My first encounter with anything Jewish was at age seven. I saw a TV commercial that said “Happy Passover from your friends at Channel 2,” and I said, “Mommy, I want to be Jewish.” I drew six-pointed stars on everything in the house. And that was that. It was instinctive. The next day, my mother talked to a woman she worked with—I can’t imagine what their conversation actually entailed—but the woman invited us to attend my first Seder.

I lived in a good working-class east Baltimore neighborhood surrounded by two “bad” neighborhoods, which were segregated, but I found Jews. There was a Brazilian Jewish girl who lived a couple of blocks away and the kid in second grade who I gave my lunch money to so he’d teach me Hebrew.

Initially, my mother thought I would grow out of it. She would say things like, “Jewish boys eat their vegetables” and “Jewish boys clean their rooms.” As I got
older, she saw it wasn’t going away. At age 14, I happened to be cutting across Johns Hopkins University’s campus and saw a billboard promoting a Jewish student-sponsored lecture and I went. Recognizing me from the neighborhood, someone asked, “What are you doing Friday night?” That’s how I started going to shul.

As soon as I discovered Shabbat, I bought a siddur and a yarmulke, which I began to wear every day. As I started to do more, conflict began. My mother started saying things like, “Give it up to do more, conflict began. My mother used to lie to my mother and tell her I was going to a club on Friday nights, but nice and accommodating. I didn’t really have any problems. People were curious as to why I was there, but nice and accommodating. I used to lie to my mother and tell her I was going to a club on Friday nights because it was better if she thought I was going to a rave than shul.

I went to the rabbi at Johns Hopkins University to ask about conversion; he said I had to be 18. I continued learning through high school, but started falling off in observance during two years in college, hitting spiritual rock bottom.

It was 1999, I was 21, and I said to myself, “You call yourself Jewish, why don’t you see what the Torah has to say?” I searched the Internet; at the bottom of every page I learned from, I’d see, “Copyright Brooklyn, New York.” So I moved there and found a rabbi who was kind of impressed when we first met. He asked me if I read Hebrew, and I said, “Well enough to pray from a siddur, but we don’t have time to talk now because it’s time for mincha.” And then he goes, “Whou, OK!” Thirteen months later, I converted.

In New York, problems with racism started. No one rented me an apartment for 11 months; everywhere I heard “schwartze.” Once at the yeshiva, kids made jokes about me to the point that I had to leave. No one can tell me that schwartze isn’t the equivalent of the n-word. Racism happened more in the modern orthodox community than in the Hasidic world—that was one of the reasons why I converted Hasidic. I find that the degree to which a Jewish person defines himself as a white American is the degree to which he’ll identify with white American racism. The Hasidic experience is still tied to Europe and life before the Holocaust.

Six weeks after getting out of the mikvah, I went to Israel in 2000 for more study at Ohr Somayach, a yeshiva exclusively for converts. I wasn’t the only black; there was a black guy from Philly, the crown prince of Swaziland and a bunch of Ethiopian Jews. Racism didn’t disappear. After a student used the n-word, one yeshiva rabbi pointed to the offender and said, “That young man is a baby and an idiot and he’s the reason the messiah’s not here.” Racism wasn’t tolerated.

In Israel, I also became a rapper. Everything musical was from becoming Jewish. At the yeshiva, my first study partner, David, a white Jewish MC from Long Island, and I would freestyle as a way to learn Talmud better. In 2001, when I returned to the U.S., David and I happened to be in Manhattan at the Orange Bear, and we took the open mike for two hours. Our only rhymes were the stuff we made up during yeshiva; they were in Aramaic about Torah and Talmud. Nobody understood us, but they loved it. The club owner asked us to play every Thursday night. That’s how my hip-hop career started.

Now when I rhyme, it’s more about Jewish content and ethics. I did two videos for Obama and being pro-Obama was a rarity in the Orthodox world. I’m kind of the voice of opposition. Some people don’t like that I’m a rapper; some people don’t mind that I’m a rapper but can’t stand that I’m so left-wing. They can’t stand that I have such progressive views, that I’m out there making music with a Palestinian MC, that I’m out there trying to build bridges where no one else will, talking about social justice.

