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BUILDING COMMUNITIES OF BELONGING:

Jewish Identity, Conversion, Intermarriage, and Adjacency

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Across North America, Jewish communities are encountering unprecedented diversity in the ways individuals connect to Jewish identity, practice, and peoplehood. Jews by birth, Jews by choice, and Jews by affiliation express their Jewishness and their connection to Jews and Jewish life through a wide range of behaviors, commitments, and relationships. These complex forms of identity and connection frequently intersect with formal questions of status and communal standing, creating opportunities for inclusion as well as moments of confusion, tension, and pastoral challenge.

Building Communities of Belonging offers a comprehensive framework for Jewish communities seeking to understand and respond thoughtfully to the evolving realities of Jewish identity, Jewish status, and communal belonging in North America. Drawing on historical analysis, contemporary sociological data, and intensive research by the Shalom Hartman Institute's North American Jewish Identity research seminar, this document equips interested communities with information and discussion tools to evaluate and refine their policies around **conversion, intermarriage, and Jewish adjacency** (informal affiliation).

Building Communities of Belonging presents **options rather than prescriptive answers**. No single policy or practice is appropriate for all communities. The text offers historical

context from the biblical period through the contemporary to illuminate the many ways Jews have understood peoplehood, boundary-setting, and communal responsibility across time. This historical grounding encourages today's leaders to approach their own assumptions with humility and curiosity, recognizing the legitimacy of multiple pathways and practices grounded in Jewish tradition.

Ultimately, *Building Communities of Belonging* aims to support communal leaders in fostering open, informed, and thoughtful conversations. The document empowers

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rabbis, educators, and Jewish professionals to better understand the constituencies they serve; discern the goals, concerns, and lived experiences of those navigating Jewish identity from various starting points; and consider how their own policies and practices can strengthen or hinder belonging.

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INTRODUCTION

The Purpose of *Building Communities of Belonging*

The North American Jewish community has changed dramatically over the last few decades, prompting many local Jewish communities and organizations to question whether they are actually as welcoming and inclusive as they want to be and to turn a critical eye toward their policies and practices around Jewish identity, status, and/or community membership. They are asking:

- Are the community's policies and practices serving the community well?
- Are the community's policies and practices informed by and responsive to recent demographic shifts?
- Are the community's policies and practices grounded in facts, or in assumptions of a bygone era?
- Should the community's current policies and practices be preserved or modified, and why?

Building Communities of Belonging provides information, historical context, and discussion questions designed to serve as a jumping off point for Jewish communities, groups, and organizations developing or re-evaluating their policies and practices regarding **three central topics** related to Jewish identity, status, and community membership:

- Forms of incorporation into the Jewish community (including conversion)
- Inter marriage
- Informal modes of affiliation (referred to below as Jewish adjacency)

While most community leaders are familiar with the general *halakhah* on these topics, they are often unaware of the way *halakhah* has played out in different historical circumstances over the centuries, and we see a wide variety of policies and practices across the Jewish world today, even within individual denominations.

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Conversion, Intermarriage, Informal Affiliation: Options, Not Answers

The Shalom Hartman Institute believes that learning how Jewish communities, past and present, have addressed questions of Jewish identity empowers communities to make choices that meet their needs. For this reason, *Building Communities of Belonging* provides historical annotations. This is not to harken back to any one model or practice as the most original or authentic. Instead, we seek to encourage a healthy humility regarding our own certainties and to raise awareness of the viability of alternative approaches.

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The Shalom Hartman Institute aims to provide communities with *options*, rather than fixed *answers*, recognizing that what is unacceptable to one community may be exactly what another needs to confront the challenges and opportunities it faces.

Jewish uniformity is not a prerequisite for Jewish unity. Our hope is that the materials presented in this document will enable communities to lead conversations that help them arrive at policies and practices around conversion, intermarriage, and informal affiliations that meet their needs and strengthen their community. We also recognize that many communities are satisfied with their current policies. This document is intended not to disrupt any community but rather to support open discussions that might help a community identify and then address tensions around existing policies.

All members of a community or congregation, or their leaders (e.g., rabbis, Jewish professionals, lay leaders, etc.), can participate in developing or re-evaluating policies and practices. This document offers a way to structure discussions among an entire congregation, community, or organization or among a small group of leaders.

It should be noted that this document is not addressed to individuals who are thinking about conversion, intermarriage, or an informal mode of affiliation with the Jewish community. Nor is it addressed to professionals who counsel or instruct those contemplating or undergoing conversion, entering an intermarriage, or establishing an informal affiliation with the Jewish community. There are many excellent resources that can assist people in these circumstances and roles, and many are listed in the [Bibliography](#).

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The Structure of *Building Communities of Belonging*

This document consists of the following sections and materials:

Part A, Identity, Status, and Standing, sets the stage by defining three key terms as they pertain to the Jewish community: identity, status, and standing.

Part B, Jewish Identity and its Complications, explores the complexity of Jewish identity through a series of concrete scenarios.

Part C, Conversion, Intermarriage, and Affiliation, presents general information, historical context, and discussion questions designed to help groups explore three topics relating to Jewish identity, status, and group membership in an informed way: Jewish status by birth and by some form of incorporation into the community, including conversion; intermarriage between Jews and non-Jews; and Jewish adjacency (informal affiliation).

This is followed by Concluding Remarks, Discussion Questions, and Endnotes. A bibliography and list of resources is [available separately](#).

The Research Behind *Building Communities of Belonging*

This document reflects two years of research by members of the North American Jewish Identity research seminar of the Shalom Hartman Institute's Kogod Research Center for Contemporary Jewish Thought. Senior Research Fellow Dr. Christine Hayes is the lead author with support provided by other seminar members. The research included primary sources, published research, interviews with rabbis and other communal leaders, and other sources.

The Recommended Use of *Building Communities of Belonging*

The materials in this document might be discussed over four or five sessions, ranging from 90 to 120 minutes each. More specifically, we recommend that Parts A and B be

discussed either together in a single session or in two separate sessions, and that each of the three topics in Part C be the focus of a single session.

Terminology

Unfortunately, there is no universally accepted term for a person who is not Jewish, and all of the terms we use are imperfect. Some who are not Jewish are accurately described with reference to another religion (e.g., a Christian, a Muslim, a Buddhist), but many individuals who are not Jewish do not ascribe to any religious tradition and would take offense at being identified with a religious label. The terms “gentile” and “non-Jew” are viewed positively by some and negatively by others for various reasons. Though no terminology is perfect or universally accepted, for the sake of clarity and consistency, in this document we use the term non-Jew—and where necessary, non-native-born Jew—to describe a person who is not Jewish. However, when discussing biblical and ancient Jewish sources, we often use the more historically accurate terms Israelite and non-Israelites.

Just as there is no universally accepted term for a person who is not Jewish, there are no universally accepted terms for distinguishing among various kinds of individuals who are not Jewish but have different relationships with and attitudes toward the Jewish people. Some persons who are not Jewish have no

knowledge of or experience with Jews, Jewish culture, or Jewish religion while others are extremely knowledgeable and even deeply engaged with or committed to Jewish individuals, community, culture, or religion. We refer to persons who are not Jewish by

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birth or conversion, but who are connected with or participate in Jewish community or Jewish life, as Jewishly affiliated or Jewish adjacent.

In general, one should not presume to know how an individual who is not Jewish or who is Jewish by choice will respond to the various labels used to describe them. Ideally, when addressing or speaking about such persons, one should attempt to ascertain preferences without being intrusive.

A. IDENTITY, STATUS, AND STANDING

The Complex Nature of Jewish Identity

Jewish identity, both today and historically, is uniquely complex and multi-dimensional:

On the one hand, Jews constitute a people (*Am Yisrael* or *B'nai Yisrael* in biblical terms) or ethnic group defined by a mix of biological and cultural factors that, for individuals, especially in modern times, may or may not include religious practice and belief.

On the other hand, since the rise of Christianity, Judaism has increasingly been classified as a religion defined by a set of practices and beliefs that could be adopted by persons with no biological or cultural connection to the community. In modern times, some Jewish groups have stressed religious beliefs and practice as the primary characteristic of Jewish identity.

This complexity makes it notoriously difficult to answer the question “Who is a Jew?” In short, is a Jew a member of the Jewish people (regardless of practice or belief) or a member of the religious culture known today as Judaism (regardless of biological descent)?

Any attempt to answer the question “Who is a Jew?” must first determine whether Jewish identity refers to membership in a people, membership in a religion, or both. Only then can we define the criteria by which a person attains and preserves their identity as a Jew.

But who gets to decide these questions, and for whom do they decide? Jewish law (*halakhah*) offers a set of answers to these questions. Over the centuries, however, different halakhic authorities have generated different halakhic standards that have then been accepted by different communities. Today, no single halakhic definition of Jewish identity is accepted by all Jews and Jewish communities. Even within communities governed by a common halakhic definition, disagreement can arise when applying that definition to individual cases and exceptional circumstances.¹

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- How do you define Jewish identity and why?
- How does your community, congregation, or organization define Jewish identity and why?
- Are different definitions of Jewish identity relevant in different contexts?
- What are the strengths and weaknesses of the definitions of Jewish identity that you adopt and the definitions that you do not adopt?

The Complex Composition of The North American Jewish Community

The North American Jewish community is particularly complex when it comes to questions of Jewish identity. Today, the North American Jewish community includes:

- Persons who identify as Jewish by descent (native-born Jews)
- Persons who identify as Jewish by participation in the religious culture of Judaism whether by inheritance (i.e., it is the religion of their parents) or by choice (i.e., converts)
- Persons who identify as Jewish by virtue of a deep engagement with Jewish ideas, values, culture, institutional life, and/or politics.

