

Rabbinic literature tells us that a convert to Judaism should be turned away three times before a rabbi should seriously consider a person's desire to convert. Three times you are to be turned away.

Here's how it plays out:

Knock, knock.

Who's there?

I want to convert to Judaism.

Listen, I'm very busy, come back tomorrow.

OK, tomorrow.

Knock, knock,

Who is it?

Me - the one who wants to convert.

Knock knock.

Who is it?

It's me, the one who want to be a Jew!

Oh dear come right in, let's study together.

Amazing - three tries to get your foot in the door. Set that aside for a moment.

Several weeks ago, I talked about the latest Jewish demographic survey, published by the Pew Research Center entitled, A Portrait of Jewish Americans.

There are eight million people in the United States willing to claim that they are fully or partly Jewish.

And it is fascinating to see how many options there are for survey participants to indicate Jewish identity. When you go online, you can use a handy calculator tool to see how many Jews there are in the US now. Depending on which boxes you click, you can watch the total Jewish population go up or go down in real time.

Here are some of the options one can choose:

Jewish by religion –

Jews of no religion -

Jewish self-Identification -

No religion -

Jewish affinity . . . and six more categories . . .

But there is no category for converts. Isn't that odd? Why is it there no option of checking off "Converted to Judaism"?

It remarkable and it's ironic because the rabbis teach us that once someone converts, it is forbidden to publicly refer to their former religion. There's a great sensitivity to the convert. According to tradition, you are not supposed to say, "Oh here is my sister-in-law Cindy, who was raised in X faith tradition and now she is Jewish."

Such a public distinction between converts and those who were born Jewish would marginalize converts and prevent them from quickly and seamlessly becoming a part of the community.

The rabbis teach us that in fact, converts are equal to those who are born Jewish.

Perhaps the greatest story of a "Jew by Choice," as we call them now, is the Book of Ruth.

Where Ruth famously says to her mother-in-law, Naomi, “For wherever you go, I will go: wherever you lodge, I will lodge: Your people will be my people and your God, my God. Where you die, I will die, and there I will be buried.”

What an extraordinary statement! “For wherever you go, I will go.” Even when she should have every reason to return to her people, to the place from where she came, she declares her allegiance to her mother-in-law, Naomi, to one God and to the Jewish people.

We live in a new era. We Jews have more freedom now than perhaps ever before in our history. And this era calls for a new approach to conversion. We need to shed the baggage of the rabbis’ “three-tries” approach. We need to avoid getting stuck in old patterns that reflect the values of another era.

When you like something, it is the most natural thing in the world to want to introduce it to the people around you. But yet with Judaism, we often take a backward approach. We question people who express interest in converting, rather than encourage them. We emphasize the serious side of Judaism, the history of our persecution. We ask, “Why would you want to convert to Judaism?”

And then, after the three tries and the skeptical roadblocks and incredulity that one would want to convert, there's a sort of sincerity test we inadvertently subject our converts to once they marry: Did you convert in order to get married?

And I say, "What if the answer is yes? What if they converted out of love? Does that mean the person's conversion was insincere?"

Absolutely not. It is the most natural thing in the world to be introduced to something by the one you love. And like many things in life, we fall in love with it over time.

Of course one of the most commonly heard objections I hear is, "Well, Rabbi, I don't want to ask her to convert, because I don't want her to feel pressured."

What would happen if we asked? It is such a simple question: Have you ever considered converting to Judaism?

And we ask people, especially people we love, for things all the time. And when we feel it is in their best interests to consider something, to explore something, we ask them to do so. And, we figure that they as adults, they are able to say "no" on their own.

I believe we need a new approach to conversion. We must and should speak about Judaism in a way that reflects our love for it. When we do, others see that love and are drawn to it. The Hebrew word יהודי means Jew or Jewish. It comes from the same Hebrew root in the name יהודה – one of the twelve tribes of Jacob. It means joyful praise. It's a beautiful expression: joyful praise. What it means to be a Jew is to express gratitude with joy – a powerful and compelling idea.

It would be to the benefit of the Jewish people, for us, to share our faith tradition with others. There may be people who may be open to the joy of Judaism. We shouldn't shy away from sharing it with them.

Our *parashah*, *Shelakh L'kha*, means “send for yourself.” God tells Moses to send the spies out into the land. But God tells Moses to do it “for yourself.” God says: do it because you want to. Do it for your own sake.

Opening the door of the Jewish community to others is something we should do for our own sake, because we love Judaism and want to share it with others. Genesis tells us the story of Abraham, *lekh l'kha*, God tells him. Go for yourself, go forth from your land to a land that I will show you, but do it for your sake, for your benefit.

In 1989, I called a synagogue to find a class on Judaism. I didn’t have to knock three times. I wasn’t questioned. I was told immediately, “Come and learn.” At each turn in the journey, the door opened and I entered. And yes, I wasn’t Jewish and I had a Jewish boyfriend. Yes, it was our relationship that initially drew me to place that first call. I think that Jewish boyfriend told me about Judaism for his own sake because deep inside he knew that this was his tradition and he wanted to share it. Indeed he did - we celebrate our 25th wedding anniversary this coming year.

What I would like to see in the next Pew study is this: Those who marked the “Jewish affinity” box, those who consider themselves Jewish but aren’t, or those who checked the “Jewish, but no religion” box, tell the Pew Research Center – I am Jewish. I was ready and someone simply asked me.

Knock, knock.

Who’s there?

I want to convert to Judaism.

Come in. Welcome. We have been waiting for you.

Shabbat Shalom.