One woman on a Chabad website asked why do I subject children to such types of music, and I replied, “Why don’t you have mercy on the people you would deprive of hearing such positive music?” We encounter a lot of opposition on a whole bunch of fronts. Even my rabbi told me to stop focusing so much on racism and trying to mobilize Jews of color, but he’s really on the same page as I am; he just tells me to focus more on human trafficking.

I saw a TV commercial that said “Happy Passover from your friends at Channel 2,” and I said, “Mommy, I want to be Jewish.” I drew six-pointed stars on everything in the house. It was instinctive.
My final break with Mormonism came in my early 20s when I decided to make my home in Salt Lake City, a liberal island with a thriving gay community in a Republican state. My Mormon bishop asked that I report incidents of my lesbian roommate’s inappropriate behavior. That was the last he saw of me. I left the church.

I grew up in the San Francisco Bay area and my dearest friends were Jews. My first love was Jewish. I also noticed that my Jewish friends seemed more well-rounded and happier than my Mormon friends. From high school through college, I acted three times in Fiddler on the Roof. The experience of being Fruma Sarah probably lit the fire. But I didn’t know for years that I wanted to convert. That happened when, at age 33, I met David, probably the only single Jewish male in Salt Lake City.

I had just been floating, acting professionally in Salt Lake City for 10 years along with taking other jobs. Then I got a master’s in social work at the University of Utah and found David working at the same mental health agency where I was employed. We hit it off. It was like “Wow, I really love Jewish men. Are you really Jewish? Where have you been hiding?”

We were dating seriously when, unbeknownst to David, I called the rabbi. I left a message. I called a second time, then a third and he finally called. It was like the midrash: You’re turned away three times.

At his Introduction to Judaism class, I was like a starving person who couldn’t get enough to eat. One of my biggest loves about Judaism is that everything is up for debate. I sift through everything that comes before me so I can decide what makes sense to my mind, my heart, my soul, my body and not feel that I’m abdicating any part of myself.

David attended class with me because he had stopped his Jewish education after bar mitzvah. When class ended in 1996, I had my “new age” conversion in the mikvah with four friends; we blessed the four ends of the earth.

And I got my Hebrew name, Debra. During that same period, I had been researching my birth parents, hoping that they might have been Jewish but found that they came from hand-cart Mormon pioneers. I discovered that my birth name was Debra. So in a way, I returned to my name. Later, we named our daughter Devora in Hebrew and Deborah in English. People mistakenly call me Debra, and I say, “No mistake, that’s my Hebrew name.”

When we married in 1998, my adopted mother was too sick to attend. She had loved David. When I told her that I was converting to Judaism, I thought she would say, “What about your savior?” Instead, she said, “At least you’re going to be religious.” The most tension comes from my deeply observant Mormon relatives. I get the feeling that they’re still praying that I will eventually come back to the fold. But they attended our wedding and eruv.

Mormons put in an incredible number of hours doing volunteer work. That’s in me. I look at the insane amount of volunteering that I do in the synagogue; people think I’m crazy. For example, I am co-leading services tonight, co-leading selichot services tomorrow night, and playing Sarah in this open tent greeting for our Sunday religious school.

I get around a group of Mormons, and I feel at home. It’s not only the volunteering, there’s also the work ethic and “Jello.” Mormons believe that they are cousins to Jews, that they are descended from the tribe of Ephraim, one of Joseph’s brothers. Mormons also pay 10 percent in tithing to the church, which derives from the Jewish tradition.

Mormons as a whole have a strange love affair with Jews. My neighbor was born a Jew but raised Mormon, then left the church. We call ourselves “MoJews.” In a way, the more deeply Jewish I become, the more I realize that a part of me is always going to be Mormon. It’s like looking at a beautiful fabric and seeing that that yellow strand is always going to be next to the blue.
Even as a young child, I was a little frustrated that the church wasn't Jewish any more. Even if I believed that Jesus was resurrected, I didn't see how that meant starting a different religion. I was baffled by the break between the two traditions.

As a Yale undergraduate, I was on the council of the university chapel and an occasional Shabbas guy for Hillel. Most of my close friends were either not religious or Jewish. And by my sophomore year, I began a personal tradition of visiting my Jewish roommate's family for Passover.

