

# A Non-believer's Conversion to Judaism

by Joel Newton

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## **FINDING A PATH**

I am converting to Judaism, and I am doing this as a freethinker and a non-believer. I am not the first to walk this path, but neither does it seem to be a commonly travelled or well-marked one. In fact, it has been difficult at times for me to see the way forward, and there have been obstacles that have required much reflection and searching to find a way through. But those obstacles and the lack of a clear path have not deterred me; instead, they have challenged me and made my pursuit of conversion even more valuable as a result.

Why am I pursuing this? What is driving me to great lengths to attempt to reconcile my intellectual stance with Judaism? It is because I want to achieve a synthesis between these two, and also because I want to make my commitment to Judaism official. Even though I am already a full-fledged member of a Jewish synagogue community, I want to be able to say "On that day, I became a Jew."

I have had a fairly extensive Jewish education, including a course introducing me to Judaism, a decade of Hebrew language study, and at least one full reading of the Hebrew Bible. I am an active, engaged member of a Jewish community and attend services on a fairly regular basis. However, I cannot in good conscience respond positively to the first of the six questions commonly posed to prospective converts: "Do you choose to enter the eternal covenant between God and the people Israel and to become a Jew of your own free will?" For what it's worth, I would readily affirm the remaining five questions, were I able to make it past this first one.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> These are the six questions commonly asked of prospective converts: "1) Do you choose to enter the eternal covenant between God and the people Israel and to become a Jew of your own free will? 2) Do you accept Judaism to the exclusion of all other religious faiths and practices? 3) Do you pledge your loyalty to Judaism and to the Jewish people under all circumstances? 4) Do you promise to establish a Jewish home and to participate actively in the life of the synagogue and of the Jewish community? 5) Do you commit yourself to the pursuit of Torah and

In working towards my conversion, I have studied numerous texts, one of which is a responsa<sup>2</sup> delivered by the Central Conference of American Rabbis, Reform Judaism's Rabbinic leadership organization. In this, it is asked whether a certain individual who identifies as an atheist and a philosophical materialist<sup>3</sup> should be allowed to convert to Judaism. The responsa concludes that belief in the reality of God is essential to the definition of Reform Judaism. The *ger* or non-Jew who wishes to convert must declare their belief in the covenant of God with the Jewish people. This I cannot do.

The responsa also addresses the seeming contradiction that allows Reform Jews to profess atheism but denies this same right to prospective converts. The atheist Jew's behavior is considered a "crisis of faith" and a "spiritual struggle," and they are permitted to "remain part of us as long as they do not abandon our people or join another religion."<sup>4</sup> By contrast, the convert is expected to satisfy stricter expectations in terms of Jewish education, synagogue attendance, and belief. On the one hand, it seems unjust that the requirements for the convert are stricter than the requirements for one already a Jew. However, this is part of the complexity that embodies Judaism: one can be a Jew by choice or a Jew by birth, and the Jew by birth need never complete a bar or bat mitzvah, be confirmed, or participate in synagogue life to be considered a Jew. It may be more accurate to describe this Jew by birth as a secular Jew than as an observant or religious Jew, but they are a Jew nonetheless. However, the responsa clearly states: "We do not convert people to 'secular' Judaism."

And yet, this same responsa which says that belief in God is required of the convert also says that the final say in the conversion process lies with the rabbi who is willing to fulfill the conversion and whose personal knowledge of the candidate gives them privileged insight into their character and intentions. I would not be on this journey had not my rabbi encouraged me and offered me her full support. So I will continue to forge ahead – to identify and embrace a Judaism that fully squares with my stance as a freethinker. I have eagerly spent many late-night hours in reading, writing, and reflecting in order to

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Jewish knowledge? 6) If you should be blessed with children, do you promise to raise them as Jews?" *Conversion to Judaism: A Guidebook*, Lawrence J. Epstein, Jason Aronson, Lanham, Maryland. 1994, p. 258.

<sup>2</sup> A responsa is a written decision on a theological question provided by authorities in Jewish law and practice.

<sup>3</sup> A "philosophical materialist" is one who believes there is nothing beyond the observable physical, "material" universe. This differs from a "materialist" who only values material possessions.