Any attempt to answer the question “Who is a Jew?” must first determine whether Jewish identity refers to membership in a people, membership in a religion, or both.

The North American Jewish community also includes:

- Persons who do not identify as Jewish, but who value a connection with a Jewish

individual, a Jewish community, or Jewish tradition (Jewishly affiliated or Jewish-adjacent individuals).² Some of these persons engage in many of the same behaviors as persons who identify as Jewish.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- How do members of your community identify themselves? Which of the identity markers listed above best describe the members of your community?
- Does your community include individuals who might be termed Jewish-adjacent?
- How does the diversity (or lack of diversity) of its members affect your community, congregation, or organization?

Identity Is Not Status Is Not Standing

Identifying as Jewish does not mean that one is recognized as Jewish by others because *identity* is not the same as *status*. As David Ellenson noted:

- Identity reflects the individual’s autonomous understanding of who he or she is, while
- Status is determined and conferred by authorities either external to the group or within the group itself, with no regard for the individual’s own sense of self-definition or subjective sense of identity.³

Like Jewish identity, Jewish status is complex because it, too, can be based on more than one factor.

Like Jewish identity, Jewish status is complex because it, too, can be based on more than one factor. For example, *halakhah* generally recognizes Jewish status by virtue of a person's birth or by virtue of their choice to follow an approved conversion process. Here too, however, different halakhic authorities have generated different standards for Jewish status by descent and conversion. As a result, the Jewish status of a person who self-identifies as Jewish can be affirmed by one community and not by another.

Standing, which refers to a person's reputation within the community, is distinct from both identity and status. For example, a self-identifying Jew whose status is recognized by the larger community may have no interest in maintaining their good standing in a Jewish community. Conversely, a person lacking Jewish identity or Jewish status might be deemed a member in good standing of a particular Jewish community based on their participation, volunteerism, and support. This person might be Jewish adjacent because of their connection to a Jewish individual (i.e., they may be the spouse, parent, sibling,

child, or other relative of a Jewish person) or because of their attachment to Jewish tradition, culture, and community.

Jewish groups have both a need and a right to establish status and standing criteria.

- The major Jewish denominations (Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, and Reconstructionist) as well as independent congregations and a variety of Jewish organizations and institutions employ diverse criteria for conferring Jewish status, regardless of a person's Jewish identity. These criteria determine a person's eligibility for the rights, privileges, and obligations attached to Jewish status.
- Some denominations, congregations, and organizations also establish criteria for recognizing a member's good standing, regardless of their status as a Jew or not. A person lacking Jewish status, and the rights and responsibilities that Jewish status confers, may nevertheless be a member in good standing, possessing a different set of rights and responsibilities that attach to group membership.

- The variety of ways of defining status and standing across the Jewish world provide individuals with many options, but these options can become confusing. We encourage Jewish groups to engage in learning around these issues and to articulate clear standards and explanations that are appropriate for their respective situations.

A person lacking Jewish status, and the rights and responsibilities that Jewish status confers, may nevertheless be a member in good standing, possessing a different set of rights and responsibilities that attach to group membership.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- What criteria does your community, congregation, or organization use to confer Jewish status on individuals? Are there communities, congregations, or organizations that reject your criteria? Why? Do you reject the status criteria of others? Why?
- Does your community, congregation, or organization have criteria for recognizing members in good standing that apply regardless of a member's Jewish status?
- Can you think of circumstances in which identity, status, and standing have come into conflict in your community, congregation, or organization? Was the conflict resolved and if so, how? What other circumstances might be occasions for conflict, and how might they be resolved?

B. JEWISH IDENTITY AND ITS COMPLICATIONS

North American Jews experience and express their Jewish identity in very different ways. Many can easily find a congregation or Jewish community that grants them Jewish status. Nevertheless, the multi-dimensional character of Jewish identity and the diverse criteria for establishing Jewish status or good standing can create difficulty, confusion, and even pain, especially in moments of boundary crossing. For example, one potential convert voiced these concerns to a rabbi:

*I'm considering converting to Judaism but am concerned about my acceptance in the Jewish world. Initially I was going to convert to Orthodox Judaism so it would be accepted by everyone, but I found that the requirements and theology were too rigid for me. Will I be accepted as a Jew by my future Jewish in-laws if I convert to Reform, Conservative, or Reconstructionist Judaism? What about at other synagogues, or even in Israel?*⁴

On the other hand, difficulties can arise when a boundary is *not* crossed. A non-Jewish individual offers the following reflections on her marriage to a Jew:

When we decided to get married, I remember my mother trying to talk some sense into me. She would say, "Just keep in mind that religion becomes a very, very sensitive issue, and

*marriage is difficult to begin with. You have so many issues that differences in religion make everything harder." I just completely ignored her. Then we started planning the ceremony and had a real tough time trying to find someone to marry us. And that's when I really started getting very discouraged, very disillusioned.*⁵

Pain can also accompany the more mundane moments of life, as this Jewish-adjacent writer explains:

*Last year, at a dinner with colleagues, one mentions to another during conversation that I am Jewish.... The newest member of the group says, "I didn't know that" and here I go again.... Which explanation do I launch into? "Well, kind of, but not really. Technically, no. My husband's Jewish; we're raising our children Jewish." Really, how exactly does an unconverted Jewish mother respond? Clearly, I am a Jewish mother. I bake a great challah, play mahjong, and make every attempt to bring my family together for Shabbat dinner. I shuttle my children to tot Shabbat, Sunday school, Temple pre-school, JCC intramural sports, and camps... and am the first to announce that we are a Jewish family in social contexts.... I am truly devoted to my children's Jewish identity and, personally, love much of Judaism.... I just haven't felt a sincere calling to conversion.*⁶

To capture the complex and multi-dimensional nature of Jewish identity and the way it complicates question of Jewish status, consider the following brief cases, each a composite picture suggestive of the many different ways these realities can play out.⁷ Is there any way to determine whether these individuals are Jewish in terms of identity and/or status?

Three days a week, Sharon takes her turn in the carpool rotation for her kids' Hebrew Day School. If it's Friday, she stops at the market to pick up challah and kosher wine for Shabbat, before starting her part-time shift as a social worker with a local Anglican relief organization.

Rachel, an undergraduate pre-med student at a large public university, has recently joined a niggun circle and is taking a Talmud class. She says the connection to Jewish music and ideas feeds her soul in a way that organized religious services do not. She's planning to study abroad in Israel in her junior year.

As a child, Richard was always fascinated by his Jewish grandfather's stories about life "in the Old Country," the narrow escape and treacherous path that brought him to America, and his struggles and accomplishments in his adopted home. Although he has never set foot inside a synagogue and doesn't believe in God, Richard is determined to honor his grandfather's story by passing on his sense of ethnic pride to his children.

David davens in the morning before climbing into his car to deliver a gift to his young niece. It is Christmas, and he knows she looks forward to seeing her favorite uncle on her favorite day. He is glad that his niece's parents have no objection to the colorful Hebrew alphabet game he plans to give her.

Since the death of his wife, Jonathan enjoys spending Friday evening in his son's home. The special meal and rituals, the singing, the family time, and his granddaughter's delight in arguing over the meaning of biblical stories create a Sabbath experience that he looks forward to all week, and that keeps him connected to something larger than himself.

These stories present a variety of behaviors, attitudes, and beliefs characteristic of Jews, and yet it is unclear in each case whether the person described identifies or is recognized by others as a native-born Jew, a convert, a potential convert, or a non-Jew living a Jewish-adjacent life.

Perhaps Sharon is Jewish and sees social service work with an Anglican agency to be consistent with and an expression of her Jewish values. Or perhaps she is not Jewish but has a Jewish life partner, loves Jewish tradition, and is committed to raising a Jewish family. If so, it is possible that she is on a path to conversion. It is equally possible that she is happy living a Jewish-adjacent life and supporting the Jewish growth and identity of her children.

Perhaps Rachel was born Jewish, but her parents, practicing Buddhists, were not interested in instilling a Jewish identity in their daughter. Jewish Studies courses, a vibrant campus Jewish life, and the attraction of an immersive Jewish experience in Israel have ignited Rachel's interest in her Jewish roots. Or perhaps Rachel is a non-Jew who, upon encountering Jewish texts and ideas in the university classroom and making Jewish friends, has found a spiritual and intellectual home and is eager to learn more, no matter where it leads her.

If Richard's Jewish grandfather is the father of Richard's halakhically Jewish mother, then Richard is halakhically Jewish (no matter the status of his father). If his Jewish grandfather is the father of his non-Jewish mother (because his grandfather married a non-Jewish woman) then Richard is not halakhically Jewish. Whether Richard is halakhically Jewish or not, his love for his grandfather has given him a strong sense of ethnic pride that he plans to foster and encourage in his own children.

David, who is halakhically observant, may be a native-born Jew whose sibling has intermarried and celebrates both Hanukkah and Christmas. David loves his sibling and respects his choice. He also loves his young niece and expresses that love by recognizing her happiness at Christmas. Or David may be a convert to Orthodox Judaism who no longer celebrates non-Jewish holidays himself but continues to love his family and maintain a connection with them on days of family importance.

Perhaps Sharon is Jewish and sees social service work with an Anglican agency to be consistent with and an expression of her Jewish values.

