

CONGREGATION AGUDATH JACOB

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From the Desk of
Rabbi Ben-Zion Lanxner

CONVERSION TO JUDAISM

Let me start by extending a very special **MAZAL TOV** to two very special and dear individuals, Paty Haessly and Christopher Culver, for officially joining the Tribe, as they successfully finalized their conversion in the presence of a Beit Din in Dallas, a Rabbinical court of three G-d fearing Rabbis.

The most popular question Rabbis get from prospective candidates for conversion is: “Why do the Rabbis make conversion to Judaism so hard?”

We personally know many Jews who don’t keep anything Jewish, don’t observe Kashrut and don’t even attend regular services on Shabbat, yet the Rabbis demand full observance to Converts in order to become a Jew. Do you really think that this is fair? “

My Response:

I can admit you have a good point here. Religion, after all, is all about belief. If you believe, you’re in; if not, you’re out. So why can’t anyone who believes in the Jewish religion, be considered Jewish? And why are those who don’t believe and don’t keep any of the Jewish practices still considered Jews?

That’s what happens when you view the Jewish people through another people’s lexicon—it all looks very puzzling. What, though, if we look at ourselves through our own language, through the original Hebrew?

Let us start with this word *religion*. Is Judaism a religion? Is that the correct word?

Religions generally start when one person or one teacher spreads his teachings to many disciples.

The people who accept to follow these teachings are considered coreligionists. Their common beliefs hold them together as a community.

Moses didn't preach a religion to individuals. He was more like a civil-rights leader, who stood for empowerment of the people. He took his own people out of slavery, who already had a common heritage, along with so many other people, mostly Egyptians who witnessed all the miracles, who had decided to join that people, the Torah actually names them **Erev Rav**, the "Multitudes" and brought them all together to Mount Sinai.

At Sinai, he brokered a Covenant between a nation and G-d.

G-d said, "I choose this nation to be my elected people, (**My Chosen People**), my messengers of Torah's wisdom to the world". **The nation, in turn, chose G-d, saying, Na'asseh Venishmah** "Whatever G-d says, we will do and we will obey".

The Jewish people, then, are best described as the "People of the Covenant"—meaning that they are a people *because* of a Covenant. In Hebrew, a Covenant is a ***Brit***—in this case, not a *brit* between two individuals, or even between an individual and G-d (as Abraham had made), it is even far bigger than that, it is a ***Brit*** between an entire nation, hundreds of thousands of people and G-d Almighty.

So, let's replace *religion* with ***Brit*** and see what happens.

The ***Brit*** is what defines us as a Nation, as a Holy people—not geographic vicinity, government or culture.

Even if we live in different countries, speak different languages, establish different leaders and eat different foods, that Divine Covenant still bonds us.

Most significantly: I would dare go further and state that even if we stop keeping our obligations under that Covenant or decide not to believe in it, the Covenant still endures.

A Covenant, you see, is a two-way deal. It takes two to make it and two to break it. Just because the people have let go, doesn't mean G-d has. That's why it's called

an “Eternal Covenant”—because even if the people may be changing their mind, G-d doesn’t change His.

So, there’s the difference: In a religion, you belong because you believe. In a brit (in this case, Judaism), you believe because you belong.

Believing is part of the *Brit*. So are all the other *Mitzvot*—obligations—of the Covenant. It doesn’t matter whether you believe in that Covenant or those obligations, or believe that G-d obligated you, or believe in G-d at all. You can’t fight with history. You are part of these people by virtue of having been born into it, and that’s who these people are and what these people do. A deal is a deal.

Let us now look at another word—**Conversion**—and things will become even clearer.

Let’s say you weren’t born into the Jewish people. Let’s say you decide you want to enter into the same Covenant as every other Jew. If this were a religion, no problem—you would just accept upon yourself whatever beliefs and rites are expected of you, and you’re in.

That’s what people generally mean when they talk about Conversion.

But this is different, as I am trying to explain, this is a ***Brit***.

To enter into G-d’s Covenant with His people, the Jewish people, believing and doing is not enough. You need to become part of that people. How do you do that?