<sup>4</sup> The full text for this responsa can be found at <https://www.ccarnet.org/ccar-responsa/tfn-no-5754-15-147-152/>

construct a narrative that incorporates my religious beginnings and intellectual maturation and that also clearly elucidates the Judaism that I am choosing. My rabbi has said that “articulation is a spiritual practice.” My efforts to articulate my Judaism have changed me and propelled me in new, previously unimagined existential directions. This narrative has become the most rewarding piece of writing I have yet produced because it is a work of self-definition and self-exploration. I look forward to sharing it with both my family and my Jewish and non-Jewish friends.

### **WHAT IS A “FREETHINKER”?**

Most people are probably familiar with the definition of a non-believer: one who does not believe in God. However, the concepts of “freethinker” and “free thought” may not be as well known, so please allow me to briefly introduce them. To lightly paraphrase Bertrand Russell, a person is not a freethinker because of the beliefs they hold, but due to the manner in which they hold them.<sup>5</sup> Two individuals may hold the same beliefs, and one be a freethinker and the other not. What is central to free thought is whether one is able to justify their beliefs with well-reasoned arguments and whether one is open to revising those arguments should they be shown to be logically flawed or not in agreement with physical evidence.

The “free” in “free thought” refers to freedom from both the external pressures of tradition and authority and the internal influence of what are colloquially called “the passions” – unexamined desires, hopes and fears. A freethinker does not believe or act in a certain way simply because a tradition or an authority dictates it. Instead, they aim to carefully assess the statements made by a tradition or an authority, and if the statements align with the freethinker’s own values and beliefs, then the freethinker can choose to accept them.

Also, a freethinker seeks to understand their own motivations. What is it that causes them to accept one view and reject another? Are they being influenced by involuntary fears or wishes that they have not yet acknowledged? As they examine and verbalize the reasons for their own beliefs, they are able to better understand why they believe as

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<sup>5</sup> “What makes a free thinker is not his beliefs, but the way in which he holds them.” Bertrand Russell, “The Value of Freethought,” in *Understanding History and Other Essays*, Philosophical Library, Inc., New York. 1957, pp. 57-58. I prefer a gender-neutral variant.

they do, and with greater understanding comes greater freedom in constructing their system of beliefs.

The mental practices of reasoning, examination, self-reflection, and openness to reevaluation are what define a freethinker. These are the processes I am using while pursuing my conversion.

## **MY ORIGIN STORY**

Thus far, I have only described my Judaism by what it is not: it is not an entering into “the eternal covenant between God and the people Israel.” In order to positively describe the form that my Judaism has begun to take, I believe it is clearest if I place it next to the Christianity of my youth. Without this juxtaposition, without connecting my present with my origins, I find that my thoughts and my efforts are untethered and without context. I am aware that both the Christianity I had and the Judaism I am entering into are not the sole forms of these traditions and that they may differ from the forms with which my readers are familiar. However, they are the forms that I know and that have shaped my beliefs and my life. They are part of who I am, and they will play a role in who I may become.

I was born and raised a Charismatic Christian. Charismatic Christianity is “a form of Christianity that emphasizes the work of the Holy Spirit, spiritual gifts, and modern-day miracles as an everyday part of a believer's life.”<sup>6</sup> I recall receiving the gift of “speaking in tongues” at an early age, a gift that enables one to act as a mouthpiece for messages from the heavenly realm, delivered in an unknown language and faithfully interpreted by one possessing the spiritual gift of interpretation of tongues. In addition to the gifts of tongues and interpretation, the gifts of prophecy and healing were also common elements in the church to which my family and I belonged.

Also, I was raised as a fundamentalist. This meant I was taught to believe that the Bible<sup>7</sup> was literal, true, and inerrant. Questioning and disbelief were discouraged, and faith was

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<sup>6</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charismatic\\_Christianity](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charismatic_Christianity)

<sup>7</sup> The Bible of my childhood years, the only Bible of which I was aware, was the Protestant Bible consisting of 39 books in the Old Testament and 27 books in the New Testament. The contents of the Old Testament (though not the book divisions) mirror the Jewish Bible, the Tanakh. This differs from the Catholic Bible and the Eastern / Greek Orthodox Bible, which are both based on the Septuagint, a Greek translation of the Jewish Bible which includes other writings – either considered apocryphal or belonging to a second canon of scripture.

the chiefest of the virtues. In one story from the New Testament, Jesus rebukes his disciples for their lack of faith before calming the wind and waves with a word. In another, he claims that only a mustard seed's worth of faith was needed to move a mountain. The implications were clear: faith is powerful, and the stronger one's faith, the superior one's Christianity.