Jonathan may be a Jewish widower enjoying the Sabbath meal with his Jewish son and daughter-in-law, or he may be a non-Jew whose non-Jewish son married a Jewish woman. That makes Jonathan the grandfather of a halakhically Jewish granddaughter, whom he adores. He enjoys learning about Jewish tradition alongside her and feels welcomed and included at all family events by his daughter-in-law. He is invested in his granddaughter's Jewish upbringing, and perhaps he even pays her day school tuition as a sign of his support for his son and daughter-in-law's choices.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Are you familiar with individuals whose Jewish identity or Jewish status is ambiguous?
- Are you aware of individuals in your community, congregation, or organization who have experienced confusion or pain around questions of identity, status, or standing?
- Is there a consensus in your community on whether it is important to address this confusion or pain, and if so, how?

C. CONVERSION, INTERMARRIAGE, AND AFFILIATION

Some Jewish communities and organizations feel that they are well served by their policies and practices concerning Jewish identity, Jewish status, and community membership. Others do not.

Contemporary demographic realities, including intermarriage and an increase in the numbers of Jewish-adjacent individuals, are prompting some communities and organizations to re-evaluate their definition of Jewish identity, their criteria for conferring Jewish status, and their policies and practices around intermarriage, conversion, and Jewish adjacency. These communities and organizations may be motivated by:

- A desire to determine whether their standards, policies, and practices are working well for their community or organization, to preserve them if they are, and to revise them if they are not.
- A desire to develop in the first instance standards, policies, or practices that will include or accommodate the variety of Jewishly identified and Jewish adjacent persons already in their midst.
- A desire to grow their community or organization by developing policies and practices that extend Jewish status, or membership in good standing, to a larger number of interested individuals.

- A desire to reduce the confusion and distress sometimes experienced by individuals exploring questions of Jewish identity, status, and standing.

The following three sections contain historical examples and discussion questions designed to assist communities in developing or evaluating their policies and practices around questions of Jewish identity and Jewish status, especially as they pertain to conversion, intermarriage, and various forms of Jewish affiliation, which we refer to here as Jewish adjacency.

Contemporary demographic realities, including intermarriage and an increase in the numbers of Jewish-adjacent individuals, are prompting some communities and organizations to re-evaluate their definition of Jewish identity, their criteria for conferring Jewish status, and their policies and practices around intermarriage, conversion, and Jewish adjacency.

Jewish Status By Birth and By Forms of Incorporation Into the Community, Including Conversion

Throughout history, individuals have been recognized as Jewish based on descent *or* on an act of incorporation into the community. The criteria for establishing Jewish status through each mode have varied widely across time and place.

JEWISH STATUS BASED ON DESCENT

Patrilineal descent in the Bible

In biblical times, Israelite status was established by descent through the male line. While the Torah prohibits intermarriage with certain specific nations perceived as enemies (Canaanites in Exodus 34:15-16 and Deuteronomy 7:3-4; Moabites and Ammonites in Deuteronomy 23), it contains no universal prohibition on intermarriage. Indeed, there are many instances of non-Israelite women being incorporated into *Am Yisrael* through marriage (prior to the creation of a process of conversion). Patriarchal figures, Moses, and numerous Israelite kings took non-Israelite wives, and the Israelite status of the children issuing from these many unions, including the children of Moses, was taken for granted.⁸

Ezra—double descent?

In the 5th century BCE, Ezra and Nehemiah attempted to restrict Israelite identity to individuals descended from two Israelite parents⁹ and foreclose the possibility of incorporation of a non-Israelite into the community. Ezra's "double descent"

innovation was met with protest since many post-exilic Jews, including priests, had foreign spouses. While some groups later adopted this principle, the Ezran requirement of double descent did not become normative for most Jewish communities.¹⁰

Matrilineal descent in later *halakhah*

In the 3rd century CE, the Mishnah (the earliest work of rabbinic halakhic teachings) introduced a principle of matrilineal descent in certain situations, likely on the model of Roman law, though patrilineal descent remained an important principle as well.¹¹ In a departure from the Bible, post-Talmudic rabbinic Judaism adopted a broad principle of matrilineal descent. Accordingly, the child of a Jewish female in a mixed marriage would be deemed halakhically Jewish, while the child of a Jewish male in a mixed marriage would not.

Over time, the rabbinic innovation of matrilineal descent became the normative *halakhah* for rabbinic Jews, but not for all Jews universally or permanently.

Diverse standards for determining Jewish status by descent today

Over time, the rabbinic innovation of matrilineal descent became the normative *halakhah* for rabbinic Jews, but not for all Jews universally or permanently, as the following two contrasting examples show:

- In the 20th century, an edict issued for Syrian Jewish communities in New York and Buenos Aires defined biological descent as descent from two Jewish parents (instead of matrilineal descent).¹²
- In 1983, a resolution of the Reform movement accepted as Jews individuals with only one Jewish parent, either the father or the mother (patrilineal or matrilineal descent).

The Law of Return adopted by the State of Israel in 1950 offers a third interesting contrast to these determinations of biological descent. This law established the right of individuals with one Jewish grandparent (and, strikingly, their spouses) to relocate to and acquire citizenship in the State of Israel.¹³

JEWISH STATUS BASED ON FORMS OF INCORPORATION INTO THE COMMUNITY, INCLUDING CONVERSION

The incorporation of foreigners into the ancient Israelite community

In the biblical period, a non-Israelite male could attain a degree of incorporation into the Israelite community by undergoing circumcision. However, the ritual did not erase the man's foreign identity. It made him a member of the community "in good standing," obligated by the negative laws (prohibitions) and able to exercise certain rights. For example, he could participate in certain communal rituals (e.g., the Passover rituals set forth in Exodus 12) and marry an Israelite woman (Genesis 34).¹⁴

The Hebrew Bible does not include any parallel to circumcision for a non-Israelite woman joining the Israelite community. The very act of marriage was the mechanism that brought a non-Israelite woman into the community. She, too, did not lose her foreign identity but became a member of the community "in good standing." Significantly,

The Law of Return adopted by the State of Israel in 1950 offers a third interesting contrast to these determinations of biological descent. This law established the right of individuals with one Jewish grandparent (and, strikingly, their spouses) to relocate to and acquire citizenship in the State of Israel.

her children were deemed fully Israelite. Thus, full incorporation into the Israelite community and the acquisition of Israelite identity could be achieved within one generation through marriage.¹⁵

In biblical times, intermarriage was often both the motivation and the mechanism for the incorporation of an outsider into the community. But rabbinic conversion was a *religious* act undertaken independent of marriage.

Biblical stories indicate that the motivations for incorporation into the ancient Israelite community were often social (i.e., marriage; co-residence) or political rather than strictly religious.

Circumcision for males and in-marriage for females continued to establish membership in the Jewish community for centuries, and eventually immersion was adopted as an additional ritual marking this transition.

The incorporation of foreigners as religious conversion

Incorporation into the Israelite community in biblical times was primarily social or communal, resembling adoption by a family

or people. But in a major shift, the Talmudic rabbis (1st–6th centuries CE) developed a formal process of conversion that differed from the earlier process of incorporation, in three important ways:

- It was a primarily religious act that required a renunciation of idolatry and an affirmative and voluntary acceptance of and commitment to Israel's God and Torah. (The precise content of that commitment was hotly debated already in Talmudic times, with maximalists requiring a knowledge and acceptance of every single commandment in the Torah and minimalists requiring no more than the desire to convert.)¹⁶
- Its purpose was to replace the non-Israelite identity of the foreigner with an Israelite identity.
- It broke the link between marriage and incorporation. In biblical times, intermarriage was often both the motivation and the mechanism for the incorporation of an outsider into the community. But rabbinic conversion was a *religious* act undertaken independent of marriage. In fact, conversion for the purpose of marriage was generally discouraged, if not discounted.

WHERE THINGS STAND TODAY

The possibility of conversion to Judaism continues in all but the Syrian Jewish community to this day.

Debates over a potential convert's motivations as well as the commitments and knowledge required of a potential convert also continue to this day. For example, the major denominations, as well as individual congregations, differ on:

- Whether marriage to a Jewish individual is a proper motivation for conversion.
- Whether all, some, or none of the following are required of the potential convert:
 - ◆ a commitment to Torah
 - ◆ a belief in God
 - ◆ observance of Sabbath and dietary laws;
 - ◆ an acceptance and observance of all the commandments
 - ◆ a sense of solidarity with the Jewish people
 - ◆ a commitment to creating a Jewish household and/or raising a Jewish family.
- Whether conversion certifies the *completion* of a process of learning and acculturation or whether conversion marks the *beginning* of what will be a lifelong process of learning and acculturation. In the latter case, a clear desire to identify as Jewish and to grow into that identity may be deemed sufficient grounds for conversion, while in the former case, it may not.

The reformulation of incorporation as religious conversion means that there is

Native-born Jews can renounce Jewish religious belief and practice and still maintain their Jewish status (and even standing) on a biological or cultural basis.

currently no formal mechanism for conferring Jewish status on persons whose reasons for wanting to join the Jewish community are personal, cultural, social, and/or political rather than religious. In the North American context, this creates an interesting lack of parallelism between native-born Jews and potential converts. Native-born Jews can renounce Jewish religious belief and practice and still maintain their Jewish status (and even standing) on a biological or cultural basis. By contrast, non-Jews can acquire Jewish status only through a ceremony of *religious* conversion offered by one of the Jewish denominations. Non-Jews whose Jewish identity is based on a set of profound social, cultural, personal, or political commitments, or individuals whose Jewish lineage does not meet the halakhic standard of Jewish descent, have no non-religious pathway to Jewish status.