My view of Judaism was grounded in wanting to be like Jesus and doing what the Bible prescribed. Back then I wouldn't have known how to convert. All my religious structures were Christian. The wisest of my spiritual advisors consistently told me that if I could find a way to make my tradition work for me, spiritually and intellectually, I should stay within it.

I was a liberal Baptist. Some people consider that an oxymoron, but then they realize that Martin Luther King, Jr. was one. The strong liberal Baptist tradition is Bible-based, but social justice oriented. Baptists focus traditionally on interpreting the scriptures for themselves, so when I did not necessarily fully accept concepts like the Trinity, I was still within the Christian spectrum and could bring full commitment to my ordination and ministry.

After receiving a masters in divinity at Yale, I served for three years as an associate pastor—the first female pastor in the Granville, Ohio, church. I left because I decided that my calling was for teaching rather than preaching. I loved leading prayer and counseling, but the emotional burden of preaching with the expectation that my words should be profoundly moving just did me in.

Looking back, my next decision to do a Ph.D. at Emory University in Old Testament studies was as close as I could then come to converting. I had continued to go home to my college roommate's family for Passover and was also going to Hillel services at Emory for the High Holy Days. I was just nurturing the Jewish side of my Christian identity.

I went to teach at the Lutheran St. Ola's College and was also a chapel preacher in 1989. Rob re-entered my life the following year. Our summer romance 10 years previously had ended because he was born Jewish and I was getting ready for seminary. We started dating in 1990 but didn't marry until 1993 when I became a professor at William and Mary in Williamsburg, Virginia, and he took a job in Washington, DC. I then made the liberal Christian commitment to keep a Jewish household and raise any children as Jews.

Rob was casual in his Jewish identity. I was the one who knew prayers and was more interested in practicing Judaism as a religion in addition to my Christianity. That dual identity became increasingly uncomfortable. Rob had two daughters with his first wife, a secular Jew. It was at our house that my stepdaughters experienced Jewish religious practice such as lighting Shabbat candles. Modeling a sense of Jewish identity for them soon came to feel like play-acting. It became inauthentic for me to straddle both traditions as a stepmother. So at that point, I realized that I had a calling to join my family and become a Jew.

I was also pregnant and decided to complete my conversion before the baby's birth so he would be born a Jew. In May 1994, at age 38, I went to the mikvah, and in June the baby was born.

My mother was sad initially because she thought she had lost me. The pillar of her church, she wasn't worried about my going to hell. My siblings range from Pentecostal to agnostic Christian, and their attitudes range from acceptance to affirming. It turns out that of her five children, I am the one who always goes to celebrate Christmas with her. She has come to see our religious lives as something we share rather than something that separates us.

And it's been a joy. The unexpected plus: The life-changing aspect is that after conversion I have spent much time explaining Christianity to Jews and Judaism to Christians. After giving one of my seminars, a Maryland synagogue group urged me to write a book that became The Reluctant Parting to introduce the New Testament to Jewish readers.

I have been overwhelmed with the affirmation and acceptance from the Jewish community, although I have had few encounters with the Orthodox community. It may be that when people learn that I was a minister, there's more respect because they see that I made a serious choice.
At the entrance to Yad Vashem, you can’t miss the grainy black and white photo of thousands of people standing in a square facing the Fuhrer, surrounded by swastikas and hundreds of military men. The first time I saw the photo, I could not stop wet, slow, fat tears from gathering in embarrassment on my chin. Why? Karl Genz, my great-grandfather, a high-ranking SS Nazi officer, was probably there. I wonder what Karl would think if he knew that I am now a Jew.

In 2005, I was newly single with a small son to raise and found myself on an inexplicable path toward personal discovery, which included listening to that inner small voice that beckoned, “You are Jewish; you just don’t know it yet.” The voice had whispered for years, but because I thought a person had to be born Jewish or marry a Jew, it had never occurred to me to convert on my own.

For more than a year I studied with two rabbis, immersed myself in the Jewish community, attended synagogue, joined a single parents’ havurah, and experienced Jewish life cycle events. I called myself a goy-between. I needed a playful sense of irreverence to keep me grounded in finding myself between my adopted Jewish culture and mottled German heritage. The more I experienced, the more I became poignantly aware that I have always felt different in my attitudes, perspectives and beliefs in a Jewish sort of way. For example, as a very small child I remember questioning certain beliefs inherent to Christianity: The notion of original sin seemed absurd, as did the need for some intermediary to absolve me from my wrongdoings.

