

Conversion

THINGS TO THINK ABOUT

Throughout the history of Judaism, conversion has been permitted. During the early rabbinic period, conversion was frequently extolled. Such a positive attitude is reflected in the writings of the historian Josephus who describes the openness of Hellenistic Judaism to converts. However, with the rise of Christianity, Jews ceased their missionizing activities. Nonetheless, during the Talmudic and post-Talmudic period, conversion occasionally, took place in accordance with rabbinic law. In time the regulations concerning conversion were drawn together by the halakhist Joseph Caro in his *Code of Jewish Law*. Here the requirements for conversion are laid down. When individuals present themselves as candidates for conversion, they are asked if they realize that Jews have been subject to discrimination and persecution. If these individuals reply that they are aware of such hostility, they are to be accepted. The basic principles of the faith are explained at length, and candidates are then informed of the punishments involved in violating God's commandments as well as the rewards for abiding by the covenant.

Concerning the candidate's motives, the *Code of Jewish Law* states that a person should be examined to ascertain if he is motivated by the desire to gain financially or socially. In addition, it should be determined whether the candidate wishes to marry a Jewish woman or a Jewish man. If no unethical motive is discovered, the candidate is told how difficult it is to follow Jewish law. If the candidate goes through all this and is not dissuaded, and if the person's motives seem genuine and heart-felt, then such a person can be accepted. Once a male convert is circumcised and ritually immersed, he becomes part of the community. For a woman, only ritual immersion is required. Until the present day this formal procedure served as the

vehicle whereby gentiles could be accepted into the faith. In non-Orthodox branches of Judaism, however, many of these features have been discarded, and today a wide variety of conversion procedures are followed in the different movements. Such diversity has given rise to general confusion about the status of these converts. Orthodox Judaism regards only its own converts as Jews, whereas the other branches of the faith generally recognize each other's converts. In considering such diversity of practice, you need to ask yourself whether you think the Orthodox are right in believing that there is only one legitimate way that one can become a Jew.

THINGS TO DO

- Go to Google.com. Look for websites dealing with Jewish conversion, such as <www.convert.org>.
- Go to Amazon.com. Search for books dealing with Jewish conversion.
- If possible, see if you can speak to Jewish converts about their experiences. You will need to ask a local rabbi for advice about whom to contact.

TIPS FOR TEACHERS

- If possible, ask a local rabbi to come to your class to explain about Jewish conversion.
- Invite a Jewish convert to speak to your class about his or her experiences of Judaism. You will need to contact a local rabbi for help in arranging this.

- Encourage your students to write a play about Jewish conversion. They should focus on some of the dilemmas faced by converts. For information about this topic, go to Google.com and look for websites dealing with conversion.