In this way, becoming Jewish is very much like becoming an American, a Moldavian or a Belgian citizen.

You can’t come to a country and declare yourself a member.

It’s a two-way street: aside from you choosing your country, the government of that country has to decide to accept you.

Similarly, if you choose Judaism, you also need Judaism to choose you. Like we said, a Covenant is a two-way deal.

So, you need to become a ***Ger***. A ***Ger*** is more than a Convert.

A **Ger** literally means someone who has come to live among a people to which he or she was not born into.

A naturalized alien. That's how the **Ger** is described in Torah, and how the process of becoming a **Ger** is described in the Talmud: "A **Ger** who comes to sojourn among us."

By joining these people, the **Ger** instantly becomes part of the same Covenant to which the people are part. And although the most essential part of joining these people is to accept the same obligations of the Covenant in which they are obligated, *it is not by force of his or her acceptance that the **Ger** is obligated.*

Proof is, if the **Ger** later has a change of mind, it helps nothing, it does not make any difference anymore. What's done is done. A deal is a deal. The **Ger** is obligated no matter what, because he or she has now also become "a child of the Covenant."

That's one difference between this particular Jewish people's citizenship and citizenship of a modern country: You could always renounce your citizenship of a particular country.

A Jew, however, is a member of an Eternal Covenant. Once he or she is in, there's no way out.

That is for Life. Going even further, even if he or she renounces and gets baptized as a Christian, once Jewish always Jewish.

In other words, I would say briefly, a **Ger** is an adopted member of the Jewish family. In the words of the paradigm of all **Gerim**, Ruth the Moabite, "Your people are my people; your G-d is my G-d."

The rituals of that adoption are the same as what the Jewish people went through at Sinai: circumcision for males, immersion in a **Mikvah** (ritual bath), and acceptance of all Torah obligations.

The crucial element, however, is that all of these are to be supervised by a tribunal of learned, observant Jews, a **Beit Din**—representing none other than G-d Himself.

Their job is not only to witness that the **Ger** was properly circumcised and fully immersed in the Mikvah, but also to ensure that the **Ger** is duly cognizant of the obligations of the Covenant into which he or she is entering.

That's another distinction between obtaining citizenship of a modern nation and joining the Jewish People: citizenship is mostly associated with the attainment of rights and privileges, while Jewish citizenship (**Gerut**) is principally concerned with the responsibilities that come along with those privileges.

If the **Ger**-wannabe learns of these obligations and feels they are more than he or she bargained for, so be it. It's OK, no problem!

Nothing happened yet that cannot be reversed at this time.

You don't have to be Jewish to be a good person and to be loved by G-d.

There is still that one other option available and that is to Believe in one G-d and keep His laws—the 7 Noachide laws, the laws of Noah, which will then consider you the be a **Ger Hassid**, a Righteous Gentile.

You will still have the same guarantee of the World to Come as a Jew has at the Final Redemption, at the arrival of Mashiach Ben David, the Messiah Son of David.

By the way, this qualifies a Gentile to live in Israel today according to the Torah. (This personal acceptance of the Noahide Code can optionally be formalized by making a declaration before a Jewish "court" a Beit Din of three Rabbis).

Judaism—as opposed to Jewishness—is not just only for Jews.

But if the **Ger** does accept to take on the belief of the One and only G-d and keep and observe G-d's Torah & His commandments, out of a sincere and deep conviction in the Truth of Torah without any other motivation whatsoever, then he or she is reborn as an eternal Jew, the same as any one of us, who was born into the Covenant. Consequently, the correct name for that Gentile who became a Jew, would be a **Ger Tzedek**, a true convert.

Our Sages taught us that the Soul of the **Ger**, along with all the other Neshamot, stood at Mount Sinai.

In at least one way, the **Ger** is yet greater, for the **Ger** is the lost child who has found his way home.

Al Pi Halachah, Halachically speaking, the **Ger** always had a Jewish Soul, Neshamah.

His Neshamah, as Kabbalah teaches us, happened to have been re-incarnated in such particular set of circumstances that it was “**Megalgeil**” (**reincarnated**) in a non-Jewish mother and that re-incarnation was such that this Soul went through a very rigorous test and obviously passed the test because that little spark of the Jew in that Soul, was only seeking at this stage, to be Jewish.

