

Logging on to Judaism

By Bayla Sheva Brenner



A Convert
Retrieves Her Soul
from Cyberspace

In 1993, nearly twenty years after Shoshana Zakar converted to Judaism, she found out she wasn't Jewish.

Zakar had innocently posted a question to an online Jewish discussion group. The responses ultimately led her on a path that would dramatically change her life.

Born in Spokane, Washington, Zakar didn't have much exposure to ideas about God and religion. "Religion didn't play a part in our home life at all," she says. "Other kids would go to church; I didn't." As a teenager, she

began questioning life's meaning but found few satisfying answers. That is, until she took an innovative comparative philosophy class in her senior year of high school. The teacher invited representatives of different religions and life philosophies including Buddhism, Catholicism and Judaism, among others, to explain the "what's" and "why's" of their belief systems. While the other presenters waxed esoteric, Leo Matzner, a concentration camp survivor, spoke of Judaism's belief in one God and its emphasis on the afterlife; whatever a person does in this world, he explained, affects his life in the World to Come. Zakar was captivated. "His words immediately grabbed me," she says. "I

felt good about a faith that says that whatever a person does is important. That was a turning point [for me]."

She hungered to learn more about Judaism but was uncomfortable approaching anyone. So she went it alone. "I read [any] Jewish books I could get my hands on," Zakar says. One of them was the *siddur*, from which she memorized the entire Amidah in English. All of seventeen, Zakar decided she wanted to convert. When she reported this to her parents, they were less than enthused, but consented to support her choice if she agreed to postpone the decision for a year.

That year, she went off to Western

Bayla Sheva Brenner is senior writer in the OU Communications and Marketing Department.

Washington University. Feeling painfully far from home, she turned to Tom, a friend and practicing Christian, for solace. He convinced her that she'd find her answers in Christianity. Zakar threw herself into the Christian coffeehouse scene on campus. "[Often, a person] doesn't understand the difference between feeling warm and fuzzy and having a genuine spiritual experience," says Zakar. "I felt connected and loved, and mistook that for the truth."

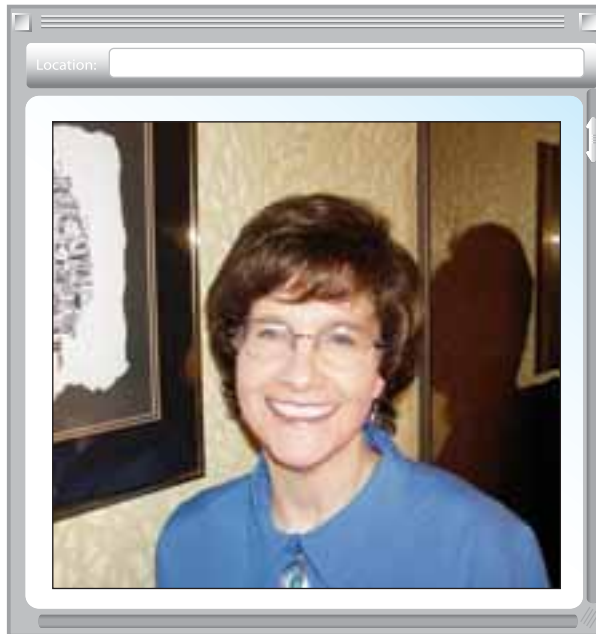
Zakar wrestled with the idea of the Trinity but kept her doubts to herself. "In Christianity you dare not ask questions," she says. "It shows a lack of faith." A telling moment forced the issue. It was October 1973, and a Christian campus group held a social event. In the midst of the festivities, a student entered the room and relayed the news that Israel had been attacked. Zakar's visceral response took her by surprise. "I felt sick," she recalls. "I couldn't possibly stay there celebrating. I didn't feel part of it anymore."

She saw graduating from college as an opportune time to make the final break with Christianity. She returned home to Spokane, accepted a job as a bank teller and decided to re-explore Judaism.

The opportunity came that summer at a local fair. Zakar noticed a booth with a banner stating "Free Soviet Jews." Approaching the booth, she realized she knew the individual manning it; it was Leo Matzner, the survivor who had spoken to her high school class about Judaism some years back. Zakar told him of her interest in Judaism, prompting an invitation to the synagogue where Matzner served as cantor. She accepted.