I was not without faith while growing up, although it was never a completely blind faith. As an adolescent, I performed tests on the Bible for internal consistency. Sometimes, to occupy myself during Sunday morning services, I would page through the lists of "begats" in the New Testament and wonder how to reconcile contradictions between the lineages of Jesus recorded in the gospels of Matthew and Luke. Other times, I tallied the ages between generations in the Old Testament to see if I would arrive at the same conclusion as Archbishop Usher,<sup>8</sup> that the world was created in 4004 BC.<sup>9</sup>

But these consistency tests didn't evolve into a full-blown skepticism until much later. Every fact was still filtered through a Christian lens, and every theory was measured against biblical teachings and accepted interpretations. I owned Christian comic books that showed humans and dinosaurs living contemporaneously and that dismissed the accuracy of carbon-14 dating. I attended seminars that warned about the evils of rock music and the use of "backmasking"<sup>10</sup> to influence unsuspecting minds. If you are listening for it, "Another one bites the dust" played backwards does sound a bit like "Start to smoke marijuana." At the impressionable age of 13 or 14, I believed it must have been Queen's intent to sneak that message into their song. I didn't question the claim that they were doing the devil's work.

Throughout childhood and adolescence, my level of engagement with Christianity waxed and waned, but there was never a moment when I didn't consider myself to be a Christian until I left home and went to college. Up till then, I had thought one must be either a good Christian or a bad Christian, either a practicing Christian or a lapsed Christian. I had never considered the option of not being a Christian at all.

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<sup>8</sup> James Ussher was an Archbishop in the Church of Ireland in the 17<sup>th</sup> century who attempted to identify precisely the date and time of the creation of the world.

<sup>9</sup> I wasn't aware of the preference for using BCE instead of BC until many years later.

<sup>10</sup> "Backmasking is a recording technique in which a sound or message is recorded backward onto a track that is meant to be played forward." <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Backmasking>

Leaving a small Christian high school (graduating class of 50) for a mid-sized state university (12,000 students) was a revelatory experience. I attended my first philosophy course my freshman year, and despite not receiving the grades I thought my work deserved, I was quickly hooked. But, though the classes contributed to my intellectual journey, it was the late-night conversations with my dorm mates that were much more influential. We were young, curious, and almost strangers, getting our first tastes of freedom and our first glimpses of the vast landscape of ideas. True, I am glossing over the majority of my college time that was mundane. I am not describing the everyday, but instead those periodic flashes, the tingling moments when an unexpected mental chord was struck; when a well-made argument crashed through the murky foundations that many of my day-to-day beliefs took for granted. Those moments can change forever the boundaries of one's mental life. And so my perspective shifted and expanded, and my decision to formally leave Christianity began to solidify.

It was one thing to decide to stop attending church while away from your family in college; it was another, and took a good bit longer, to work up the courage to tell my parents about it. When the time came, it was a tough conversation, and I could see that it caused them great pain, but to this day, I cannot see a path that I could have taken which would have spared them that pain and still kept our relationship as healthy and strong as it is today.

An important element in my adult journey has been my continued conversations with my dad where we engage in some respectful metaphysical sparing. Both of us have been happy to listen and engage with the other but ultimately unwilling to change our own views. It has been a wonderful example of how we can love someone and yet hold conflicting core beliefs, and it gives me hope for a future mending of many of the ideological rifts we have experienced as a country – if we can just sit down and get to know each other.

## **FINDING JUDAISM**

Through my college years and young adulthood, I began to chart out a world without faith. It was not a quick or simple process to unravel and discard the beliefs and patterns of thinking that had constituted my first eighteen years. Mine was not a well-mapped journey towards a known destination. I just wandered, and in the process, I moved further away from the Christianity of my youth. I delved into atheism and free thought. I

encountered the writings of Robert Ingersoll, Bertrand Russell, Sam Harris, Richard Dawkins, Dan Barker, and others. I tried to understand why Anthony Flew, a long-time atheist, changed his position near his end. I developed a strong fear of death, but I refused to let that shake my non-belief. I continued to converse with my dad, and to further define my position in contradistinction to his.

A few years after finishing graduate school, I met Margo, and as a sign of my commitment to her I agreed to adopt the Jewish traditions and practices of her heritage. I thought this would mean observing holidays and Shabbat and attending the occasional service. Christmas and Easter would be replaced with Hanukkah and Pesach (Passover). She wasn't asking that I profess a faith I didn't have. She was just looking to preserve the traditions that had shaped her and to pass them on to our children.

