just knew that having Jewish children would be fine.

We had a beautiful Jewish wedding in

1995, complete with *chuppah* and broken glass. Our Rabbi, Paul Levenson, of Brookline, Mass., only made one small alteration to the vows—referring to the laws of God instead of the laws of Moses and the people of Israel. This was a small twist, which I took as evidence of Jewish pragmatism.

Lauren was born in 1996 and Stephanie in 1999. Their naming ceremonies affirmed their Jewishness. But then what? As they grew older, I kept remembering my promise to have Jewish children, and

Then it hit me. I would become Jewish. It was a kind of forehead-slapping mind-flash. It all made sense. Why hadn't I thought of it before? A conversion would bond me to my family in ways going beyond the wonderful ties we are enjoying anyway...

I realized that "having" Jewish children meant "raising" Jewish children. Something had to be done, and Jill shouldn't have to do it alone. On Dec. 17, 2001, Stephanie fell and broke her front teeth. After the initial panic had died down and an able pediatric dentist (not Seinfeld's) had worked a minor miracle 'bonding' Steffie's teeth, I took a walk around my office building. Then it hit me. I would become Jewish. It was a kind of forehead-slapping mind-flash. It all made sense. Why hadn't I thought of it before? A con-

version would bond me to my family in ways going beyond the wonderful ties we are enjoying anyway; it would authenticate my Jewish wedding *post hoc*, and it would allow me to do an inside job raising my two Jewish girls.

Thanks to Rabbis Lipman, Gutterman and Blake, I enjoyed a course of study that introduced me to a variety of Jewish themes, from literature to liturgy. The immersion in the Mikvah and the holding of the Torah scroll marked the ritual fulfillment of what had been set in motion 15 months earlier.

To me, being a Jew remains a process of becoming a Jew. The cornerstones of my approach are reading, reading, reading, and deepening my understanding of Shabbat. And then there are the kids. When I said that I would raise them to be Jewish, I was not telling the whole truth. Our education is mutual. When I was a post-Lutheran youth, growing up in the wilds of Westphalia, I discovered a paperback my father had left on the coffee table. It was a collection of satires by the Israeli writer Ephraim Kishon. Loosely translated (from the Hebrew to English to German and now back to English) its title was *Noah's Ark, Economy Class*. Kishon (nee Hofmann), whose native language is Hungarian, noted that Hebrew is the only mother language that mothers learn from their children. Lauren and Stephanie understand this. They know that come next Hanukkah, Daddy will again see the writing on the dreidel—and ask them what it means.

Joachim I. Krueger is a professor of psychology at Brown University.

Letters

Save the Bookmobile program for the elderly

I am appalled that this Jewish community has cut the Bookmobile program to the elderly in assisted living facilities. It seems shameful that this community, which supports the Federation and other Jewish causes so well, has allowed such a worthy cause to "grind to a halt" for lack of funds. It does seem that a fundraiser for this sole purpose — one sponsored by some Jewish agency, could certainly raise suffi-

as well not yet tapped.

Also, I was appalled by the self-righteous tone of the letter by Hanna Reich Berman on the subject of the Lev/Smith wedding. Not only did I find the letter unkind and in absolute poor taste, but I thoroughly disagree that we can advance the Jewish cause by a form of Jewish coercion which she seems to advocate. My Jewish religion never taught me such

When our children were dating, we never placed any constraints on who they should associate with. It so happened they both married Jewish mates. What we advocated was that it was easier to marry within one's religion but that it was far more important to marry for true mutual love and caring. We still think it is far more important for a good life than fostering Jewish marriages — no matter what.

Clare Rosenberg