Moved by the meeting, she wrote

in her journal: "In many ways, I am a shy person and afraid to jump into the



Sue Zakar already considered herself Jewish when a chance encounter online began her journey toward genuine Judaism.

midst of this people on my own. Yet I trust God, and it seems that God is answering that trust. Last night the cantor himself invited me to come to services at Temple. I will go."

She went that Shabbat and, despite feeling a little disoriented while trying to follow the Hebrew prayers, she enjoyed the services. "It was the relief of having made the connection; just being there, in a synagogue, among Jews," says Zakar. "I felt like an orphan who had found a family."

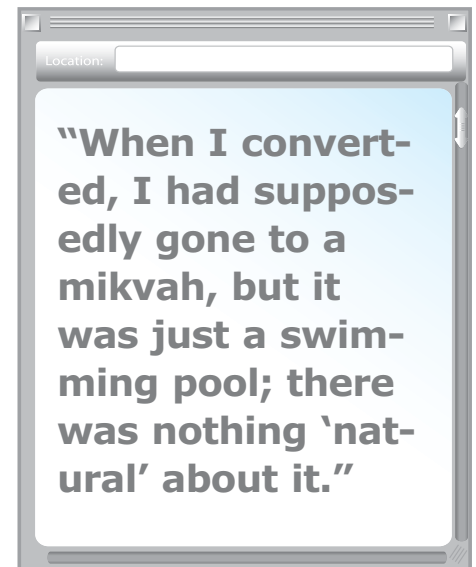
Her introduction to Jewish worship and community occurred in a Conservative synagogue, the only synagogue in the city. Eventually, she decided to ask the rabbi about converting.

The rabbi invited her to join the synagogue's confirmation class, an hour-long session held every Sunday morning for post-Bar and Bat Mitzvah children. Throughout her preparation, she was disturbed by an underlying attitude that conversion was no big deal. "[The course] was not challenging or difficult. The whole process was just 'hoops' that

I was given to jump through to make sure I was more or less serious," she says. "I didn't understand that Jews don't really care whether or not someone becomes Jewish."

In 1975, shortly after Pesach, the rabbi informed Zakar that he was planning to go ahead with the conversion. Excited that she was "finally going to be Jewish," she reviewed the Hebrew dates of the holidays, committed the order of the Hebrew months to memory and chose the name Shoshana, a derivative of her English name, Susan. The rabbi asked that she bring wine, cakes and cookies for the *kiddush* afterward.

During the actual conversion, Zakar and several other would-be converts were called individually into the rabbi's study, where they sat before the *beit din*, composed of the rabbi, the cantor and one of the officers of the synagogue. "I was there for about ten minutes," reports Zakar. "The *beit din* was satisfied [with my answers to their questions], and I was excused." The group went to an apartment complex housing an indoor pool. The rabbi instructed them to change into their



swimsuits, and dunk into the water. "We repeated a solemn statement of commitment and dedication to God and Torah, Judaism and the Jewish people; then we made a blessing and dunked again," says Zakar. They were

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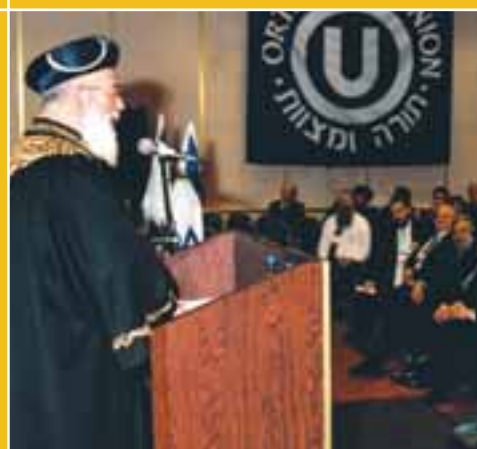
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declared Jewish and returned to the synagogue for the *kiddush*.

Not too long afterward, Zakar moved to Laurel, Maryland, to accept a job offer as a government Russian translator. During this time, she met her husband-to-be, Joe, who was Jewish but not observant. The couple soon married and joined a local Conservative synagogue. "We felt that as Jews, we had a responsibility to support the general Jewish community," says Zakar.

