PERSONAL HISTORY

THE CHOOSING ONES

Converting to Judaism in the wake of October 7th.

BY JEANNIE SUK GERSEN

The saga of my Jewish conversion began twenty-five years ago, when I got engaged to my first husband. He'd grown up in an Orthodox family, and his parents, my future in-laws, were devastated that he was marrying a non-Jew; under religious law, a child is born a Jew only if the mother is Jewish, so any kids we had would not technically be Jewish, either. An Orthodox rabbi pleaded with my fiancé one night not to marry me, then vomited all over the sidewalk—possibly from too much alcohol, but the point was vividly made. I remember feeling elated to realize that I could solve the problem by converting. It turned out not to be so simple. For decades, through our marriage and divorce and my subsequent remarriage, I lived like a Jew without becoming one. At home, my family lit candles and said blessings on Shabbat. I shook a *lulav* and *etrog* on Sukkot, taught my children when to make noise during the Megillah reading on Purim, and learned enough Hebrew to read and sing at the Passover Seder. It wasn't until a Yom Kippur sermon last year—and, two weeks later, the events of October 7th—that I decided to finally follow through.

I was raised in a Korean American evangelical church, where people spoke in tongues as the Holy Spirit moved them. My Bible teacher referred to me as "devil's spawn" because I had a habit of picking arguments with Scripture. (Eve's lust for knowledge wasn't sinful, I remember declaring; God's curse on humankind was an overreaction.) By the time I reached adulthood, I'd developed an emphatically rationalist world view, which for a while I thought precluded religion. But I knew the first books of the Old Testament cold, and I still sometimes prayed to God. I also nurtured a nascent affinity for Judaism, born of both disposition and circumstance. My father, a physician, did his medical residency at Brooklyn Jewish Hospital, where his department chief was an Orthodox Jew, and he'd occasionally serve as a "Shabbos goy," turning on lights for the religious doctor on the Sabbath. Like many devout Christians, my mother was fascinated with Israel, and she visited the country often.

My first husband, Noah, didn't ask me to convert—Jewish law stipulates that a conversion must not be done merely to accede to another's wishes—but through him I absorbed Jewish rituals and tradition. The Talmud, with its rabbinic legal codes and commentaries, its reams of debates and interpretive disagreements, provided a heady way into learning a new religion. I took a course in law school taught by an esteemed Jewish-law scholar, Hanina Ben-Menahem, who was known for arguing that, compared with Western legal thought, the Talmud allows judges a degree of discretion to deviate from the letter of the law in order to honor its spirit. Exploring the tradition's built-in disputation—reasoned differences touching on every conceivable subject—I felt that I might have a home in Judaism.

The only conversion that would have been legitimate in my in-laws' community, though, was an Orthodox one, and Orthodox rabbis typically required prospective converts to demonstrate their commitment to a strictly religious life. This would entail following hundreds of mitzvot, or commandments, including extensive kosher dietary laws, prohibitions of work and travel on the Sabbath, and many more obscure rules, such as eschewing garments that contain both linen and wool. It didn't seem plausible for me to promise to maintain such a life style, in part because Noah had let go of rigorous observance. Converting under the more lenient Conservative or Reform denominations felt more within reach, but I feared that pursuing a non-Orthodox conversion would amount to thumbing my nose at my in-laws' standards.

If I'm honest, though, my biggest barrier to conversion back then was a

ILLUSTRATION BY CHLOE CUSHMAN

youthful allergy to the message that I could gain acceptance only by adopting a new identity. My parents and grandparents had fled their home in North Korea during the Korean War to avoid being killed; I was born in Seoul and immigrated with my family to the United States when I was six. The tragic history of my native country was in constant dialogue in my head with the story of the Jewish people, and I knew that Korean and Jewish identities could be compatible. But the Orthodox community at the time didn't make it easy to feel that the two could coexist. While I was considering conversion, Noah and I went to a class reunion of the Modern Orthodox high school that he'd attended. Afterward, when the school's alumni newsletter came in the mail, with a group photo from the reunion, Noah noticed that he and I—the only Asian person there—were missing from the picture, though we both recalled posing for it. (The photographer told Noah, who wrote about the incident years ago, that he had taken some pictures that cut off one side of the group but hadn't selected the final photo.)