Even today, when someone asks, “Why did you convert?” it is difficult to answer. Jews tend to want to know why I would consciously join the unlucky club, and Christians are often perplexed that I gave up Jesus.

In the United States, it’s easy to feel safe as a minority. Jews have tended to run into troubled times more than most groups, yet survival seems inherent in the Jewish people’s constitution. But I didn’t choose to become Jewish to prove my survival instincts or to assuage my guilt. I converted because Judaism just fit, as if I had a Jewish neshemah all along that just needed a chance to take off.

Sometimes I wonder if one reason can be found in that photo in Yad Vashem. As those who survived the Holocaust enter their waning years, we must carry their legacy into this next century. Their individual and collective triumphs over evil demonstrate the power of forgiveness, peace, healing, courage and determination. And if someone like me, the great-granddaughter of a Nazi can become a Jew—be embraced by the Jewish community—then there must be a way for our communities, societies, religions and governments to meet at the crossroads of tolerance and understanding.

My second husband, an Israeli, and I each had been married for nine years to non-Jews before we met three years ago. My father-in-law is a Holocaust survivor, and my beloved and I now have a young daughter, so imagine this: In two generations, two families inextricably linked by horror are now linked by marriage, love and a baby. Each day I affirm my connections to Judaism. Our family made aliyah in August. It certainly feels like coming full circle, like finding the home I never knew I’d left.

I was born Muslim in Iran and my husband, Ron, was born Jewish in Israel. We met as students at Tulane University’s medical school in New Orleans. When
we discussed the differences in our backgrounds, I felt it would be important to provide our future children with a cohesive identity. Even if our families were not very focused on this issue, the rest of the world would be.

My parents are secular. I speak Farsi, learned much about Persian culture and visited Iran twice after the revolution when I was 10 and 11 to see relatives. My observant grandmother follows all four pillars of Islam, but I never fasted for Ramadan or went to a mosque. My understanding of Islam was also never congruent with my political beliefs. I believe in gay rights and don’t think any branch of Islam accepts that. I’m also an ardent feminist. I know there are Muslim feminists, but I couldn’t marry the two in my mind.

I had many Jewish friends as an undergraduate at UCLA and in New York while working for three years for Ms. Magazine. I went to Israel then with a friend to visit her parents. I felt culturally part of the fabric of the country. People were open and straightforward, like Iranians; everyone had awful table manners. They were very involved with friends and families and not very religious. It was just like being in Tehran.

So I was open to exploring Judaism and started classes at New Orleans’ Touro Synagogue, where I was received with warmth and acceptance. At first, I thought, I’m in medical school and don’t have time for this. Then I started looking forward to classes, and Ron went with me. He had had a bar mitzvah but didn’t know much, so it became an experience that brought us closer and provided us with a new community.

We had a mixed Persian-Jewish wedding, not officiated by a rabbi because we didn’t want to rush into conversion. Then I became pregnant and everything took on greater meaning. I realized that I did want to raise my child as Jewish. It was more than just wanting to provide him with structure and identity: I wanted to be a part of it wholeheartedly.

When Hurricane Katrina came a year later in 2005, I was about six months pregnant and in the midst of the conversion process. We evacuated to Houston for a year with most of the people in our synagogue and immediately formed a community that provided amazing support during the calamity. I completed my conversion a week before my son was born. It was a private, emotional and meaningful event, instead of what I had imagined: a big thing in front of many people at the temple.

Interestingly, we’re more religious than anyone in my husband’s family in Israel. His family has always been very accepting. They never put any pressure on me to convert. But they were very happy about my conversion because raising our children as Jewish was important. His family is small since so many were killed in the Holocaust.

My family’s concern was that we would be so religious that they wouldn’t have a place. When they visit, they participate in Shabbat or other holidays. They want to learn more. My Muslim grandmother only cares that we believe in one God. She and my family have always had Jewish friends. I was fortunate that they were exposed to Jews in Iran and America.