She gave birth to a son and then a daughter. As the family grew, the couple stopped attending services. "It didn't make sense to drag a baby to services, and neither of us was likely to go alone," says Zakar. "I wondered how it was that I had lost that same feeling for God that I had had before the conversion. It seemed like the 'real world' just got in the way of spirituality."

As Zakar had already learned, some of life's most important answers come from unexpected places. One evening, in April of 1993, Joe was busy posting messages on an online news discussion group, when his wife happened to glance over his shoulder. "Are there any Jewish discussion groups out there?" she asked. Within a few minutes, he located one, and it immediately captured Zakar's interest. "I sat there for at least two hours, reading all kinds of messages from Jews of almost every persuasion." She decided to initiate a topic. "Why do Orthodox Jews have the view of women that they do; why aren't women allowed to read from the Torah, and why are they not counted as equals in a minyan?"

She received a flurry of interesting responses. Her spiritual appetite stirred, Zakar joined other Jewish discussion groups, feeling increasingly connected to her cyber *chevra*. "I found a group of people who were actually interested in talking about

Jewish subjects, about God and about religion," she says. "I felt more comfortable asking hard questions ... and much less isolated."

No stranger to difficult questions, Rabbi Dovid Y.B. Kaufmann, director of campus activities for Chabad-Lubavitch of Louisiana and an adjunct



To the Zakars' great relief, their children did not seem disturbed by the news that they would have to convert to Judaism.

professor at Tulane University, maintained an ongoing dialogue with Zakar and suggested she read a number of books that effectively address the role of women in Orthodox Judaism.¹ That Shavuot, Zakar found herself sick in bed reading some of the suggested works. Subsequently, she admitted to

Currently, the Zakars live in Baltimore, Maryland, and are members of The Shul at the Lubavitch Center. Shoshana continues to enjoy growing in *Yiddishkeit*, attending classes at the Women's Institute of Torah. She uses her adept computer talents to develop web sites for Jewish non-profits and serves as the webmaster for various Jewish organizations. David, twenty-four, a software engineer, lives in Silver Spring, Maryland, with his wife, Debbie. They attend the Woodside Synagogue. Julie, twenty-one, attends the University of Maryland.

her online mentor that her perception of the Orthodox view of women was "flat out wrong." Reading all those books prompted her to rethink "many elements of [her] own Jewish lifestyle."

Some of the new information she learned not only took her by surprise but left her shaken. The laws of family purity, for instance. "I knew that when I converted, I had supposedly gone to a mikvah, but it was just a swimming pool; there was nothing 'natural' about it." She read that when one immerses in a mikvah, there should be no intervening substance between one's body and the water. She had worn a bathing suit. "I realized that [this] could be a very serious problem."

Afraid to approach her husband, Zakar mulled over the worrisome repercussions of her situation for a day or two. One night, she couldn't sleep and finally turned to Joe and asked if he would object if she were to speak to an Orthodox rabbi about the potential mikvah problem. "As far as Joe was concerned, I was Jewish; he had no questions about it," says Zakar. "Still, he said I should feel free to do whatever I needed to do in order to settle this in my own mind." She went to bed and cried herself to sleep.

At the suggestion of some of her Internet friends, she contacted Rabbi Zvi Teitelbaum, principal of the Yeshiva of Greater Washington in Silver Spring, Maryland, to set up an appointment. At their meeting, she handed him a letter she had prepared detailing her spiritual journey. He read it carefully, as she silently waited for the verdict. "It seems clear to me," he said, "that you are not Jewish."

"I felt like I was returning my soul," says Zakar. "It was very difficult to hear, but I think it's important to hear the truth." Rabbi Teitelbaum talked about the effect her status would have on her children and possibly her marriage. He also brought up the possibility of her undergoing a kosher conversion. "I had hoped that since I had been living as a Jew for eighteen years, an Orthodox conversion would be a

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[mere] formality. Repeat the mikvah, repeat the blessing and that would be that.” She soon learned that simply saying she wanted to become more observant would not suffice.