This has led to calls for the creation of a secular alternative to religious conversion that would enable non-Jews to join the Jewish people through a process of “Jewish Cultural Affirmation.”¹⁷ When becoming a Jew is seen as joining a people rather than joining a religion, it can be described as adoption rather than conversion.¹⁸

DISCUSSION PROMPT AND QUESTIONS

Throughout history, Jewish communities have made provision for non-Jews wishing to incorporate into the community, but the requirements and processes have varied as communal needs and demographic realities have shifted.

- What are your community/ congregation/organization's criteria for conferring Jewish status?
- What are your community's policies and practices around conversion?
- Do your existing policies and practices serve your community in a way that is consistent with your needs and aspirations?
- What are your community's "red lines" when it comes to conversion? Why are they red lines?
- How does an awareness of the multiple pathways into Jewish community and the diversity of approaches to questions of Israelite/Jewish status affect your community's attitudes, aspirations, and options around conversion?

Intermarriage: The North American Jewish Experience

REASONS TO MARRY WITHOUT CONVERTING

One consequence of living in a free and open society is the development of close relationships among individuals of diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds, which often leads not only to intermarriage between Jews and non-Jews but to greater awareness of Judaism, Jewish culture, and Jewish life more broadly among non-Jews.

Some non-Jews choose to convert to Judaism, and some do so in anticipation of or after marriage to a Jew. The decision to convert is a highly personal one, and those who choose to convert must undergo a process overseen by one of the major denominations. Despite their significant differences, these conversion processes are religious in character. There is currently no non-religious process by which a non-Jew can acquire Jewish status.

Although some non-Jews convert prior to or during marriage to a Jew, many more non-Jews intermarry without converting. Like the decision to convert, the decision not to convert is also a highly personal one. The reasons for making this decision are numerous and varied but may include:

- The non-Jewish partner is committed to another religion (such marriages might be described as interfaith marriages)
- The non-Jewish partner is secular and lacks interest in Jewish belief or practice

- The Jewish partner lacks interest in maintaining their own Jewish identity and/or creating a Jewish home and thus does not want their non-Jewish partner to convert.

However, the decision to marry without converting is not always due to one of these reasons. Indeed, many intermarried couples commit themselves to creating a Jewish home and raising Jewishly identified children.¹⁹ In such cases, the non-Jewish partner's reasons for not converting may include:

- subjective desires, such as honoring the wishes or memory of a parent or parents
- objective hindrances, such as:
 - ◆ The local community has not been welcoming or encouraging of conversion
 - ◆ The preferred form of religious conversion may not be readily available
 - ◆ The preferred form of religious conversion may not be accepted in contexts that are relevant to the individual
 - ◆ There is no non-religious mechanism for those who wish to acquire Jewish status for non-religious reasons or on non-religious terms.

There are, of course, many other reasons both subjective and objective that may ground a non-Jew's decision to marry without converting.

THE RATES AND REALITY OF INTERMARRIAGE

Decades of warnings about the deleterious effects of intermarriage on the Jewish identity of individuals, on Jewish families, and on

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Jewish communal life have had little impact on the rate of intermarriage in North America. In 2020, the Pew Research Center reported a 42% intermarriage rate among all currently married Jewish respondents in America. When Orthodox Jews are omitted from the data, the intermarriage rate is 47%. Among Jews who married between 2010 and 2020, 61% are intermarried, and when Orthodox Jews are omitted from this group, the intermarriage rate is 72%.

While intermarriage has increased steadily over the past half-decade, its effect on **personal Jewish identity**, on the **creation of Jewish families**, and on **organized Jewish life** has not followed demographers' predictions. In the latter half of the 20th century, it was generally assumed that a Jew's choice to enter

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an intermarriage indicated a weak Jewish identity and signaled a renunciation of both Jewish community and the intention to create a Jewish home. However, Jewish professionals today report not only that intermarried Jews are raising Jewish children but that non-Jewish spouses often play a significant role—and sometimes a lead role—in creating Jewish households and nurturing the Jewish identity of their children.²⁰

Today, non-Jewish spouses and family members as well as Jewish-adjacent individuals without marital ties to the community contribute to organized Jewish life in myriad ways. They serve on synagogue boards, teach in Jewish educational institutions, and dedicate their personal resources, time, and labor to Jewish

communal activities and causes. Thus, it is arguably not surprising that the 2020 Pew Research Center study showed that children of intermarriage are increasingly identifying as Jewish in adulthood.²¹

Intermarriage is a fact of contemporary North American Jewish life. Even though it has not brought the dissolution of Jewish identity as predicted, it has certainly brought change. These changes have prompted some Jewish communities and organizations to ask whether they are well served by policies and practices that were not designed for their community or organization as it is currently constituted.

DISCUSSION PROMPT AND QUESTIONS

In contrast to earlier generations, many American Jews today view intermarriage not as a problem that requires a solution but as an opportunity that can strengthen and enrich the Jewish people, as well as the lives of individual community members.

- Does your community, congregation, or organization tend to view intermarriage as a problem or an opportunity? Why?
- Does your community include intermarried people? How has the presence (or absence) of intermarried people affected your community?
- What are your community's attitudes, policies, and practices regarding intermarriage? Do they serve you in a way that is consistent with your needs and aspirations or should they be revised? How and why?
- What are your community's "red lines" when it comes to intermarriage? Why are they red lines?
- How does an awareness of multiple approaches to intermarriage affect your community's attitudes, aspirations, and options around intermarriage?

Jewish Adjacency (Informal Affiliation)

Throughout history, non-Jews have participated in and/or contributed to the lives of Jewish individuals and/or the larger Jewish community while retaining a distinct identity. The term "non-Jew" does not fully capture their situation because a non-Jew can be entirely disengaged from Jews and the Jewish community. These Jewishly affiliated persons regularly interact with Jews and/or a Jewish community and may be said to be living Jewish adjacent lives, to one degree or another.

THE BIBLICAL GER

In biblical times, a person who dwelled in a community that they were not born into, whether temporarily or permanently, was known as a *ger* (plural, *gerim*). For example, Abraham uses the term *ger toshav* to describe his status among the Hittites (Genesis 23:4), and the Israelites were *gerim* in Egypt before their enslavement (Leviticus 19:34). Similarly, a non-Israelite who took up residence in the Israelite community was known as a *ger* (sojourner) or *ger toshav* (resident alien). Although this term would later denote a religious convert to Judaism, it originally referred to a community resident who *retained* his or her non-Israelite identity.

Many biblical texts attest to the presence within the community of persons who did not identify as Israelite or possess Israelite status and who were not married to an Israelite. These *gerim* were integrated into the life of the community in different ways and to different

degrees without the erasure of their non-Israelite identity or status.

Modes of integration

Rituals of collective memory constituted one mode of integration in biblical Israel for both citizen and *ger*. According to Exodus 12:19, anyone who participates in the ritual of collective memory that commemorates the exodus from Egypt (eating unleavened bread) is a member of *'adat Yisrael* (the “community” or “congregation” of Israel).²² This includes the resident non-Israelite (the *ger*). Deuteronomy 9:14 confirms that a circumcised non-Israelite resident may participate in the collective memory rituals of the Passover sacrifice on equal terms with the native-born and circumcised Israelite, without erasing his non-Israelite identity or status. The commandment that Israel commemorate the Exodus underlines the fact that taking on the historical memory of the community and identifying with the experience of its past generations is an act of integrative imagination for the citizen, no less than the *ger*.

The *ger* was also integrated into the community through participation in other communal festivities and gatherings, such as Shavuot and Sukkot,²³ and through various cultic practices. For example, the *ger* had general access to the expiatory sacrificial practices of the community and could offer voluntary personal sacrifices at the sanctuary.²⁴

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Another mode of integration for non-Jews was obligation to the terms of the Sinaitic covenant. Deuteronomy 29:10 lists the *ger* among those who entered the covenant concluded 40 years earlier at Sinai. The biblical covenant contains laws that applied broadly, as well as laws that applied narrowly to men, women, *gerim*, Israelites, Levites, and/or priests. Thus,

- Some of the covenant’s prohibitions applied to all residents in the land of Israel regardless of gender, ethnicity, citizenship, or socio-economic status²⁵
- Some prohibitions applied to Israelites and *gerim*²⁶
- Some laws applied to Israelites but did not preclude their voluntary observance by *gerim*²⁷
- Some prohibitions obligated Levites and priests only, or priests only (for example, some marriage laws).

Nevertheless, despite these many differences in the scope and application of specific laws within the covenant, individuals obligated by the covenant formed a single Israelite community.

The *ger* was integrated not only through the observance of certain prohibitions but also by various legal protections. The laws of bodily injury and homicide applied to the *ger* and the citizen without distinction, as did the law protecting laborers from abuse by an employer.²⁸ The covenant also extended special protections to *gerim*. Like Levites, *gerim* were landless and, therefore, economically vulnerable. Thus, in the charitable laws that obligate all Israelites, *gerim* appear as recipients alongside Levites, (Israelite) widows and orphans, or the generalized poor.²⁹

Finally, the *ger* was integrated into the community by a simple act of embrace. The obligation to not only welcome but also to love the non-Israelite residing in Israel's midst is expressed in Leviticus 19:34: "The *ger* who resides with you shall be to you as your citizens; you shall love each one as yourself, for you were strangers (*gerim*) in the land of Egypt." The embrace of the *ger* commanded by Leviticus 19:34 does not erase the *ger's* non-Israelite identity; on the contrary, it affirms the *ger's* non-Israelite identity.

Models of affiliation

The Bible provides numerous narrative examples of non-Jews who enjoyed various kinds of affiliation with the Israelite community.

