

**WHO IS A JEW?
Yom Kippur Eve
September 22, 2015**

There was a strange case that reached the Supreme Court in Israel in 1962. A Christian Monk applied for Israeli citizenship under the Law of Return.

The Law of Return was established early in Israel's statehood to make certain the every Jew, regardless of previous nationality, could automatically become an Israeli citizen. Many Jews in Europe became stateless as a result of the war. The Law of Return was based on who one's parents or grandparents were. In fact, these categories ironically came right from the Nazi Nuremberg Laws.

Oswald Rufeisen was a Polish Jew, who survived the Holocaust. On his return to his own town after the war, he converted to Christianity and became a Carmelite monk. He ultimately became the head of the Carmelite monastery in Haifa, under the name of Brother Daniel.

The controversy about the Brother Daniel case raged in Israel and in the rest of the world Jewish community, until it was finally resolved by the Court. It ruled that apostates, those who formally left Judaism are excluded from the Law of Return.

The argument about “Who Is A Jew?” quieted down, until this year. The matter seemed to be resolved. We thought we knew who is a Jew. But now there are new questions.

The cause of the new discussion was an unexpected one: A Survey of Religions in America by the Pew Foundation.

I. THE PEW FOUNDATION

The Pew Charitable Trust is a Philadelphia based large, multi-faceted charity. It gives away lots of money, mostly in the Philadelphia area. But it also, through its Research Center, does periodic Religious Landscape Studies. They did one in 2014, and the results were published this spring. They interviewed a shade more than 35,000 American adults. 847 of this group identified themselves as Jewish,

Here are some of their findings:

Jews are highly educated. We are the second most educated religious group in America – behind the Hindus. Our college graduation rate is 59 percent.

We are the largest religious non-Christian minority in America. We have risen from 1.7 percent of the US population in 2007 to 1.9 percent in 2014. The denominational breakdown is 44 percent are Reform Jews, 22 percent Conservative, 14 percent Orthodox, 5 percent other movements, and 16 percent, no denomination.

Most of us are White, but not as much as we were in 2007. There seems to be an influx of Latino, Asia-Americans and Blacks into Judaism.

AND NOW: the astounding results: 17 percent of us said that we were raised in a religion other than Judaism.

An earlier study of the New York Jewish Community in 2011 showed that of the Jews who participated, 79,000 were adult Jewish converts. **But another 83,000 identified as Jews, even though they reported no Jewish parents or grandparents, nor had they undergone formal conversion.**

Some of these are people who married Jews, but never converted; they live essentially Jewish lives. They identify as Jews.

So, who is a Jew? Is it someone who feels Jewish? Who identifies himself or herself as Jewish? We do know, several generations back, Southern Jewish boys married local Christian girls. Those girls became active in the Jewish community, bore what they thought were Jewish children, became presidents of

the Sisterhood and the Temple. But they never underwent a formal conversion to Judaism.

People who think they are Jewish, but never converted is not an American issue alone. There are also thousands of people from the former Soviet Union who live in Israel. They fled to Israel because of anti-Semitism. They fled because they were Jews.

But they are not considered Jews by the Orthodox controlled Chief Rabbinate, because, according to halacha, their mothers were not Jewish. As a result, they cannot marry in Israel to other Israeli citizens. Israel only has religious weddings. All religious weddings are controlled by the Chief Rabbinate. There are no civil weddings.

So, who IS a Jew? In this our land of freedom, a country essentially free of anti-Semitism, people feel free to identify as anything they choose to. For example, take the case of Rachel Dolezal, the head of the NAACP in Seattle. She called herself African American. She does not have a drop of African-American blood. She was “outed” by her parents as being White.

We, who live in America feel that we can identify as anything that we want to be.

But Jewish tradition is not quite so casual. Or is it?

I. WHO'S IN AND WHO'S OUT

I have long been intrigued by a statement I have heard from some public personalities. The statement is "I am half Jewish"

What does that announcement mean? Does it mean: I have a Jewish-sounding name (whatever that means), but I do not practice Judaism. OR: I am ashamed of having one Jewish parent? OR: I am really not who you think I am? OR: If you are anti-Semitic, you shouldn't apply those prejudices to me. I really don't know what to think. It certainly is a provocative statement.

To my mind, there is no such thing as a half Jew. You are Jewish or you are not. No one should care what degree of kashrut you keep or your frequency of synagogue attendance. At the heart of the matter is how one thinks of himself or herself.

Recently, Professor Steven Cohen, who teaches at NYU and the Hebrew Union College, and Rabbi Joy Levitt, the director of the JCC on the West Side, recently wrote a provocative article called "Marry a Jew and You're One of Us."

In that article, they point out that in ancient times, there was no such thing as formal conversion. Women such as Sarah, Rebecca, Leah and Rachel became Jews because they married their Jewish husbands.

In a free society, people can live as they please. Probably at no other time in the Jewish experience do we have so many people wanting to be Jews.

Cohen and Levitt remind us of the biblical category of “ger toshav,” which is usually translated as resident alien. They and I prefer the term “fellow traveler.”

Several weeks ago, we were invited as house guests in the country at the home of a psychiatrist friend, who has a prominent position in New York State mental health circles. He was raised as a Christian in the South. He told me that he really wanted to be Jewish, and that he felt that he was Jewish..

This is probably the first time in Jewish history that people, without any Jewish roots, want to be Jewish. This is a

phenomenon that our grandparents would have difficult in understanding. And so do the religious officials in Israel.

II. TOWARD A NEW AMERICAN JEWISH WAY

Jews were persecuted in numerous ways for centuries. In particular, those who survived the Holocaust await a new Holocaust at every turn. Those whose origins are in 19th century Germany frequently cannot get over the demise of German Jewry. The seemingly vital Jewish life in Germany just fell apart. The Israeli writer Amos Elon even wrote a book about those two hundred years called *The Pity Of It All*.

The world is not the same today as it was 100 years ago, or 200 years ago. Yet, we behave as if it were. We no longer need to be defensive because we are Jews. Pogroms are not around the corner. We should have no fear of welcoming people who want to be part of the Jewish experience.

I believe that we must begin to reach out and welcome strangers to Judaism. With open arms. Our doors must be open. The welcome mat needs to be out.

I am not suggesting Mormon proselytism. I am not expecting armies of Jewish young people going door to door seeking converts.

I *am* talking about changing our attitudes to strangers. We need to cast aside the fears of anti-Semitism if we openly welcome all those who want to become part of our family.

How much the more so with those who are already in our midst. Intermarried couples need to be welcomed in. Fully, with whole hearts. Children of intermarried couples need to feel fully part of the Jewish community. No one should ever say again, "I am half Jewish."

How many more people are there out there who feel Jewish and who are not welcomed in? Only how we behave will tell us the answer.

I want more and more people to declare themselves "I am Jewish!"

CONCLUSION

We Jews have been a boon to civilization in the world. Our values, our way of looking at the world, have produced some of the greatest minds the world has ever known. Think of science without Jews. Or music. Or art. Or technology.

We should be welcoming people into our fold, our universe, our way of thinking. The world would be a far better place than it is now.

In this new year, let us commit ourselves to opening our hearts and our doors to all those who wish to join us.

We have too much to offer to close anyone out.