As a young immigrant with a fair measure of pride, I recoiled intuitively at such signals that my presence was shameful—a *shanda*, as Jews would say. I allowed those feelings to stymie my pursuit of what I wanted for myself, which was Judaism.

In 2023, on Yom Kippur, the Jewish day of atonement, my friend Rabbi Angela Warnick Buchdahl of Central Synagogue, a Reform congregation in New York City, gave a sermon focussed on atoning for the "sin of passing judgment," and in particular judgment of intermarriage. Buchdahl has a Jewish American father and a Korean Buddhist mother. I've known her since we attended college together, in the nineteen-nineties, when she already seemed poised to become the first East Asian American Jew ordained as a rabbi. She reached that milestone in 2001, and has built a robust following within her congregation and beyond. She is fifty-two years old, with pixie-cut brown hair that frames the light freckles on her heart-shaped face, and a rich alto singing voice. When Buchdahl travels, even Orthodox Jews stop her to share that they watch her services, saying, "Don't tell my rabbi!" I live-streamed her Yom Kippur sermon from my home in Cambridge, along with people in roughly a hundred countries.

Buchdahl drew a contrast between the Bible's Ezra, who promoted the idea of a Jewish "holy seed," and Ruth, a Biblical model of conversion. A Gentile by birth, Ruth married an Israelite and, when she was later widowed, told her mother-in-law, Naomi, "Wherever you go, I will go. Wherever you stay, I will stay. Your people are my people, your God, my God." Ruth became the great-grandmother of King David, an ancestor of the future Jewish Messiah. As Buchdahl later put it to me, "We've been a mixed multitude all along." Plus, in her experience—contra fears about conversion "diluting" Judaism—those who join the faith often "make their Jewish spouses more Jewish." Buchdahl invoked Rabbi Alexander Schindler, a former leader of the American Reform movement, who made the front page of the *Times* in 1978, when he pressed Jews to seek converts. Proselytizing is often understood to be anathema to Judaism, but Buchdahl told congregants, "Throughout Jewish history, you should know, whenever Jews felt safe, we sought new adherents. This moment in America should be such a time."

Two weeks later came October 7th. Hamas invaded Israel, massacring some twelve hundred people and kidnapping two hundred and fifty more. Israel, in turn, launched a devastating war in Gaza that has killed approximately forty-five thousand people. Around the world, anti-Israel protests erupted, and antisemitism spiked; many Jews faced a fresh reckoning with the relationship between Israel and Jewish identity. It was a time of fear and dread and painful fractures within the Jewish community—it was no longer, as Buchdahl had suggested, a moment when Jews widely felt at ease. Yet rabbis from a broad range of Jewish institutions observed something they hadn't anticipated: a surge of interest in Judaism. Elliot Cosgrove, a Conservative rabbi and the author of the new book "For Such a Time as This: On Being Jewish Today," told me that since October 7th he's seen engagement from "within and beyond the boundaries of the conventional Jewish community" at a level he's never before witnessed. This has included increased synagogue membership, expanded enrollment in Hebrew-school programs, full houses at Shabbat services—and oversubscribed courses for people interested in becoming Jewish. Suddenly, my own halting path to conversion was meeting a larger movement.

At Central Synagogue, another rabbi, Lisa Rubin, runs the Center for Exploring Judaism, which educates and guides Jewish-curious newcomers. Since October 7th, the program's courses have enrolled double the usual number of students and accrued a seven-month waiting list. Rubin told me that she has warned potential converts that "this is not a great time to be stepping into Judaism." Still, as she put it, "They're running toward the house on fire."

Judaism is not only a faith but a tribe, a culture, and a life style, and the motivations behind conversion are as varied as Jewishness itself. I spoke to converts who had always suspected that they had Jewish ancestry. Deb Kroll, a woman in her early seventies, grew up in the Bible Belt with parents who became Pentecostal leaders, but when she was a child her Christian grandmother told stories of her family fleeing at night from a county where the Ku Klux Klan was active, soon after the lynching of Leo Frank. Kroll remembers thinking, I'm a little Jewish girl who's been born into the wrong family. For most of her life, she didn't realize that it was even possible to convert to Judaism. Then, in recent years, Kroll said, DNA testing of relatives suggested that she had significant Jewish ancestry on both sides. She was studying in Rubin's program online from her home, in Georgia, when the events of October 7th occurred. "I thought, Well, I'm not going to stop my Jewish journey out of fear," she recalled, adding, "I throw in my lot with the Jewish people."