Yitro, the foreign father-in-law of Moses, is related to the Israelite community by bonds of marriage (his daughter's) and blood (his grandchildren are fully Israelite). While he does not take up residency within the community himself,³⁰ his relational affiliation is the basis for significant positive interactions in Exodus 18:

- He celebrates the community's success by breaking bread with Moses and Aaron.
- He praises Israel's deity.
- He offers counsel that leads to the establishment of an orderly judicial procedure for the Israelite community.

Yitro's son Hobab, brother-in-law of Moses and uncle to his sister's fully Israelite children, also enjoys a relational affiliation with the Israelite community though his is accompanied by co-residency.

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In Numbers 10:29–33, Moses persuades Hobab and his people to guide the Israelites through the wilderness, enter the land with them, and live alongside them. Their relational affiliation and their co-residency, mentioned in Judges 4:11, do not dissolve their status as a distinct people; rather, they are the basis for ongoing positive interactions.

Various descendants of Yitro and Hobab (the Kenites and the Rechabites) provide the Israelites with military support in times of crisis (Ya'el), philanthropic support in times of rebuilding (Malkhiyah), and make contributions to Jewish culture and learning (serving, for example, as scribes).³¹

Post-Biblical Developments

Periods of hostility between Israelites and various non-Israelites in the half-millennium before the Common Era had negative consequences for the phenomenon of Israelite adjacency. In the 5th century BCE, Ezra and Nehemiah, amplifying characterizations of non-Israelites as “morally impure” (Ezra 9:11) and as “non-holy seed” (Ezra 9:2) advocated for an innovative policy of double descent, precluding the incorporation of an individual with one non-Israelite parent. They oversaw the expulsion of foreign spouses and their children (Ezra 9:1–10:19). This policy was not widely adopted in the centuries leading up to the rise of the rabbinic movement (as writings from the time indicate) and was definitively rejected by the Talmudic rabbis. Instead, the rabbis adopted a principle of matrilineal descent, while also allowing the incorporation

of a person with two non-Israelite parents through a process of religious conversion. However, the event that brought the greatest change to the phenomenon of adjacency was not an event at all, but a linguistic shift.

Finally, the *ger* was integrated into the community by a simple act of embrace.

Shortly before the turn of the Common Era, many Israelites (increasingly known as “Judeans,” which will give rise to the term “Jews”) came to understand the biblical term *ger* as referring to a “convert,” i.e., a person seeking to *replace their existing identity/status with Israelite (or Jewish) identity/status*.³² As a result, the biblical laws of the *ger* that were originally designed for non-Israelite aliens who resided in the Israelite community while *preserving* their non-Israelite identity were applied to individuals who wanted to *replace* their non-Israelite or non-Jewish identity.

The linguistic shift and the subsequent application of laws *preserving* foreign identity to individuals seeking to *replace* their foreign identity had two immediate effects:

- First, it eliminated both the recognition and the regulation of Israelite (Jewish) adjacency. As the laws of the *ger* were applied to converts, non-Israelite (non-

Jewish) residents who might wish to reside in and contribute to the community without effacing their foreign identity, were left in a shadowy and unregulated no-man's land.

- Second, it diminished the ability of would-be converts to achieve the full Israelite/Jewish status they sought. The laws of the resident alien were designed to allow a foreign individual to live as a member of the community while preserving their foreign identity. Applied to converts, however, these rules were experienced as limiting the convert's full integration.

Talmudic sources relate rabbinic attempts to alleviate some of the limitations arising from applying laws intended for the partial integration of resident aliens to converts. For example, the rabbis increasingly equalized the marriage laws for converts and native-born Jews, allowing even the child of a convert to marry into the priesthood.³³ By contrast, the situation of Jewish-adjacent individuals was not addressed, beyond general laws regulating interactions between Jews and non-Jews. Moreover, the Talmudic assessment of non-Jews was ambivalent. Many rabbinic sources warn against the harmful consequences of close association with non-Jews, while many others elevate and commemorate non-Jews (historical and contemporary) who enjoyed positive relations with the community or made sacrifices for its sake.³⁴

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late antiquity. A better source of historical information on Jewish adjacency is the archeological record and non-rabbinic sources.³⁵ Archeological evidence, especially from diaspora communities in such cities as Sardis and Aphrodisias in late antiquity, attests to the presence of non-Jews in synagogues (as both patrons and participants), to non-Jewish observance of the Sabbath and festivals, and to non-Jewish contributions to Jewish charitable activities.³⁶

The conditions of Jewish life in the medieval period, when Jews lived as a distinct, generally maligned, and sometimes persecuted minority with limited rights and freedoms, were not conducive to Jewish adjacency (especially in Christian lands), but emancipation brought Jews and non-Jews into increasing contact. In North America, the opportunity for close relationships between Jews and non-Jews has given rise to a significant number of Jewish-adjacent individuals, though accurate statistics are difficult to attain.³⁷

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WHERE THINGS STAND TODAY

Today, a significant number of North Americans are Jewishly affiliated or live Jewish-adjacent lives, and many are deemed members in good standing of a synagogue or other Jewish communal entities. The affiliation of some is based on a family or personal relationship, either their own or that of a relative.

- They may be the spouse or domestic partner of a Jew and have not converted.
- They may have Jewish children even though they themselves are not Jewish and do not plan to convert.
- They may have a child or a parent or a sibling who is married to a Jew.
- They may be the grandparent, aunt or uncle of a Jew owing to the marriage of a child or a sibling to a Jew.
- They may enjoy an affiliation that is not based on a family or personal relationship. For example:
 - ◆ They may be drawn to Jewish tradition and religious observance but do not wish to convert.

- ◆ They may attend synagogue services or participate actively in Jewish communal life.
- ◆ They may have a passion for Jewish texts, languages, history, and culture.
- ◆ They may identify with Jewish values and contribute time and personal resources to Jewish causes, communal projects, philanthropies, or social action efforts.

The modes of affiliation experienced by Jewish-adjacent individuals vary little from the modes of affiliation experienced by native-born Jews. Native-born Jews may be *born* into Jewish community but often *continue* in Jewish community for many of the reasons that draw Jewish-adjacent people to Jewish community.

In short, despite differences in status, native-born Jews, converted Jews, and Jewish-adjacent individuals—intermarried or not—often express their identity and affiliation in *identical* ways, which may include any of the following:

- Engagement in rituals of collective memory
- Observance of dietary laws
- Sabbath observance
- Family observances and ceremonies
- Synagogue attendance on Sabbath and/or holidays
- Study of Jewish languages, texts, and traditions
- A passion for Hebrew and Jewish literature and culture
- Support for Jewish philanthropic or political causes
- Volunteer work for Jewish communal organizations
- And much more

In recent years, some communities have created rituals of recognition as well as new forms of integration that can meet the evolving needs and realities of both Jewish-adjacent individuals and the Jewish community.³⁸ Nevertheless, the fear that Jewish adjacency will dilute or negatively impact the character of Jewish communities persists and should be openly discussed by communities evaluating their policies and practices.

A person's status as native born, convert, or Jewish-adjacent is not an infallible predictor of their role in shaping Jewish communal life, whether as agents of change or of

continuity. Recent sociological studies show that converts and Jewish-adjacent people are at least as invested, if not more invested, in the preservation of traditional norms than are their native-born Jewish partners and friends.³⁹ Moreover, a brief look at Jewish history shows that native-born Jews—from Ezra to Paul, from Maimonides to Mendelssohn, from the Baal Shem Tov to Buber—have wrought radical changes that have transformed the shape and character of Jewish communal life and religious practice in profound ways. In short, the relationship between intermarriage, conversion, and Jewish adjacency on the one hand and continuity or change in Jewish communal life on the other is complex and unpredictable.

In short, despite differences in status, native-born Jews, converted Jews, and Jewish-adjacent individuals—intermarried or not—often express their identity and affiliation in *identical* ways.

DISCUSSION PROMPT AND QUESTIONS

Historically, Jewish communities have contained members who were not Jewish. Many Jews today view Jewish adjacency, which refers to non-Jewish participation in and/or contribution to Jewish life (communal or individual), not as a crisis that threatens to dilute Jewish community but as an opportunity that has the potential to enrich it.

- Does your community, congregation, or organization tend to view the presence of Jewishly affiliated/Jewish-adjacent people as a challenge or an opportunity? Why?
- Does your community include Jewishly affiliated/Jewish-adjacent people? Can they be members? How do their rights and responsibilities differ from those of Jewish members?
- How has your community been affected or shaped by the presence of Jewish adjacent individuals (informal affiliation)?
- What are your community's policies, and practices regarding Jewishly affiliated or Jewish-adjacent people? Are they aligned with your community's attitudes and aspirations? Do they serve you in a way that is consistent with your needs and aspirations, or should they be revised? How and why?
- Does your community recognize and celebrate the contributions of its Jewishly affiliated members?
- What are your community's "red lines" when it comes to Jewishly affiliated people? Why are they red lines?
- How does an awareness of multiple approaches to Jewishly affiliated individuals affect your community's attitudes, aspirations, and options around Jewishly affiliated people?