She broke the news to her husband but fretted about telling David and Julie, their children, who were twelve and nine at the time. “How strange it is—I often worried about my kids ending up intermarried,” she says. “I never dreamed *I* would.” Joe agreed to do whatever was necessary to help her resolve the situation, but also shared her concerns about the children’s reactions. They decided to hold off telling them about the conversion problem and began, instead, to encourage the family to move toward greater observance. Zakar was concerned that taking on “new rules” would stir negative feelings about Orthodox Judaism. “How do I approach this so [that my family] will understand how *mitzvot* fulfill our lives, not imprison us?” she wrote to her

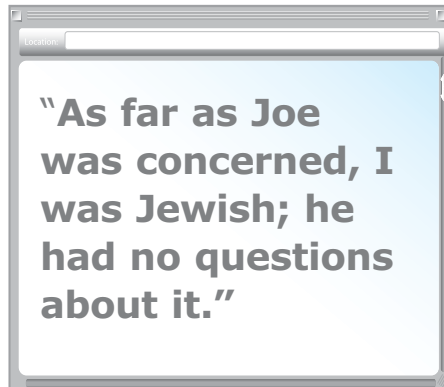
Abraham—Father of All Converts

When Ovadiah the convert queried Rambam as to what the proper wording of his prayers should be, Rambam replied: “Avraham was the father of all his worthy children and of every convert who has converted. Therefore, you should say [in your prayers], ‘Our God and the God of our fathers,’ for Avraham is your father. And all the miracles that happened to us, it is as though they happened to you as well” (*Rambam’s Responsa*, Blau ed., responsum 293).

Internet friends.

As she struggled to change the family lifestyle, she had to contend with

accompanying feelings of guilt. She asked herself: “Is my search for religious fulfillment and truth so important that I should make others suffer?” When her son went on overnight field trips with his public school classmates, Zakar would pack kosher food provisions. “I



did my best to give him his favorite foods and lots of treats, but no delicacy compensated for the teasing that inevitably resulted from [his] being ‘different.’”

The family soon stopped shopping on Saturday and became more vigilant about keeping kosher inside and outside the house. Zakar was pleasantly surprised to see her children’s willingness to grow, despite the difficulties. “Both David and Julie seemed to accept ‘Jews are not supposed to do this’ as a sufficient answer,” says Zakar.

News arrived that Rabbi Mendel Feldman, the *av beit din* in Baltimore, was insistent that the Zakars move to a community with an Orthodox infrastructure before he would agree to the conversion. The Zakars put their house up for sale.


Zakar prepared for her conversion with Rabbi Binyamin Field, director of religious life at Baltimore’s Beth Tfiloh Dahan Community School—meeting with him weekly. She also began shuttling her children the forty-five miles to and from Hebrew school, three days a week. To the Zakars’ great relief, the children did not seem disturbed by the news that they would have to convert to Judaism. After informing David of the *brit dam* requirement, he responded, “You’re going to owe me for this one,

Mom!” She inquired as to the exact price. “Ten bucks and a trip to the arcade.” They happily sealed the deal.

On Friday morning, July 15, 1994, the day the conversions were scheduled to take place, Zakar and her children stood by the phone, waiting to hear when the ceremony would begin. The phone rang. Rabbi Feldman reported that the mikvah was broken, and the conversion would have to be postponed until the following Monday. Zakar fought back tears; she had hoped to celebrate that Shabbat as a Jew. “The broken mikvah felt like a final test and a final preparation.”

That Monday, Zakar and her children finally immersed in the mikvah waters that would make them complete Jews. “I stepped into the [mikvah] water, and a sea split before me,” relates Zakar. “I plunged beneath the surface, rising up to say the most important *berachah* I had ever said in my life.

“People ask what it was that caused me to begin this process. I tell them ... much of it began because of my conversations over the net ... from the deeply honest and caring answers I received from friends that I have known, really just [from] the net.”

The day after her conversion, Zakar wrote a message to her online friends who accompanied her on so much of her journey. “I just wanted to let you know that I have finally come home!” 

Note

1. In 1998, Shoshana Zakar and Dovid Y.B. Kaufmann co-authored *Judaism Online*, which details Zakar’s journey from fundamentalist Christianity to authentic Judaism. Zakar describes the book as “a conversation between David Kaufmann and me over the Internet during the last leg of my journey home ... his insights, shared in dozens, perhaps hundreds, of e-mail messages, helped me find a sure footing on the path. These messages, along with entries from my journal, provide a ‘real time’ glimpse into my life along the way.”