Another graduate of Rubin's course, Keve Bates, is a thirtysomething Midwesterner. He comes from a long line of Methodist ministers on his father's side; his mother's parents were Christians, too, but they had surnames—Goldman and Kirsch—often associated with American Jews. Though his family members insisted that they had no Jewish past, Bates became interested in learning about Judaism. He eventually moved to New

York, where he took Rubin's class and considered converting. Although he is, by his own description, "a person who has a problem starting things and not completing them," the aftermath of October 7th spurred him to go through with it. Friends invited him to anti-Israel protests, but he didn't attend. One day, he was near the American Museum of Natural History when a protest march filled the street. He overheard a fellow-observer say, "It's like 1933 all over again" and felt an uneasiness that he couldn't shake. Bates didn't want to be "on the side, hiding in plain sight," he told me. "I wanted to belong."

A number of converts I spoke to had, like me, been with a Jewish partner for years without becoming Jewish themselves. Several said that they'd been planning to convert since before October 7th but now felt an increased sense of urgency. Leo Spychala, a forty-three-year-old graduate of Rubin's class who grew up gay and Catholic in New Jersey, said that he'd always felt an affinity for Judaism but that his impression from popular culture was that "it's almost like you wouldn't be welcome"; he recalled an episode of "Sex and the City" in which the Waspy Charlotte, embracing Judaism after her boyfriend says that he can't wed a non-Jew, goes to a rabbi asking to convert and initially has a door shut in her face. Then Spychala met his partner, a Jewish man who works in Jewish philanthropy. One of the first Jewish things they did together was attend synagogue, in 2022, for the holiday of Simchat Torah, a joyous celebration that involves dancing in the aisles while parading a Torah scroll. "I felt very welcomed," he said. "It was a big moment for me." A year later, Simchat Torah fell on October 7th. The mood in synagogue was sombre. There was no dancing this time. "Seeing the difference was just really sad," Spychala recalled, and he felt himself drawn closer to the Jewish community. This past August, he proposed to his partner with a diamond-studded Star of David necklace; he completed his conversion a week before the October 7th anniversary.

"Two Jews, three opinions," the saying goes. The canon of Jewish humor includes many jokes about Jewish dissensus, including one about a Jew alone on a desert island who builds two synagogues: one that he attends and another that he wouldn't set foot in. Conversion to Judaism inspires its own share of disagreement. Lacking a central authority comparable to, say, the Vatican's governance of the Catholic Church, Jews of different denominations have developed diverging rules and rites around what makes a valid conversion. Orthodox and Conservative Jews require converts to immerse themselves in a mikvah, a ritual bath, and expect male converts to undergo circumcision or, if they are already circumcised, to be pricked to draw a ritual drop of blood. The Orthodox typically do not recognize Conservative or Reform conversions; Conservative Jews may not recognize Reform ones. And those are just the three major North American denominations. Some Sephardic communities may not accept conversion at all.

The basic question of what makes someone a born Jew is no less divisive. American Reform Judaism, since the nineteen-eighties, has recognized "patrilineal Jews," but the Orthodox and Conservative denominations do not. As a result, a large portion of people who consider themselves Jewish are not acknowledged as such by some of their fellow-Jews. Buchdahl recalled that, as a teen-ager, during a fellowship in Israel for young Jewish leaders, her roommate commented that she wasn't Jewish because her mother wasn't a Jew. At the age of twenty-one, Buchdahl decided to undergo conversion rituals: appearing

before a beth din, a Jewish court, and immersing herself in the mikvah. She chose to think of this as a way of reaffirming that she had always been a Jew.