So, after conversion, Halachah recognizes that this new reborn person was always Jewish, and considers him or her as such. That is also why we do not refer to that Ger Tzedek as a **Convert**, but as a Jew who got lost in a Gentile body but who finally found his way back home with his original people, Am Yisrael, the Jewish People.

He or she is Halachically a Jew, 100% equal with exactly the same status as any other born Jew, like you and I. No difference whatsoever!! And I cannot stress that enough, because I too often hear people calling the new reborn Jews as Converts. I will not stand for it. They deserve to be called Jews and not only that they deserve and earned it, the Talmud teaches us that G-d always favored the Convert because he or she had the choice, we born Jews did not.

So, I am imploring you from now on, to make a mental note and not call them by any other names but Jews. It is very condescending and shameful, to say the least, and as I said earlier, an individual who became a Jew through Halachic conversion is a Jew. No doubt about it whatsoever. It's final.

It is also incumbent upon all of us to realize that for all such converts to Judaism, it has always entailed supreme sacrifices; breaking off family ties, relationships with friends, giving up an easier life, perhaps also a promising future in the former society -- all in order to embrace a religion that has often been despised and persecuted by the world at large, and to join a people that has always been a small minority in a hostile world, today more than ever.

In former days, throughout the Middle Ages, converting to Judaism meant risking one's very life.

Yet despite all of this, there have been Gerei-Tzedek throughout the generations who freely chose to join the Jewish people, because they came to realize that it is truly "**A Kingdom of G-d's Servants and a Holy Nation,**" and decided to become a member of this Nation and lead a life sanctified by the Divine Torah and Mitzvot.

So, to conclude, if I have to characterize what Paty (Eden) and Chris (David) demonstrated during this past year, it's exactly that. They are the lost children who truly and sincerely found their way back home.

Their tenacity, their resilience to learn and understand, to research and to acquire Torah and the curiosity to know everything there is to know was simply amazing and re-invigorating.

We all want you to know, that even before, while you were on your way to return back home, we at Agudath Jacob felt you were already although unofficially, part of our Family.

I, as your Rabbi, I had the responsibility to guide and teach you all along, but I had also all the fringe benefits.

The pleasure you gifted me with and satisfaction along with the pride to see and to witness your weekly progress, your total surrender to Hashem, when reciting the Sh'ma Israel, how you really love the G-d of Israel with all your heart and with all your soul....

So, in turn, I want you to know that personally, I love you both with all my heart and being.

On this Shabbat Lech Lecha, you were officially taking the yoke of the Mitzvot and therefore considered one of us. Your People are my People, My G-d is your G-d, my Home is your Home. You are welcome here and will always be welcomed here, with open arms....

May Hashem Bless you all and keep you always safe and strong to be His faithful servants. Amen

Rabbi Ben-Zion Lanxner

PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

“*Lech L'cha*: Annual Presidential Address, 5786”

Dr. Jeff Levin

L'shanah tovah. G'mar chatimah tovah.

A year ago, I began my last Annual Address with acknowledgment of the treacherous time that we Jews find ourselves in throughout the world. I also posed a question: when hasn't it been? It's an old story. That doesn't make it any easier for us, recognizing that this is nothing new, but it should give us great confidence in our resilience. We can endure anything. Now, please G-d, the *tsurises* should end soon, but, no matter, we'll still be here. Our belief in one G-d, our love of Torah, our support of Israel, and our commitment to *mitzvot* will never waver. The hailed opinion leaders of society may not like us for that, but...tough. That's their problem—something they can take up with their maker when this life ends, and good luck with that. But, notwithstanding, the wickedness that they do does affect us, and so we have to deal with the fallout.