At that point, I viewed Judaism solely as a religion. My connection to it was only through my commitment to my wife. We began to make a Jewish home and celebrate the holidays but we weren't members of a synagogue. It seemed unlikely to me that we would discover a place of worship where a non-believer might feel at home. But then Margo was asked to perform in the High Holiday services at B'nai Jehoshua Beth Elohim (BJBE), a Reform Jewish synagogue then located in Glenview, Illinois. I attended the services to show my support for her, and during one of those services, I heard something that struck me. From the bima<sup>11</sup> on Rosh Hashanah, Rabbi Mark Shapiro said "You don't have to believe in God to be a Jew."

Rosh Hashanah marks the start of the Jewish year, the celebration of the creation of the world, and the beginning of the Days of Awe. It is a time for renewal and reflection. And for me, on that day, it provided a glimpse of a place where my lack of belief wouldn't have to be buried, where it might in fact be accepted. It suggested a possible home.

I learned to read Hebrew and began taking conversational Hebrew classes at BJBE, and Margo and I started attending adult education seminars there. One of those seminars was titled "Skeptics, Agnostics, Atheists and Judaism." The seminar made us realize that Rabbi Shapiro's statement wasn't an anomaly, and the packed room showed that we weren't the only ones interested in this topic.

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<sup>11</sup> The bima (also spelled 'bema' or 'bimah') is the raised section at the front of a Jewish sanctuary where the Torah scrolls are kept in an ark and the rabbis and cantors lead the services.

In the years that followed, our connection to the synagogue and the community continued to grow, becoming the integral part of our lives that it is today. This connection with a synagogue and with Judaism initially baffled my dad, since he knew my lack of belief in God hadn't changed. To help explain it to him (and to make better sense of it for myself), I turned to the synagogue's mission statement.<sup>12</sup> I echoed the ideas found there to my dad: that there are different ways, different "portals" through which one can experience a full Jewish life, and that spiritual practice and worship is only one of them. There were other portals – Torah (Jewish learning), *g'milut chasadim* (acts of loving kindness) and *k'hilah* (community) – through which I was already started to connect with Judaism.

In my years as part of the BJBE community, I have never experienced anything except complete acceptance. I have never been asked whether I am Jewish or if I have converted. While I am grateful for this acceptance, I have recently begun to reflect on the privilege that the color of my skin provides me. I will never know if my experiences might have been different had I been a Black man entering into a Jewish community instead of a white man, but I do know that I should take advantage of these awakened reflections, and do everything in my power to never assume to know what a Jew, a Muslim, a Christian, or anyone of any belief system is supposed to look like.

Through the years, I have become more active and engaged in social, ritual, educational, and social justice activities, and I have occasionally participated spiritually, in a manner that I hoped would maintain my self-integrity without appearing disrespectful. During services, I don't cover my eyes when the *Sh'ma*<sup>13</sup> is spoken. I may sometimes recite the words of the prayer, but oftentimes I do not. It has not always been clear to me how to consistently practice my non-belief while in a prayer service. This is something I imagine will continue to evolve.

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<sup>12</sup> This is an excerpt taken from BJBE's website: "All of us are on a quest to discover the meaning and purpose of our lives. We believe that this discovery can come through participation in a sacred Jewish community, and yet we know that each person's Jewish journey will be different. Our mission is to help you find your own special entry point, or Portal, into Jewish life based on your particular passions and interests – so that when you walk through it, your soul will sing, your spirit will soar, and in time, you will come face-to-face with your destiny."

<sup>13</sup> This is the central prayer in Jewish prayer services. The English translation of the *Sh'ma* is: "Hear, O Israel. The Lord your God, the Lord is one."

For many years, I never considered pursuing conversion because I was already a fully-fledged member of the community and besides, wouldn't my lack of faith pose an issue? When I learned that it need not present a barrier to my conversion, my world expanded. Suddenly there appeared before me a new path, which if I chose to follow it, might lead to unimagined vistas. And so began this project – of exploring Judaism from a non-believer's perspective.

## **CREATING MY JUDAISM**

To a casual observer it may appear that I am simply joining a religion, ending a long hiatus that followed my membership in another religion. Nothing could be further from reality. After grappling with how to describe the vast differences between my Christianity and my Judaism, this is what I have hit upon: *my Christianity was a faith in the truth*. There was one right way to be and to act, and this way could be found in the pages of the Bible. By contrast, *my Judaism is a journey towards wisdom*. I do not expect to ever complete this journey or to fully get it right, but I do plan to continue to strive towards deeper and fuller understandings of myself, my fellow humans, and this world.