I figured that I would pursue a non-Orthodox conversion, though it stung to know that some Jews would never consider me Jewish. Then, through an Orthodox friend, I learned about a New York-based rabbi named Adam Mintz. Mintz is a member of the century-old Rabbinical Council of America (R.C.A.), which, since 2007, has overseen standards for Orthodox conversions. But in recent years Mintz has gained, by word of mouth, a reputation for an unusual willingness to provide Orthodox conversions outside the R.C.A.'s system. Creating extreme hurdles for potential converts is "not good for the Jewish people," he told me, because it prevents the formation of Jewish families. Once he began convening his own beth din, he found that a rising number of people from within the Orthodox Jewish establishment, including R.C.A. leaders, were asking him to convert their own family members. Because of the law of matrilineal descent, the majority of candidates who sought him out were women. Mintz now leads a growing cohort of Orthodox rabbis who share his view that less rigid requirements for conversion can still satisfy Jewish law. In 2022, he co-founded a nonprofit conversion organization, Project Ruth.

Mintz is sixty-three, with eyes that twinkle behind his glasses and an impish laugh that makes his deliberations seem like a series of adventures. I began studying with him over Zoom for several hours each week. One potential obstacle to my Orthodox conversion was that my second husband, Jacob, was a *kohen*, a member of a priestly male hereditary line going back to the time of Moses, and according to the Talmud *kohanim* are forbidden to marry converts. Mintz saw two ways around this prohibition. The first, and more controversial, was through interpretative leniency. Mintz considers laws that are stipulated in the Bible to be nonnegotiable. Because God commanded that males must be circumcised, for instance, Mintz requires that male candidates be free of foreskin prior to conversion. (He told me that not all of them stick around when they hear this news.) But the particular rule regarding *kohanim* and converts is rabbinic, not Biblical, which—arguably—allows a degree of discretion. A simpler solution would be for Jacob to abdicate his claim to the *kohen* lineage. After much lively discussion of these points of law, though, the issue seemed increasingly moot: Jacob's probing of family memories made him highly doubtful that he was a *kohen*, after all.

Mintz's conversions typically entail six to nine months of study, but after assessing my Jewish knowledge he determined that I would be ready to go to the mikvah in a couple of months. True to Buchdahl's observation about converts making their spouses more Jewish, in my second marriage I had been the one to insure that our family kept Shabbat rituals. To the bemusement of my new in-laws, I'd cajoled Jacob into dusting off the Hebrew he'd learned for his bar mitzvah. He had never imagined that he'd be keeping kosher, yet he did his best to observe the rules of *kashrut* with me. During the High Holidays this year, as we walked home after hours in shul, he jokingly wondered aloud, "How did this happen?"

The Hebrew term for "convert," *ger*, also means "stranger." (My married surname, Gersen, happens to derive from it.) Buchdahl is writing a memoir, "Heart of a Stranger," thematically inspired by the Genesis story of Abraham, the father of the Jewish people, who leaves his birthplace when God calls on him to found a new nation. As Buchdahl put it to me, "He can't become a Hebrew until he becomes a stranger in a different land." The word *Ivri*—Hebrew person—comes from the term for "crossing over."

According to rabbinic sources, Abraham and his wife Sarah went on to convert a large number of people to Judaism. In Exodus, God admonishes the Jews not to oppress strangers, "for you were strangers in the land of Egypt," a line that rabbis have long interpreted as one of God's many warnings not to mistreat converts. To be a convert to Judaism is to be one form of *ger*, and to be Jewish is to be another. Converts, by embodying a Jewish relation to strangers, remind Jews that they are strangers even to themselves. Buchdahl told me, "For so much of my Jewish life, I felt inauthentic, and like an outsider in so many ways. At some point, I understood that maybe that's the most Jewish thing about me."

Jewish texts are wildly ambivalent on the subject of converts. The convert is "more beloved than Israel when they stood at Mount Sinai," it says in a midrash, a rabbinic interpretation of the Torah. In the Talmud: "Converts are harmful to Israel as leprosy." Medieval rabbinic discussions of the latter line underscore the divided thinking: one rabbi worries that converts will influence other Jews to become lax in their observance of God's commandments; others fear that Jews will inevitably mistreat converts and suffer God's punishment for it. Yet another rabbi, a convert himself, reasons that because converts are "more meticulous in their observance" they draw attention to the shortcomings of other Jews.