Thank G-d, we have everything that we need to prevail. I mean that cosmically—we have Hashem and we have His Torah and we have His faithfulness to us—and we also have that right here in Waco. We have a wonderful *shul*, in a paid-for building—and I hope everyone realizes what a rarity that is—and we have a magnificent Rabbi who's a great font of spiritual wisdom and guidance and encouragement. For some of us, Jews by choice, Rabbi Lanxner may be the only Rabbi we've ever known. How blessed we are; and let me let you in on a little secret: they aren't all like him. We won the Rabbi lottery, for sure. So no matter what happens on the world stage—and of course we all pray continually for our homeland, Eretz Yisrael—we have been blessed with the ability to have a full, traditional Jewish religious life here in Waco, Texas. We are a small-ish and semi-aging Jewish community in a small city, so, my gosh, we won the *shul* lottery, too.

To keep it going, though, we all need to step up. Every one of us. We're getting by, *baruch Hashem*—or should I say *kinehora*—but it's an ongoing process, and we can never get to the point where we become complacent. I've been most heartened over the past year by how so many of our members, including our incredibly devoted friends in the conversion cohort, have taken part in helping us to make physical improvements to our building and, recently, to beautify our grounds. All of these efforts have improved our synagogue, for sure, and have saved us oodles of money, definitely, but they've also helped forge and strengthen bonds of

friendship and fellowship. For a congregational president—heck, for the leader of any organization or institution—this is the most rewarding thing imaginable. So, let's keep it up!

There are three areas in which we must continue to move forward, and I want us to focus on them in the coming year.

First, we need more attendance at our services. On average, we do fine on Fridays; we usually have a *minyan*, and then some. On Saturdays, it's more hit-or-miss: we mostly have a *minyan*, but sometimes fall just a bit short. Of course, like every congregation in every faith tradition, we have our regulars, who seem to be here almost every time the door is open. G-d bless you and *yasher koach*. We're so grateful for your devotion. We also have several folks in our conversion cohort, and they're here regularly, too. So, our *minyan* future actually looks pretty good. But, still, I'd like to put out a challenge to those who aren't regulars, and even those who are just in the couple-times-a-year category. If you could commit to come *davven*, say, on the various Jewish holidays and whenever you have a *yahrzeit*—oh my gosh, all by itself that would be awesome and would probably ensure *minyanim* on a constant basis.

Second, we would benefit from increased contributions. But, then, I suspect every president of every synagogue or church in the country could probably say the same thing. As noted, we own our building, which is no small blessing, but to meet budget and expenses we have to draw down the interest on our endowment fund earlier and earlier each year. In preparing this year's remarks, I've struggled with how to couch this. Meaning, either (a) we're in dire straits and our immediate survival is in jeopardy—which simply isn't true; or (b) everything's rosy and we have nothing at all to be concerned about—which also isn't true. Our situation is neither (a) nor (b), but it could go either way. We're so grateful for everyone's efforts and current levels of contribution—through dues, donations, labor, etc. But let's see if we, especially those among us who may have some means, can make a special effort in this coming year to find ways to do more. Listen, it's my job as President to bring this up and ask, so don't shoot the messenger, so I'm asking. One really nice way to give is to identify something in particular that you'd like to support—a meal, an event, a cause—or a person that you'd like to honor, such as a friend or fellow congregant or relative of blessed memory. The latter is such a *mitzvah*. It benefits the cause you're supporting; it benefits you the giver as a great source of *zechus* (or merit), and it benefits the *neshamah* (or soul) of the person that you're honoring. This is a characteristically traditional Jewish way to support one's *shul*, and it does such good all the way around.

Third, we need more members. This is something that, if I recall, I think every President has mentioned in his or her annual address since Lea and I started coming here in 2010. At present, this need could be fulfilled in three ways. We'd love to see former members come back. Oftentimes, once the kids are grown and moved away, the parents stop coming. Others may have left for other reasons. No matter, we welcome their return. We'd also love to see folks who have been coming to services here and contributing to the life of the *shul* to formally join us. You're already part of the family, so make it official. The dues of our members help keep us going. Finally, we'd love to sign up new members among the Jews of Central Texas who may not know about us, or who know we're here but haven't attended. In every place that I've ever lived in my entire life, if you added up the number of members or family units of all of the synagogues, it doesn't exhaust the number of Jews in the community. Sometimes it doesn't even come close. Now, I have no idea how many unaffiliated Jews there are in this area, but I suspect that there are quite a lot. I'd like to ask those among us here who know of such folks to encourage them to come *davven* with us, to try us out. If they end up joining, terrific. And if they instead decide to go with our sister congregation, that's great, too. I just feel such sadness for Jews by heritage who are disconnected from the practice of Judaism. Let's see what we can do in the coming year.