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Communities formulating, evaluating, or revising their policies and practices around intermarriage, conversion, and Jewish adjacency need accurate information about the individuals addressed. Non-Jews seeking some form of Jewish identity, community membership, or Jewish affiliation are not a monolithic group. The more Jewish communities can learn about the diverse goals, interests, motivations, and experiences of intermarried, converted, and Jewish-adjacent people, the better they can adopt policies and practices that meet the needs and interests of the communities and individuals involved. This can be achieved by inviting converts and Jewish-adjacent individuals in the community to share their insights and perspectives. It can also be achieved by consulting studies and books about non-Jews who have entered Jewish community in some fashion (through intermarriage, conversion, or Jewish adjacency). Many of the works published in the last three decades separate myth from fact, provide direct access to the voices of converts and non-Jewish individuals, and offer important insights into their varied goals, interests, motivations, experiences, modes of affiliation, and preferred nomenclature.⁴⁰

No two Jewish communities are the same. A policy or practice that works well and strengthens one community may divide and weaken another community. The Shalom Hartman Institute expects that different communities will discuss the information, prompts, and questions set forth here and arrive at different conclusions regarding the policies and practices that will best meet the needs of their community. At the same time, the Shalom Hartman Institute hopes that the very process of discussion and deliberation will enable communities not only to reach clarity around their own decisions but also to appreciate that other communities might reasonably arrive at decisions that differ from their own.

The more Jewish communities can learn about the diverse goals, interests, motivations, and experiences of intermarried, converted, and Jewish-adjacent people, the better they can adopt policies and practices that meet the needs and interests of the communities and individuals involved.

DISCUSSION PROMPTS AND QUESTIONS

A. Identity, Status, and Standing

THE COMPLEX NATURE OF JEWISH IDENTITY

- How do you define Jewish identity and why?
- How does your community, congregation, or organization define Jewish identity and why?
- Are different definitions of Jewish identity relevant in different contexts?
- What are the strengths and weaknesses of the definitions of Jewish identity that you adopt and the definitions that you do not adopt?

THE COMPLEX COMPOSITION OF THE NORTH AMERICAN JEWISH COMMUNITY

- How do members of your community identify themselves? Which of the identity markers listed above best describe the members of your community?
- Does your community include individuals who might be termed Jewish adjacent?
- How does the diversity (or lack of diversity) of its members affect your community, congregation, or organization?

IDENTITY IS NOT STATUS IS NOT STANDING

- What criteria does your community, congregation, or organization use to confer Jewish status on individuals? Are there communities, congregations, or organizations that reject your criteria? Why? Do you reject the status criteria of others? Why?
- Does your community, congregation, or organization have criteria for recognizing

members in good standing that apply regardless of a member's Jewish status?

- Can you think of circumstances in which identity, status, and standing have come into conflict in your community, congregation, or organization? Was the conflict resolved and if so, how? What other circumstances might be occasions for conflict and how might they be resolved?

B. Jewish Identity and Its Complications

- Are you familiar with individuals whose Jewish identity or Jewish status is ambiguous?
- Are you aware of individuals in your community, congregation, or organization who have experienced confusion or pain around questions of identity, status, or standing?
- Is there a consensus in your community on whether or not it is important to address this confusion or pain, and if so, how?

C. Conversion, Intermarriage, and Affiliation

JEWISH STATUS BY BIRTH AND BY FORMS OF INCORPORATION INCLUDING CONVERSION

Throughout history, Jewish communities have made provision for non-Jews wishing to incorporate into the community, but the requirements and processes have varied as communal needs and demographic realities have shifted.

- *What are your community/congregation/organization's criteria for conferring Jewish status?*
- *What are your community's policies and practices around conversion?*
- *Do your existing policies and practices serve your community in a way that is consistent with your needs and aspirations?*
- *What are your community's "red lines" when it comes to conversion? Why are they red lines?*
- *How does an awareness of the multiple pathways into Jewish community and the diversity of approaches to questions of Israelite/Jewish status affect your community's attitudes, aspirations, and options around conversion?*

INTERMARRIAGE: THE NORTH AMERICAN JEWISH EXPERIENCE

In contrast to earlier generations, many American Jews today view intermarriage not as a problem that requires a solution but as a opportunity that can strengthen and enrich the Jewish people, as well as the lives of individual community members.

- *Does your community, congregation, or organization tend to view intermarriage as a problem or an opportunity? Why?*
- *Does your community include intermarried people? How has the presence (or absence) of intermarried people affected your community?*
- *What are your community's attitudes, policies, and practices regarding intermarriage? Do they serve you in a way that is consistent with your needs and aspirations or should they be revised? How and why?*
- *What are your community's "red lines" when it comes to intermarriage? Why are they red lines?*
- *How does an awareness of multiple approaches to intermarriage affect your community's attitudes, aspirations, and options around intermarriage?*

JEWISH ADJACENCY (INFORMAL AFFILIATION)

Historically, Jewish communities have contained members who were not Jewish. Many Jews today view Jewish adjacency, which refers to non-Jewish participation in and/or contribution to Jewish life (communal or individual), not as a crisis that threatens to dilute Jewish community but as an opportunity that has the potential to enrich it.

- *Does your community, congregation, or organization tend to view the presence of Jewishly affiliated/Jewish-adjacent people as a challenge or an opportunity? Why?*
- *Does your community include Jewishly affiliated/Jewish-adjacent people? Can they be members? How do their rights and responsibilities differ from those of Jewish members?*
- *How has your community been affected or shaped by the presence of Jewishly affiliated or Jewish-adjacent people?*
- *What are your community's policies and practices regarding Jewishly affiliated or Jewish-adjacent individuals? Are they aligned with your community's attitudes and aspirations? Do they serve you in a way that is consistent with your needs and aspirations or should they be revised? How and why?*

- *Does your community recognize and celebrate the contributions of its Jewishly affiliated members?*
- *What are your community's "red lines" when it comes to Jewishly affiliated people? Why are they red lines?*
- *How does an awareness of multiple approaches to Jewishly affiliated individuals affect your community's attitudes, aspirations, and options around Jewishly affiliated people?*

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The NAJI seminar began our research asking about the impact of conversion to Judaism on contemporary North American Jewish communities, and we soon came to see that conversion was only a small part of the challenges facing leaders and laypeople seeking to build and support liberal Jewish life today. The Hamas attacks on southern Israel on October 7, 2023, and their impact on the North American Jewish experience further intensified questions of membership and belonging.

Each member of the NAJI seminar contributed to our discussion, bringing both personal experience and scholarly expertise. I am particularly grateful to David Ellenson who, before his untimely death in December 2023, articulated the difference between identity and status, a distinction that is central to this white paper, and to Joy Levitt who

shared stories of her work with candidates for conversion to Judaism, raising important concerns beyond what we were able to find in the existing research.

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—Dr. Christine Hayes

About The Shalom Hartman Institute

The Shalom Hartman Institute is a leading research and educational center serving Israel and world Jewry. We work to enrich the moral and spiritual life of Israel and the Jewish people, deepen the commitment to pluralism and Israel's Jewish and democratic character, and rebuild the covenant between Israel and the Jewish world.

Through our community of outstanding scholars and educators, the Institute develops innovative responses to the challenges of our time, cultivates a new generation of leaders and change agents, and builds transformational educational projects that help inspire a better Judaism and a better Israel for the 21st century.

About The Kogod Research Center

The bicontinental Kogod Research Center for Contemporary Jewish Thought is the Shalom Hartman Institute's think tank for applied research. The KRC is home to more than fifty research fellows, including Hartman staff scholars and affiliated scholars from universities across Israel and North America, who address contemporary challenges facing Israel and Jewish communities worldwide through collaborative inquiry. Building on their individual expertise as scholars and their shared commitment to the thriving of the Jewish people, they develop the ideas, arguments, and frameworks needed to build a better Jewish and Israeli present and future.

The ideas developed in the KRC shape the discourse about Israel and Jewish life in North America through Hartman's public presence, educational programs, publications, podcasts, and other media. Hundreds of thousands of people—including rabbis, Jewish educators, lay leaders, communal professionals, young adults, and Israeli government officials—rely on the work of the KRC as they navigate the challenges of today and build the Israel and Judaism of tomorrow.

ENDNOTES

- 1 For example, all Orthodox communities accept conversions that are grounded in a sincere commitment to halakhic observance and supervised by an orthodox *bet din* (court). However, Orthodox rabbis apply these rules with varying degrees of stringency, with the result that one Orthodox court may not recognize the conversion of another Orthodox court. For an excellent summary and discussion of trends toward leniency in the Sephardic Orthodox community, see Richard Hidary's "Sephardic Approaches to Conversion" in *Conversion, Inter marriage, and Jewish Identity*, ed. Robert S. Hirt, Adam Mintz, and Marc D. Stern (Yeshiva University Press, 2015), 293-328.
- 2 The 2003 sociological survey of the Jewish population of the United States by Gary Tobin and Sid Groeneman estimated 6.0 million Jews defined as individuals who say Judaism is their religion, who have a Jewish background (parent or upbringing), or who view themselves as ethnically or culturally Jewish and specify no other current religion. The same study identified a further "6.7 million adults who are not Jewish but who have a connection to Judaism or the Jewish community. Some are married to Jews and feel identified with the community. Others volunteer a sense of affinity based on intellectual or emotional identification with Jews and Judaism. The largest group, some 4.2 million, consists of adults in the United States who have a Jewish grandparent or great-grandparent or more distant Jewish ancestor."
- 3 See David Ellenson, "'Who Is a Jew?' Issues of Jewish Status and Identity and Their Relationship to the Nature of Judaism in the Modern World," in *Berit Mila in the Reform Context*, ed. Lewis M. Barth (Carol Publishing Group, 1990), 69-81, p. 70.
- 4 "Ask a Rabbi." *Jewish Boston*, March 2015 (<https://www.jewishboston.com/read/ask-a-rabbi-will-i-be-accepted-in-the-jewish-world-as-a-convert-to-judaism>).
- 5 Cited in Jane Kaplan, *Interfaith Families: Personal Stories of Jewish-Christian Inter marriage* (Seabury Books, 2005), xi.
- 6 Abigail Auer, "Living Jewish Without Converting" *Sh'ma*, Nov 2008. (<https://www.bjpa.org/content/upload/bjpa/nov0/nov08auer.pdf>). Accessed May 20, 2024.
- 7 These sketches are based on, and combine, the experiences of actual persons as reflected in surveys and anecdotal accounts. All names are fictional. Additional scenarios that capture additional complexities are as follows:

Steven sings in the synagogue choir every week. Doing so reminds him of the Levites in the Temple and helps him feel connected to God. It's also a way to donate time and talent to the Jewish community he loves.