Unlike Christianity, Judaism does not teach that people of other faiths must adopt the religion to be saved. But Buchdahl is not the only Jewish leader today who believes that a tradition of Jews proselytizing has been underemphasized. Mintz said that during the early Roman Empire, when Jews were in a position of strength, at least some of them actively worked to convert people in the Hellenistic world. "Not proselytizing is a function of lack of power," he said. Whether Jews proselytized in this period and how much have been subjects of scholarly debate. Another rabbi, Ethan Tucker, the head of Hadar, a yeshiva in Manhattan, noted that the Jews' history of persecution includes not only massacres, expulsions, and forcible conversions but also prohibitions on converting people to Judaism, sometimes on pain of death. "I think Jews got very strategically attached to non-proselytizing as a self-defense mechanism," he said, "and then turned it into a philosophical virtue." Tucker is the stepson of the late senator Joseph Lieberman, who published a book in 2011 about the Jewish Sabbath, "The Gift of Rest." If you consider Judaism a "gift" and not a burden, Tucker told me, then it's natural to want to share it with others.

In the Biblical story of Ruth's conversion, Naomi says "turn back" three separate times before accepting Ruth's determination to follow her. This has led to an idea that people seeking to convert to Judaism should be turned away three times, or at least initially, to test their conviction. The Talmud says that a person who comes to a court to convert is to be questioned as to his motivation and asked, "Don't you know that the Jewish people at the present time are anguished, suppressed, despised, and harassed, and hardships are frequently visited upon them?" If he says he knows

and still wants to convert, "the court accepts him immediately to begin the conversion process." He is then taught "some of the lenient mitzvot and some of the stringent mitzvot," but rabbis must not "overwhelm him with threats" or be "exacting with him about the details." As Cosgrove, the Conservative rabbi, put it to me, "When I want to join a gym, they don't say, 'Get in shape and then join a gym.' They say, 'Join the gym and we'll get you in shape.'"

In practice, though, within Orthodox Judaism, conversion candidates are often put through a process that Rabbi Mintz compared to hazing. Converts, candidates, and rabbis told me some of the demoralizing things they'd experienced or witnessed. (Most asked to speak anonymously because they feared retaliation from Orthodox institutions.) Wishful converts had reached out to rabbis and been repeatedly ignored or told to go away. They had been instructed to stop living with their Jewish partners, or to stop dating them altogether, throughout a multiyear conversion process. One candidate was required to move in with an Orthodox family to insure her religious observance. Others had their conversions delayed again and again, for years, because they weren't deemed ready. Rabbis typically prohibited the setting of wedding dates in anticipation of conversions, leaving couples uncertain about when they would be able to start a family. One Jewish man, who today leads a major Jewish organization, said that when he approached an Orthodox rabbi he knew to ask about conversion the rabbi became so cold and discouraging that the man considered leaving Jewish life. He'd been raised Jewish, with Yiddish-speaking grandparents on his father's side. But his mother had undergone a Reform conversion, so Orthodox and Conservative communities didn't recognize him as a Jew. He told me that when he eventually met Orthodox rabbis who agreed to convert him he broke down and wept. (R.C.A. leaders declined my requests for an interview, but a representative said, in an e-mail, that the council aimed "to create an apparatus that operates with professionalism, sensitivity, and transparency.")

Benjamin Samuels, a Modern Orthodox rabbi and a longtime member of Boston's Orthodox beth din (unaffiliated with the R.C.A.), told me that rabbis who choose to ignore potential converts are being "negligent of our religious obligations." He acknowledged the irony that "to become a Jew, you have to be a super Jew." Still, like many other Orthodox rabbis, he believes that conversion to Judaism should be difficult. Converting someone without having confidence that she will fulfill God's commandments would violate the Jewish mandate against "placing a stumbling block in front of the blind." Instead of leading a perfectly good life as a Gentile, Samuels said, she enters a "life of liability."

Mintz, meanwhile, has been inundated with inquiries from potential converts. In 2023, his beth din in New York completed about ninety conversions; in 2024, it has so far completed nearly two hundred—around the same number that the R.C.A., which has not seen an increased interest since October 7th, typically completes across North America in the span of a year. Candidates have flown in to see Mintz, sometimes as a family or in groups, from other states—Kansas, North Carolina, California, Texas—and from as far abroad as Australia and Hong Kong. His beth din has regularly converted gay, lesbian, and transgender people, and their children. A few of the rabbis who work with him have presided over same-sex weddings. Though Jewish law has not traditionally recognized such unions, Mintz said that a rabbi's choice to officiate them "in no way disqualifies" him from legally conducting an Orthodox conversion. But the diversity of Jewish communities and their respective rabbinic standards means that virtually no conversion is guaranteed to be accepted everywhere. Indeed, Mintz told me that a substantial number of his candidates are converting to "fix," "upgrade," or "strengthen" their Jewish status—and he acknowledges that if, in the future, any of them want to join a Jewish community with a different set of standards, they might choose to go to the mikvah again.