Some may ask, "What is intrinsically Jewish about a journey towards wisdom?" to which I would reply, "Nothing, just as nothing is intrinsically Christian about having faith in the truth." One could choose to practice Christianity as a path towards wisdom, or Judaism as a faith in the truth, or either as something else entirely. *How one chooses to practice one's religion is ultimately not determined by the religion itself*, though the religion's institutions and scriptures will likely play an influential role. How one practices a religion is a reflection of how one chooses to live one's life and what one decides to prioritize – be it faith, spirituality, ritual, wisdom, community, family, self-awareness, empathy, emotional comfort, familiarity, convenience, or any other number of criteria. For my priorities, I have chosen wisdom, compassion, community, family, tradition, and justice.

For me, Judaism offers a framework of practices within which to create a meaningful existence. It provides the opportunity and the imperative to make time sacred, to give structure and limits to one's habits and rituals, and to turn everyday acts into purposeful statements. It is accepted, and by some it is expected, that I work to discover which ethical commandments are meaningful and important to me. Mindful adoption and application, not dogmatic acceptance, is a legitimate way to practice Judaism.

The word "halakhah" is often translated as "law," but a more accurate translation is "way." Halakhah consists of the collected statements of ways in which a Jew should act, taken from the written and the oral Torah. There is disagreement about how each guideline should be interpreted, or even followed at all, and which are outdated and not pertinent to us today. But there is a central belief that one must search for the best path and that there is much value to be gained from learning about halakhah. That search for the best path is a part of my journey towards wisdom.

During my conversion process, I have reviewed a list of the 613 commandments laid out in the Torah. I found many of those commandments to be at odds with my own intellectual and ethical values. Naturally, the commandments that mention God are problematic for a non-believer such as myself, but there are other commandments – some condoning slavery, unfair treatment of women, and forbidding marriage between Jews and non-Jews – that I wondered how I might reconcile with my values. Then I came across a book by a Modern Orthodox rabbi<sup>14</sup> who wrote that, like Abraham and Moses, we should be courageous enough to hold God accountable to a higher ethical standard, and we should bring this standard to bear on our religious texts and practices. The belief that Judaism and Judaism's God are beholden to a higher ethical standard is a strange and intriguing idea to me, and one I look forward to exploring further.

Thus far, I have only mentioned Reform Judaism and Modern Orthodox Judaism. In addition to these two, there are other denominations or movements within Judaism, including Conservative Judaism, Reconstructionist Judaism, Haredi Judaism, and Chasidism. These movements all fall within the Ashkenazi tradition which originated in Eastern Europe, and they are distinct from the Sephardic tradition that originated in Spain and Portugal. The movements differ from each other in their interpretation and application of Halakhah as well as differing culturally. The creation of Reform Judaism in the 18<sup>th</sup> century was greatly influenced by the intellectual values popularized by the Enlightenment and by the belief that Judaism should evolve. Conservative and Reconstructionist Judaism were both responses to Reform Judaism, attempting to correct perceived shortcomings. In my preparation for conversion, I have come to realize there are numerous forms of Judaism – so many more than the denominational groupings of Modern Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, etc. These numerous forms are born from the hopes and fears, the griefs and joys, the groundedness and the chaos of

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<sup>14</sup> Donniel Hartman, *Putting God Second: How to Save Religion from Itself*, Beacon Press, Boston, MA. 2016.

individual lives that have directed and shaped how Judaism is practiced. Countless Jews have poured the best of themselves into this tradition, and we today inherit both the treasured wisdom and the continuing struggle of past generations.

And just as there are many forms, so there are also many aspects of Judaism. Through my Reform Jewish lens, I view Judaism as a marriage of tradition and reason. To me, it represents a convergence of the particular and the universal. It is a body of beliefs, a set of commands, a collection of practices, and a desire for mindfulness. It is a spectrum of worldviews, tethered together by shared histories, texts, and traditions. It is at times complex, practical, baffling, problematic, profound, and majestic, because it is a reflection of the people who practice it and who have sustained and renewed it, generation after generation.

