

DEAR DR. PHIL

Synagogue Newsletter Column

These columns were conceived and carried out by Phil Snyder at Tifereth Israel Synagogue in San Diego for the monthly bulletin. When Phil first started this endeavor, he and his rabbi thought of the questions and answers. Then it took off! He dealt with questions that people actually had. This column keeps Keruv in the minds of the congregation every time it appears.

Dear Dr. Phil,

My daughter-in-law's family came to our Seder. I have never attended any of their celebrations and am totally uncomfortable with Christmas and Easter. I now feel I should attend their next Christmas celebration. How can I find peace with this issue?

Uncomfortable Jewish Mother

Dear Jewish Mother,

No one can tell you how to feel about Christian celebrations. Many Jews are uncomfortable attending non-Jewish religious celebrations. Since they came out of respect for your traditions it should now be easier to attend theirs for the sake of family harmony. You will make your daughter and her family very happy to have you there.

Dr. Phil

Dear Dr. Phil,

My sister in-law and her daughter are thinking about converting. Must they go to a Mikvah and undress in front of other people as part of the conversion process?

Ima Shy Person

Dear Ima,

Tsniyut (modesty) is a very important Jewish value. While immersion in a Mikvah (ritual bath) without clothing is an essential ritual for the conversion of men and women, great pains are taken to insure that personal comfort and modesty are respected.

No one watches anyone undress and it is possible to enter and exit the Mikvah without anyone present. During the immersion itself no one of the opposite sex is allowed near the Mikvah, Witnesses to the conversion stand behind a wall or opaque curtain and hear, but do not see, the immersions.

There does need to be at least one Mikvah attendant of the same sex present to make sure the immersions are

done properly, but great care is taken to make sure that the person immersing feels comfortable and safe.

Alternately, here in San Diego, it is possible to use the Pacific Ocean, the world's largest Mikvah! The witnesses stand on the shore while the convert enters the water up to their neck in a bathing suit. The bathing suit is removed while the convert's body is under water, the immersion takes place, and then the bathing suit is put back on before they leave the water. In extraordinary circumstances it is even possible to immerse in the ocean with a loose fitting bathing suit.

So there are many options. Please encourage your sister-in-law and niece to speak with your rabbi. Most people find the Mikva a very spiritual experience. Their concerns about modesty should not stop them from following the path they have chosen.

Dr. Phil

Dear Dr. Phil,

We are thinking of becoming members of Tifereth Israel. As an interfaith family how will we be made to feel comfortable at your shul?

Prospective Member

Dear Prospective Member,

You will be welcomed with open arms at our shul. At Tifereth we follow the following passage from the bible. "The stranger who dwells with you should be like one of your citizens; love him like yourself for you were strangers in the land of Egypt". From our rabbi, staff and board we want you to know that you will be treated as family. Our Keruv group is a great place to come and meet other intermarried couples many of them have been members for years.

Dr. Phil

Dear Dr. Phil,

I recently became Jewish and I prefer to be referred to as a Jew By Choice and not a convert. I would like to enlighten everyone that I prefer this term.

New Jewish Person

Dear New Jewish Person,

Mazol Tov on choosing to become Jewish! Welcome to the "tribe" and I hope that you can enlighten people with the term that makes you happy. In Keruv we honor both those who have "chosen to become Jewish and those who chose to be supportive non-Jewish spouses. If it makes you happy to be called a Jew by Choice then you can tell those that call you a convert the term that makes you more comfortable.

Dr. Phil

Dear Dr. Phil,

Even though I converted a long time ago I have heard words around our shul that offend me like "goyim". I do not want to make a big deal out of it but I would like to say something to the person that says it. Do you think I should say something? My husband says not to make a scene.

Offended Goy

Dear Offended,

Throughout our history as Jews, we've had ignorant words hurled at us. Ignorance is ignorance, and this falls under that category. I see this as an opportunity to educate that person, and you can do so without being offensive. By saying something like, "you may not be aware, but coming from a non-Jewish family, I find that term offensive," and then leave it at that. Whether Jew, Black, Gay, or Christian it is important to respond to ignorant remarks, intended or otherwise.

Dr. Phil

Dear Dr. Phil,

Two years ago when my best friend's son was born they had a bris. Now two years later my friend has asked me to come to his baptism at a local church. She told me she is doing this to make her husband's grandparents happy. I am not sure whether to support my friend and go to an event that I cannot believe she is allowing to happen. She has promised me that their son will still be raised Jewish. What do you think I should do in this situation?

Unsupportive Best Friend

Dear Best Friend,

You have a choice to make. Showing up does not mean you agree with your friend's decision to have a baptism. On the other hand, how do you feel about participating in a religious ceremony which you know is a deception?

I shared your question with a Christian friend of mine and this is what she had to say: "The idea of baptizing a child to make the in-laws happy but with every intention of raising the child Jewish is, in my opinion, not kosher. Baptism is a series of belief statements, affirmations, and vows made by the person being baptized that he/she believes in the Christian God, and will do his/her best to live a Christian life. In the case of a child being baptized, the child's parents vow to bring the child up in a Christian household, with Christian beliefs."

"In Christianity, baptism is as religiously significant as marriage, entering the priesthood, and last rites. What would you consider your obligation to be if someone planned a completely religious Jewish wedding while also planning to actively practice another religion?"

"It's a difficult question, and probably depends a lot on the level of the friendship, but I would hope that this person would at least have a conversation with their friend to make sure that they know how serious a baptism really is. If the friend goes ahead with it anyway, I personally would say that the observing friend should not attend the ceremony. Whether or not the observing friend should contact the priest/pastor to make sure that he/she knows what's about to happen is another question. There are probably priests/pastors who would do the baptism anyway, but I think many would not."

Dr. Phil