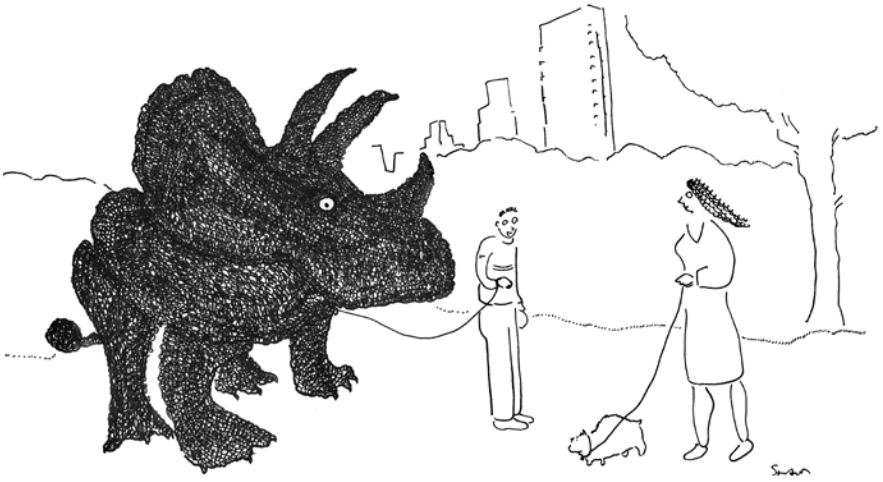
On Rosh Hashanah this year, Rabbi Rubin of Central Synagogue gave a sermon in which she likened the post-October 7th surge in conversions to one in post-Holocaust Germany, where so many people sought to convert to Judaism that a commission was formed in Berlin to help process requests. But the divisions within the Jewish community today complicate the comparison. Nancy Ko is a Korean American convert to Judaism and a doctoral student in Middle Eastern history at Columbia. She grew up around the many Jews who frequented her family's grocery store, in Brooklyn's Bensonhurst neighborhood. In college, she studied the history of Arab and Middle Eastern Jews. She also became involved in activism against the Israeli occupation and helped found an organization to promote the inclusion of non-Zionists and anti-Zionists in campus Jewish communities. She told me that she finally decided to convert after an Israeli American mentor, paraphrasing Moses' metaphor about Jews opening their hearts to God, urged her, in Hebrew, to "circumcise your soul." Ko was moved by the Talmud's teaching that the souls of converts were present at Mt. Sinai with all Jewish souls when God gave Jews the Torah. Though she had no Jewish partner or family, she wanted an Orthodox conversion, in part, she told me, "so that I could daven in any shul and bless the bread at any Shabbos table, and so that my children would be able to do so as well." Mintz's beth din converted her in 2022, sixteen months before October 7th.

When I spoke with Ko recently, she was working to get money to families who had fled from Gaza to Egypt. She connected her pro-Palestinian activism with her family's origins on the Korean island of Jeju, where, in 1948, an uprising during the American military occupation was met with a massacre that eventually killed tens of thousands of civilians; the same year, in what's become known as the Nakba, hundreds of thousands of Palestinians were displaced during the formation of the State of Israel. On October 7th, a friend and colleague of Ko's, an Israeli American anti-occupation peace activist, was killed by Hamas. Another friend, a Palestinian in the West Bank, told her that he couldn't get out because Israel had closed the border. When Ko posted critically about Israel on social media, a Jewish friend messaged her to say that she shouldn't "pretend to be part

of the Jewish community." Ko belongs to a group of observant Jews who came together for prayer after October 7th, feeling out of step with Jewish institutions. She told me that it was "unbearable to be in the synagogue where folks are celebrating that a hospital was destroyed, or are standing up to do the prayer for Israel."