Steven may be Jewish, or he may be a convert, or he may be a non-Jew drawn to the beauty and ritual of Jewish worship and eager to offer the gift of his music to the community that has welcomed him.

After 20 years of marriage to a secular Israeli, Canadian-born Lee has become highly fluent in high-level Hebrew. Her passion for Hebrew and Israeli literature, and for the cultural world that this literature both reflects and creates, inspires and pulses through her own creative writing on Jewish themes.

Lee is quite possibly an Orthodox Canadian Jew who fell in love with secular Hebrew and Jewish literature. When she met the secular Israeli man she would later marry, literature was the primary bridge between their very different Jewish identities. Or perhaps Lee is a non-Jewish Canadian woman, whose encounter with a secular Israeli romantic partner introduced her to a culture, language, and literature that she increasingly wanted to make her own. Perhaps some years into her marriage she formalized her entry into the world of Jewish culture by converting. Or perhaps she decided not to convert because a religious conversion does not accurately reflect the kind of tie that binds her to the Jewish people and their culture.
- 8 For example, Joseph married the Egyptian Asenath who bore Manasseh and Ephraim, eponymous ancestors of two of the twelve tribes. Moses married

the Midianite Zipporah who bore Gershom and Eliezer. There is some biblical evidence for descent through the female line in mixed marriages that were matrilineal, i.e., lived with or near the (Israelite) wife's place of residence. However, most marriages in antiquity were patrilineal and an Israelite woman who married a non-Israelite man would normally have lived with and been incorporated into her husband's people.

- 9 Similarly, citizenship in 5th century BCE Athens was restricted to males born to two Athenian parents. Ezra justified his innovation by analogizing ordinary Israelites to priests. Previously, only priests had been viewed as a "holy seed" that could not be intermixed with non-holy seed. Therefore only priests were prohibited from intermarrying in order to preserve their seed as "holy," i.e., separated out to God. But Ezra declared all Israel to be not merely a holy people but a "holy seed" in a quite literal sense. Mixing holy seed with non-holy seed was in his view a trespass against its sanctity (*me'ilah*) that required an *asham* sacrifice (Ezra 10:19).
- 10 As other ancient writings attest. The writings of Philo and Josephus, for example, indicate that Ezra's characterization of Israel as literal holy seed, his extension of genealogical purity requirements from priests to lay Israelites, and his rejection of conversion and of marriage between Jews and even converted Gentiles were not widely accepted. In *On the Virtues* 102:8, Philo describes Moses' guarantee of the right of non-Jews to join the Israelite community as converts. In *Antiquities of the Jews* 20.17, Josephus tells the story of Queen Helene of Adiabene (a kingdom in northern Mesopotamia) and her son Izates who converted to Judaism in the 1st century CE. There are many other ancient witnesses (textual and archaeological) to Hellenistic and Roman era incorporation of Gentiles (proto-"conversions"). Although Ezra's "holy seed" view was adopted by the separatist community that lived in the caves of Qumran by the Dead Sea until the destruction in 70 CE, it was in general rejected by the Talmudic rabbis.
- 11 Mishnah Qiddushin 3:12 states that the child of a woman and a man with whom she cannot contract a legal marriage follows the status of the mother, but the example given is that of a gentile woman

and an Israelite man. The case of an Israelite woman and a gentile man is not explicitly stated, but later authorities understand this case to be included in this clause and determine that the child follows the status of the Jewish mother in that case. Nevertheless, the beginning of the mishnah states explicitly that in lawful marriages lineage follows the father. It also states that patrilineal descent continues to determine the child's status in mixed-rank marriages. For example, the child of a priest or a Levite who marries an Israelite woman of a lower rank takes the status of the father. In other words, the rules of lineage in the 3rd century were less clear than is often assumed. For a recent criticism of the idea that the Bible's patrilineal descent was replaced by a principle of matrilineal descent in Talmudic times see Rabbi Jeremy Gordon's *The Principle that Wasn't: A Reevaluation of the Matrilineal Principle in Biblical and Rabbinic Judaism*, <https://rabbionanarrowbridge.blogspot.com/2021/07/the-principle-that-wasnt-re-evaluation.html>. Whether or not the principle of matrilineal descent was in fact fully established in Talmudic times, it would come to prevail in post-Talmudic rabbinic Judaism.

- 12 The community still allowed certain conversions (for example, the conversion at birth of adopted children and "legitimate" conversions that occurred before the ban) but when determining *biological* claims to Jewish status, it insisted on descent from two parents.
- 13 However, different standards formulated by rabbinic authorities in Israel determine Jewish status for the purposes of marriage, divorce, burial, and more. Status determinations may differ depending on the context or purpose of the determination.
- 14 In Exodus 12, circumcision enables foreign-born males to participate in the rituals of memory at the heart of Passover (including consumption of the Paschal sacrifice), rituals from which a native-born Israelite is excluded if he is not circumcised. The story of Dinah in Genesis 34 is a tragic source and a negative example that nevertheless attests to the principle that circumcision makes a male a member of the community with access to certain rights and responsibilities, including the right to marry an Israelite woman.

- 15 For example, Tsipporah the wife of Moses, and Ruth the Moabite, wife of Naomi's son and later of Naomi's kinsman Boaz. The children of both of these foreign women were deemed to be Israelites. Israelite kings had foreign wives and their children were deemed Israelite.
- 16 An example of the maximalist position is found in Sifra Qedoshim 8:3. Commenting on Leviticus 19:33–34 which exhorts the Israelite to treat the *ger* like a “citizen” (i.e., like a native-born Israelite) and understanding the *ger* to be a convert rather than a resident alien (see below), the Sifra states: “Just as the native-born Jew takes upon himself all the words of the Torah, so must the convert take upon himself all the words of the Torah. From here they ruled: If a convert took upon himself all the words of the Torah except one, he is not to be accepted. R. Yosi b. R. Yehudah says: Even [if he did not accept] a small matter among the inferences of the Scribes.” An example of a minimalist view is Hillel's willingness to convert a non-Jew simply because he expresses a desire to convert (Bavli Shabbat 31a). Hillel tells the convert to “Go and learn,” suggesting that conversion is the beginning of a journey of learning. An intermediate position is found in the conversion ceremony outlined in Bavli Yevamot 47a–b, in which the convert must learn and accept some things with the expectation that he or she will gradually learn more.
- 17 See for example, the op-ed titled “Conversion shouldn't be the only path to joining the Jewish people” penned by Steven M. Cohen and Kerry M. Olitzky (<https://www.jta.org/2013/11/29/ideas/op-ed-conversion-shouldnt-be-the-only-path-to-joining-the-jewish-people>) as well as articles at <https://forward.com/opinion/188802/dont-believe-in-god-come-aboard> and <https://forward.com/opinion/188947/another-way-to-join-the-jewish-people>.
- 18 Avraham Infeld argues that because Jews are a people rather than a religion, becoming a Jew should be understood on the model of adoption rather than conversion, since the latter suggests a change in religion. See Infeld's short piece “Adoption, not Conversion” at <https://ejewishphilanthropy.com/who-is-a-jew-peoplehood-versus-religion-2> as well as his book, *A Passion for a People: Lessons from the life of a Jewish Educator*, written with Clare Goldwater and published by YouCaxton Publications in 2017.
- 19 Jennifer Thompson's multi-year study of intermarried couples in Atlanta shows that intermarried couples care deeply about carrying on Jewishness in their families and through their descendants, out of concerns for Jewish population decline, respect for lives lost in the Holocaust, or love of strong traditions. She contests the dominant cultural narrative about intermarriage as assimilation and shows how it obscures the many similarities between intermarried and inmarried Jews. Jennifer Thompson, *Jewish on their Own Terms: How Intermarried Couples are Changing American Judaism* (Rutgers University Press, 2013).
- 20 For more see Jennifer Thompson, “[Look Who's Raising Jews](#),” in the *Forward*, May 19, 2010.
- 21 The Pew Research Center survey, “[Jewish Americans in 2020](#),” found that among Americans older than 49 with one Jewish parent, roughly one in five (21%) identifies as Jewish. The percentage increases to nearly half (47%) in the 18–49 age range, while nearly 60% of those under the age of 30 identified as Jewish.
- 22 Exodus 12:19, “No leaven shall be found in your houses for seven days. For whoever eats what is leavened, that person shall be cut off from the community of Israel (*'adat Yisrael*), whether he is a non-Israelite resident (*ger*) or a citizen (*ezrach*) of the land.” The second ritual of collective memory observed at Passover, eating the Passover lamb, requires circumcision—a requirement that extends equally to *ger* and citizen. Notably, individuals ineligible for specific ritual observances based on status (e.g., circumcised vs. uncircumcised, *ger* vs. Israelite vs. Levite vs. priest, male vs. female) are still members of the larger collective. Thus, a native-born Israelite who is unable to be circumcised, for example, remains a member of the Israelite community even though he cannot partake of one of its rituals of collective memory (eating the Passover lamb). Similarly, the uncircumcised *ger*, like the uncircumcised Israelite, is constituted as a member of *'adat Yisrael* through the ritual of unleavened bread and other rituals,