## **IN CONCLUSION**

I would like to offer a few final notes of comparison between Christianity and Judaism as I have experienced them. Since I am a member of a Reform Jewish community, my comments mostly pertain to Reform Judaism. The idea of a messiah (מָשִׁיחַ), an individual who will bring about redemption and liberation, originated within Judaism. For many, many years, belief in the coming of a messiah was a central tenet of Judaism. Today, Orthodox and Hasidic Jews still believe that a messiah will come, but this is no longer central to the platforms of Conservative, Reform, and Reconstructionist Judaism.

By contrast, Christians are no longer waiting for a messiah because they believe he has already come. They believe the man called Yeshua ben Yosef was the messiah that the Jews had long awaited, and that he was the Son of God. 79% of American Christians believe that Yeshua/Jesus will return to earth one day.<sup>15</sup> This belief is derived both from sayings attributed to Jesus and from events prophetically described in Revelation, the final book of the New Testament. Revelation speaks of a future period of major wars and environmental decimation. After this time, Jesus will return to earth, and all people will first be judged and then be transported to their eternal destinations. By contrast, instead of waiting for a messiah, Reform Judaism is working toward the realization of a “messianic age” on earth, a future time when peace, justice, equality, and sustainability are present everywhere. This is a goal to which I can commit myself and which requires no compromise of my intellectual integrity.

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<sup>15</sup> <https://www.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/4/legacy-questionnaires/287.pdf>

Christianity originated as the story of a man and his followers, and central to that story is the belief that this man is the Son of God. To me it is inconceivable that one could embrace Christianity and not believe that Jesus is God's son. By contrast, Judaism originated as the story of a people. Some Jews believe that all the elements of this story should be taken literally. Abraham actually heard a call from God to leave his home and go to a new place. Moses really received the teachings of the Torah from God on Mount Sinai and in the Tabernacle.<sup>16</sup> Other Jews believe the Torah was not literally given by God to Moses but was written by men and inspired by God. And still others believe that the Torah is wholly the product of the Jewish people and is not divinely inspired at all. But even though they disagree on whether the events in the Hebrew Bible should be taken literally or not, there is strong agreement across the spectrum of Judaism on the importance of what Judaism offers to the Jewish people and to the world: a sacred framework within which meaning may be found. Does it make sense to believe that something is sacred but to question whether it is divine? I believe it does. For me, something is sacred when it has been purposely set apart and it has acquired significant value. Shabbat is sacred because it has been set apart from the rest of the week and given a specific significance. The first verse of *Pirkei Avot*, a 2<sup>nd</sup> century CE work containing the ethical insights of the Rabbinical Jewish tradition, says that we should "make a fence around the Torah."<sup>17</sup> Whether or not the Torah is of divine origin, I believe it is this fence, lovingly constructed and maintained by Jews over the centuries, that sets the Torah apart from other teachings and makes it sacred.

Judaism is a religion but it is also a practice. I choose to practice my Judaism by expressing my love for the Jewish people and my desire to become one of them. I practice by immersing myself in Jewish wisdom and participating in the conversation of Jewish philosophy. I practice by seeking to act according to the Jewish virtues of pursuing justice, doing tzedakah, welcoming the stranger, and not standing idly by.

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<sup>16</sup> "Torah" has multiple usages. It can refer to only the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Hebrew Bible. This is commonly referred to as the Written Torah. It may encompass both the Oral Torah and the Written Torah. This is the sense in which I use it here. According to rabbinic tradition, the Oral Torah was passed down from Moses to subsequent generations, and eventually codified in the Talmud and the Midrash. The Torah may also refer to all 24 books of the Tanakh, the Hebrew Bible. Lastly, it may refer to the sum of all Jewish teachings.

<sup>17</sup> Pirkei Avot, 1:1

I practice by keeping Jewish traditions in my home and teaching them to my son. And so, in place of a traditional declaration of faith, I make a declaration of love and fidelity – to the Jewish people, Jewish wisdom, and Jewish traditions.

I want to leave this world better than I found it and help improve the lives of others while I'm here. I want to learn to number my days so that I may gain a heart of wisdom.<sup>18</sup> I want to strive to be my best possible self. For many years, I have been a solitary searcher for wisdom, but now I choose to join my single, fleeting light to a flame that was first lit thousands of years ago and which still burns brightly today: the flame of Judaism.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Psalm 90:12

<sup>19</sup> I was drawn to this metaphor of one light merging with another larger flame by the *ner tamid* (Hebrew for “eternal light”), which is the lamp that burns perpetually in synagogues before or near the ark in which Torah scrolls are kept.