Still, Ko's anti-Zionism exists necessarily in relation to mainstream Jewish identity—as a form of dissent. "You cannot be a Jew alone," she said. "No matter how Jewish you know you are, it's not completely up to you. It's up to the community to decide what kind of Judaism and Jewishness they want to advocate for." Ko told me that, given her views on Israel, she suspects that the beth din might have rejected her if she'd tried to convert after October 7th. Rabbi Mintz insisted otherwise. "She would have been accepted," he said. "The beauty of rabbinic Judaism—it is all about the argument." On that last point, the two of them concur. Ko told me, "There's been a very rich history of Jewish anti-Zionists. There's been division on these questions. What are Jews if not disagreers?" She added, quoting the Talmud, "*Machloket l'shem shamayim*"—"Disagreement for the sake of Heaven."

In June, my parents and I happened to be in South Korea when Rabbi Buchdahl delivered a speech at the launch of a center for Israel studies at Seoul National University, my father's alma mater. Before an audience of government officials, academics, and diplomats, Buchdahl noted parallels between the stories of Koreans and Jews, remarking that "the modern states of these ancient peoples" were formed within months of each other. But it was the differences between the cultures that enlivened her storytelling. She compared Korean folk tales about the value of filial piety with a midrash about Abraham smashing his father's idols. She contrasted her mother's solitary Buddhist learning with the Jewish tradition of *havruta*, studying in noisy dialogue with a partner. To conclude, she took out a guitar and sang a mashup of "Jerusalem of Gold," an Israeli song from the nineteen-sixties expressing longing for the Old City, which was then under Jordanian rule, and the Korean folk song "Arirang," which, during the Japanese occupation of Korea, became an anthem of anti-colonial resistance.



"Triceradoodle."

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I made the unconventional choice to have two different Jewish courts oversee my conversion ceremony at the same time. Rabbi Mintz convened an Orthodox beth din with two younger rabbis, who gave off Brooklyn hipster vibes. Rabbi Buchdahl assembled a Reform one with another rabbi from Central Synagogue and a congregant of theirs, my longtime friend Tali Farhadian Weinstein, an Iranian American Jew. Another close friend, who is Orthodox, and Jacob accompanied me. A quarter century of dilemmas of identity and belonging had led me there, and the meeting, at the West Side Mikvah in Manhattan, seemed to embody its own fresh contradictions. Mintz also teaches at Yeshivat Maharat, an Orthodox institution in the Bronx that trains and ordains women as rabbis, but, per Orthodox conversion rules, there are no women on his beth din. One of the Orthodox rabbis remarked to me later, "Angela is one of the great rabbis in the world" and joked, "Why would she need me, a little *pischer* rabbi in Brooklyn, to complete this conversion?"

The event began with an extended discussion between the rabbis and me about my path to conversion. I recounted my Korean childhood, my decades in a Jewish family, my love of Jewish tradition, and my sense of belonging among the Jewish people. Afterward, to prepare for the heart of the proceedings, I went alone into a spa-like marble bathroom. I took off my jewelry and makeup, undressed, washed, and put on a white bathrobe that a mikvah attendant had left for me. Some Orthodox rabbis insist on being present for a convert's immersion, or at least on observing through slits in a partition, to insure that it's done properly. Mintz doesn't do that with female converts, so he waited outside, but Buchdahl and my two friends entered the room with me.

The mikvah itself was an inviting lapis blue and resembled a luxurious plunge pool. The water was warm. I submerged my body, then my head and my long hair. I curled into a ball underwater. Suspended there, I felt gently but fully held. I recited the mikvah prayer: "Blessed are You, O Lord, our God, King of the universe, who has sanctified us with His commandments and commanded us regarding the immersion." In the long-sought ritual, I momentarily sensed boundaries receding as I crossed over to become a Korean American Jew.

When I emerged from the mikvah, the two sets of rabbis showed me the documents they'd prepared to officially mark my new Jewish status. The papers bore my chosen Hebrew name: Chava, or Eve. Buchdahl told me that the certificate of conversion under Reform Judaism would be sent to be recorded for posterity in the American Jewish Archives. I looked expectantly toward the Orthodox rabbis. They seemed impressed. One of them said, "We keep a list in a Google doc." ♦