I entitled these remarks, "*Lech l'cha*," or "go forth," one of my favorite passages in the whole Torah. It's from *Sefer B'reishit* 12:1: *Vayyomer Ad-nai el-Avram lech-l'cha* ("And Hashem said to Abram, 'Go forth.']"). That's the charge that I'm placing before all of us for the coming year. We've spent the past Jewish year getting our house in order, literally, inside and out, and building up a cadre of new Jews. Now it's time to look outward: to build relationships with unaffiliated Jews and welcome them here, to travel to Israel perhaps (as I did this past summer on a medical mission), to speak up for and defend our people when we're under verbal assault from ignorant people, and to communicate to our friends among the gentile world through our daily actions and comportment what it means to be a Jew. Finally, let's not be resistant to making common cause with those among our Christian friends and colleagues and neighbors who strongly support Israel and our people. Let's let them know how deeply we appreciate their fellowship and solidarity.

To close, let me personally thank our Board of Trustees; our Executive Committee; our spiritual leader and *mara d'atra*, Rabbi Lanxner, and Rebbetzin Susan; our new office administrator, Kathleen Keller, and departing administrator, Shannon Reynolds; those members of law enforcement who provide security for our services and for our *shul*—a very special thank you; and all of our many volunteers

for all of your assistance and support. And thank you most of all to the membership of Congregation Agudath Jacob for your continued investment in the life of our *shul* as we move into the Year 5786.

L'shanah tovah. G'mar chatimah tovah. And may we all be inscribed and sealed for a sweet new year.

L'shalom,
Jeff Levin

November Service Schedule

Friday, October 31

Kabbalat Shabbat	6:00 pm
Candle Lighting	6:22 pm

Saturday, November 1

Shacharit	10:00 am
Shabbat Ends	7:16 pm

Friday, November 7

Kabbalat Shabbat	6:00 pm
Candle Lighting	5:16 pm

Saturday, November 8

Shacharit	10:00 am
Shabbat Ends	6:11 pm

Friday, November 14

Kabbalat Shabbat	6:00 pm
Candle Lighting	5:12 pm

Saturday, November 15

Shacharit	10:00 am
Shabbat Ends	6:08 pm

Friday, November 21

Kabbalat Shabbat	6:00 pm
Candle Lighting	5:09 pm

Saturday, November 22

Shacharit	10:00 am
Shabbat Ends	6:05 pm

Friday, November 28

Kabbalat Shabbat	6:00 pm
Candle Lighting	5:07 pm

Saturday, November 29

Shacharit	10:00 am
Shabbat Ends	6:04 p

ANNOUNCEMENTS

Offices will be closed November 27 for Thanksgiving.



Agudath Jacob Special Social Gathering

Lunch and a movie

Sunday November 9th

We will meet at The OLIVE GARDEN lunch at 1:15pm

Everyone this is Dutch, pay your own tab.

Then we will meet inside the AMC Theater lobby off Valley Mills Drive. at 3:15.

To view a new Hollywood produced Holocaust film called Nuremberg.

Starring Russell Crowe. Film begins at 3:40pm

NOTE: Each participant shall need to purchase their individual tickets

Either on the AMC Galaxy Website (easy to do) or go to the Theatre

this week to pre-purchase your tickets. (Special Note) Select seat in the two back rows

so we can be seated TOGETHER! SEE YOU THERE! 😊



November 1

Benjy Bauer

November 16

Harriet Stupak

November 30

Lourdes Perez

There are no anniversaries this month.

THANK YOU for your donations in October!