- without becoming a full Israelite subject to the full rights and responsibilities associated with that status.
- 23 See Deuteronomy 16:10–11, “Then you shall observe the Feast of Weeks for the Lord your God offering your freewill contribution according as the Lord your God has blessed you. You shall rejoice before the Lord your God with your son and daughter, your male and female slave, the [family of the] Levite in your communities, and the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow in your midst, at the place where the Lord your God will choose to establish the divine name”; Deuteronomy 16:13–14, “After the ingathering from your threshing floor and your vat, you shall hold the Feast of Booths for seven days. You shall rejoice in your festival, with your son and daughter, your male and female slave, the [family of the] Levite, the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow in your communities”; Deuteronomy 31:12 “Gather the people—men, women, children, and the strangers in your communities—that they may hear and so learn to revere the Lord your God and to observe faithfully every word of this Teaching.”
- 24 Numbers 15:14–16, “And when, throughout the ages, a stranger who has taken up residence with you, or one who lives among you, would present an offering by fire of pleasing odor to the Lord—as you do, so shall it be done by the rest of the congregation. There shall be one law for you and for the resident stranger; it shall be a law for all time throughout the ages. You and the stranger shall be alike before the Lord; the same ritual and the same rule shall apply to you and to the stranger who resides among you”; Numbers 15:26–30, “The whole Israelite community and the stranger residing among them shall be forgiven, for it happened to the entire people through error. In case it is an individual who has sinned unwittingly, that person shall offer a she-goat in its first year as a sin offering. The priest shall make expiation before the Lord on behalf of the person who erred, for having sinned unwittingly, making such expiation that the person may be forgiven. For the citizen among the Israelites and for the stranger who resides among them—you shall have one ritual for anyone who acts in error.
- But the person, whether citizen or stranger, who acts defiantly reviles the Lord; that person shall be cut off from among the people.”
- 25 For example, the prohibition of Molekh worship (Leviticus 20:2, Deuteronomy 17:2–5 and 18:10) and the prohibition of certain sexual acts (Leviticus 18:26).
- 26 For example, work prohibitions on the Sabbath (Exodus 20:9); work prohibitions on Yom Kippur (Leviticus 16:29); blasphemy (Numbers 15:30); some dietary restrictions (Leviticus 17:8–16); rules concerning the failure to remove corpse impurity (Numbers 19:9–10).
- 27 For example, the ritual purity laws listed in Leviticus 12–15 are directed at and thus mandatory for Israelites only, although voluntary observance by a resident alien is not explicitly precluded. Exceptionally, corpse impurity applies to all individuals (as implied by Numbers 31) since the prohibition of murder applies to all individuals.
- 28 For laws of bodily injury and homicide, see Leviticus 24:17–22, “If any party kills any human being, that person shall be put to death. One who kills a beast shall make restitution for it: life for life. If any party maims another [person]: what was done shall be done in return—fracture for fracture, eye for eye, tooth for tooth. The injury inflicted on a human being shall be inflicted in return. One who kills a beast shall make restitution for it; but one who kills a human being shall be put to death. You shall have one standard for stranger and citizen alike: for I the Lord am your God.” For the law protecting a laborer, see Deuteronomy 24:14, “You shall not abuse a needy and destitute laborer, whether a fellow Israelite or a stranger in one of the communities of your land.”
- 29 Leviticus 23:22, “And when you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap all the way to the edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest; you shall leave them for the poor and the stranger: I the Lord am your God”; Deuteronomy 14:29, “Then the [family of the] Levite, who has no hereditary portion as you have, and the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow in your settlements shall come and eat their fill, so that the Lord your God may bless you in all the enterprises you undertake”; Deuteronomy 26:11–13, “And you shall enjoy, together with the

[family of the] Levite and the stranger in your midst, all the bounty that your God has bestowed upon you and your household. When you have set aside in full the tenth part of your yield—in the third year, the year of the tithe—and have given it to the [family of the] Levite, the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow, that they may eat their fill in your settlements, you shall declare before the Lord your God: ‘I have cleared out the consecrated portion from the house; and I have given it to the [family of the] Levite, the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow, just as You commanded me; I have neither transgressed nor neglected any of Your commandments.’”

- 30 In Exodus 18, Yitro celebrates with the community, offers crucial counsel, then returns to his own land.
- 31 Yael defeats Israel's enemy Sisera (Judges 4:17–22) while Yehonadav joins Yehu to battle the priests of Baal in 2 Kings 10. Malchiyah, a descendant from Hobab through the Rechabite line, sees to the repair of the Dung Gate in Nehemiah's day (Nehemiah 3:14). Some Kenite clans are described as scribes living in Judah (2 Chronicles 2:55). According to rabbinic tradition, these scribes served on the Sanhedrin, the high court in Israel that met on the Temple Mount (Bavli Sotah 11a, “Yitro... merited that some of his children's children sat [in the Sanhedrin] in the Chamber of Hewn Stone [on the Temple Mount], as it is stated (I Chronicles 2:55): ‘And the families of scribes who dwelt at Jabez, Tirathites, Shimeathites, and Sucathites, these were the Kenites who descended from Hammath, the father of the house of Rechab.’” The rabbis also include Rechabites in the rotation of those who delivered wood for the altar in Temple times (Mishnah Taanit 4:5).
- 32 Despite Talmudic assurances that a *ger* is an Israelite in all respects, a convert is exempt from certain obligations that require or assume literal genealogical descent from Israel's biblical ancestors, including liturgical declarations about one's ancestors. For example, Mishnah Bikkurim 1:4–5 states that a convert born of two non-Israelites may not recite the prayer accompanying the presentation of first fruits because his foreign descent precludes him from saying truthfully, “[I have come into the land] which the Lord swore to our fathers, to give to us” (Deuteronomy 26:3); neither may he say “God of our fathers” in public prayer. However, a tradition in the Yerushalmi states that a convert may recite the formula since Abraham was the father of many nations and not just Israel: “It has been taught in the name of R. Yehudah, ‘A convert himself both brings [first fruits] and recites [the required declaration from Deuteronomy 26:3]. What is the scriptural basis for this view? “for I have made you the father of a multitude of nations” (Genesis 17:5) – In the past you were the father of Aram, but henceforward you are the father of all nations. R. Joshua b. Levi said: The law accords with the view of R. Yehudah. A case came before R. Abbahu and he decided it in accord with the view of R. Yehudah” (Bikkurim 1:4, 64a).
- 33 Interpreting Leviticus 21:14's requirement that a priest marry a virgin “of his own people” expansively, some Talmudic rabbis allow a woman who converted at an extremely early age to marry a priest. The relevant Talmudic sources include the Yerushalmi to Qiddushin 4:6; the Yerushalmi to Bikkurim 1:5; and Bavli Qiddushin 60b, 64a, 78b. Later codes tended to adopt stricter views.
- 34 Positive assessments of Yitro are found in Mekhilta Yitro to Exodus 18:27 and in Bavli Sotah 11a; of Antoninus in Genesis Rabbah 11:4, the Yerushalmi to Megillah 1:11 and 3:2, Bavli Berakhot 57b, Bavli Avodah Zarah 10a-b, and Bavli Sanhedrin 91a-b; of Ketiah bar Shalom in Avodah Zarah 10b; of Dama ben Natina in Bavli Avodah Zarah 23b. A negative portrait of non-Jews emerges from much of Mishnah Avodah Zarah.
- 35 For example, the New Testament and the historian Josephus refer to gentiles in Asia Minor who adhered to certain Jewish practices and beliefs (Sabbath and festival observance, synagogue attendance, worship of the Jewish god, fasting, financial support) without converting to Judaism. See for example, Luke 7:4–5; John 12:20–21; Acts 13:14–16, 42–48; Acts 17:1–4, 16–17; Acts 18. See also Josephus, *Antiquities* 14.110, and Josephus, *Jewish War* 7:45, “Moreover, they [the Jews of Syria] were constantly attracting to their religious ceremonies multitudes of Greeks and these they had in some measure incorporated with

themselves.” Such people were sometimes referred to as “god-fearers.”

- 36 A famous inscription from the synagogue in Aphrodisias (in Asia Minor) lists Jews, converts, and “god-fearers” as members of the synagogue and/or donors to its charitable activities, an indication of robust inter-group cooperation and positive relations in the city in the late 4th century CE. The sermons of the 4th century church father, John Chrysostom, denounce Christians for observing the Sabbath, frequenting synagogues, participating in Jewish festivals, and taking part in other observances including circumcision.
- 37 See note 2 above for Tobin and Groeneman’s 2003 estimate of “6.7 million adults who are not Jewish, but who have a connection to Judaism or the Jewish community” in North America.
- 38 Some congregations recognize non-Jews as members in good standing of their community. Some rabbis pronounce blessings or conduct annual rituals of recognition, often as part of high holiday services. Rabbi Janet Marder’s “Blessing for non-Jewish Spouses” first delivered in 2004 has been used or adapted by many others, including Rabbi Paul Kipnes (<https://www.paulkipnes.com/blessing-for-non-jewish-spouses-and>) and Rabbi Jill Perlman (<https://buildingjewishbridges.org/finding-a-synagogue/a-rosh-hashanah-blessing-for-non-jewish-loved-ones-from-the-rabbi>).
- 39 See Thompson, *Jewish on Their Own Terms*.
- 40 See especially the works by Allan Berkowitz and Patti Moskowitz, Jane Kaplan, Catherine Hall Myrowitz, and Jennifer Thompson listed in the [Bibliography](#).



מכון שאלום הרטמן
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