Shabbat

Semyon Papernov

Javis Howeth

Inez Bonneville

Jeff Levin

Susan Lanxner

George & Kathleen Keller

Susan Raphael

In Memory Of

Stella Milberger

Susan Raphael

Mary G Settle

Joseph Settle

Reina Bauer

Bauer Family

Harvey Goldfeder

Jeff Levin

In Honor Of

*A HUGE Thank you to EVERYONE who donated in Honor of a loved one
for the Yizkor list for Yom Kippur*

YAHREZEITS

The following names of dearly departed will be read aloud by the Rabbi preceding the Mourner's Kaddish on Shabbat morning. It is fitting and customary that the nearest of kin be present in the synagogue for the recitation of this special prayer in their memory. Attendance not only honors the departed but also enhances and guarantees that a Minyan is present to recite the Kaddish.

Kaddish will be read on Oct/Nov 31/1

Heshvan 9	Mariano Joseph Fusco Mrs. Max Harelik*
Heshvan 10	William Ellis* Mrs. Ruben Gandler *
Heshvan 11	Louis Lipsitz
Heshvan 12	Esther Beerman Betty Greenbaum Bettylee Greenberg L Rosen* Hyman Rosenberg Mrs. Max (Mollie) Siegel*
Heshvan 13	Max Beerman* Morris Commer* Helen Fred* Anna Rae Frindell* Sarah Hoppenstein* Nathan Wolf Koss* Mrs. Toby Novich Margaret Ida Fusco Sevick
Heshvan 14	Mrs. Sophie Levy* Ann Frindell
Heshvan 15	Abe Cohen Jennie Greenberg Sam Reed

Kaddish will be read on November 7

Heshvan 16	Johnnie N Campbell Ida Wolkoff Harris* Jennifer Lanxner Joseph Lebowitz Rabbi Max Zucker
Heshvan 18	Evelyn Burchman Aaron Esserman* Jack Shaw
Heshvan 19	Elaine Berman Maynard J Wizig*
Heshvan 20	Abe Lowich* Mrs. Max (Mollie) Sigel* Nathan Wolf Koss* Mrs. Toby Novich Margaret Ida Fusco Sevick
Heshvan 21	Kittie Heineman Max Schwartz*
Heshvan 22	Betty Hershkovitz*

Kaddish will be read on November 14

Heshvan 23	Mrs. Dave Adams Ida Goldreyer Carl Meyers Benjamin Vince Schiller, Sr
Heshvan 24	Gershon Epstein E Levin* Betty Budin Rosen*
Heshvan 25	Al Budin Anna Korsch Mayer Lipshitz
Heshvan 26	Joseph Levine Joe Harry Lewis* Mollie Roberts* Max F Starr*
Heshvan 27	Nathan Feldt* Jennie Rubin
Heshvan 28	Anne Goodman Feldt* Hyman Lyons* Harry Smith*
Heshvan 29	Hyman Wolf Fink Sarah Smolensky* AL Torchin*

Kaddish will be read on November 21

Kislev 1	George Cohen* Max Ellis Mrs. J Kuttner Frank Lipinsky* Sam Raphael
Kislev 2	Mrs. Cecil Chazanow* Cecilia Fleischman*
Kislev 3	B Kaplan* Charles Handelman Rachel Lachman Minnie Meinstein
Kislev 4	Eva Cohen Adler* Secil Chazanow Geraldine Harelik Ethan Koppman*

Kislev 6	Edith Koss Pauline Koss*
Kislev 7	Mrs. Toby Novich Arthur Schwartz Mrs. Edith R Weisberg

Kaddish will be read on November 28

Kislev 8	Mrs. F Chazanow Archie David Goldfine Isaac Goldstein Rosa Genecov Ellis
Kislev 9	Sophie Blank Mrs. Isaac Feldt Jack Goldberg Sarah Holste Isidor Israel* Wm Petchesky Dora Sackett Beatrice Segal* Mrs. M Wise*
Kislev 10	Joe L Reed* Sol Siegel Hannah Udashen*
Kislev 11	Carol Mithcell
Kislev 12	Sam Gelberger Mina Parven Samuel Milberger* Mrs. Goldye Solomon* Toby Zelda Zeichner
Kislev 13	Miriam Leah Berkman* Phillip Stupak*
Kislev 14	Stanley Marmelzadt Lilian Mendelsohn