Ironically, I’m now a Persian Jew. I took Ron’s last name Shatzmiller as my middle name and retained my Iranian last name. When we moved to Los Angeles, the Conservative synagogue we joined warmly welcomed us, but some Iranian Jews didn’t accept me, I guess, because I wasn’t born Jewish. Typically they are Orthodox, and a Reform rabbi converted me. Initially, their rejection was hard for me. In time I learned to let that go and focus on what it means to me to be Jewish rather than on other people’s views. I now have more Iranian Jewish friends and think of myself as part of the Jewish community. It’s nice to marry the two cultures.
had their own holidays because of their absence from public school.

Judaism entered my life when I met Lindsay, a Jewish woman, in 1988 in Shanghai, where I was working. We literally bumped into each other as we were rounding a corner. We struck up a conversation. I guess she noticed my New York accent. We started dating on weekends when she came to Asia on monthly business trips.

When I returned to the U.S., I celebrated my first Seder in Louisville at the home of my future sister-in-law and brother-in-law. From that time on, I began to understand how a religion could be passed down “unchanged” from the time of Abraham to Moses to today. I learned that it doesn’t take a leap of faith to understand and accept Judaism. One isn’t born again. Being an engineer, I don’t believe in miracles. Judaism is perhaps the first and only religion that is between you and God. So nothing conflicted with my beliefs.

When Lindsay and I lived in Beijing, we found a Jewish community and attended community-led services, and I learned about rituals and holidays. I was comfortable participating. When we lived in Appleton, Wisconsin, we were members of a Conservative synagogue in Green Bay, but again, there was no push for me to convert. Everyone assumed that I wasn’t Jewish, but everyone was always friendly. I could not be called up to say an aliya since saying the prayers would not have the same force unless I was Jewish.

What propelled me to formally convert to Judaism was our daughter. I had agreed to raise Kendall as Jewish when we adopted her in China. I wanted to complete my conversion before her bat mitzvah in 2007, and I did. Kendall was in third grade among blonde and blue-eyed children when we lived in Appleton. One day she came home from school, almost in tears, and said to her mother, “I’m different from all the other kids.” Lindsay asked, “Oh my God, what did they say?” She replied, “I’m the only Jewish kid in the class.”

Converting to Judaism wasn’t a matter of seeking a spiritual path but rather of falling in love with a Jewish girl. I met Lisa at the University of Michigan when we were undergraduates. Religion was never an issue between us, and I only learned of her parents’ concerns when our relationship became serious. In 1973 her father said that it would break his heart if she married someone who is not Jewish. To his credit, he was open-minded enough to say, “Well, if this man you love is willing to learn about Judaism and embrace the culture insofar as he can, I can accept that,” but he wanted his future grandchildren to be Jewish. Although I think he believed that our marriage would never be destroyed by cultural differences, he thought Lisa would be happier married to a man who knew about her religion.

I had no religion. My parents were casual Protestants. We went to church when I was a child, and I remember getting some pleasure from ritual. When I was around 12, my family joined a Unitarian church, a classic white-steepled edifice in Massachusetts. I think many times when I have gone to religious services, whether Protestant or Jewish, that the physical setting is often a potent part of the experience. I enjoyed going to this beautiful, minimal church and singing hymns. I remember climbing into the bell tower and gazing at the New England cemetery and the ocean beyond. I suppose those kinds of sensual experiences were closer to being spiritual than anything that I heard in my pew. But that was my last sustained connection with a church. My religious experience stopped at age 13.

So converting to Judaism didn’t mean turning my back on something. But I didn’t take lightly committing myself to study and actually joining a faith. I didn’t think my motivation was righteous. I loved this woman; I wanted to marry her. I didn’t want to break her father’s heart. When I shared my ambivalence with a Reform rabbi, he said, “I understand.” I think he thought that even though I lacked proper motivations, I had an earnest curiosity. It was not an arduous conversion. I learned a bit of Hebrew and did quite a bit of reading, mostly Jewish literature rather than texts about Jewish belief, and learned about holidays and rituals. Fortunately, I was already circumcised.

The conversion process gave me more insight into Judaism. I had attended my Jewish friends’ Reform confirmations when living in Grand Rapids, Michigan, as an adolescent and later went to Jewish weddings. I didn’t know how much of what I experienced had to do with religion, but early on I was attracted to Jewish culture: the emphasis on family and education. When I saw families coming to shul, I realized the power, not simply of faith, but of a culture that binds families.

Chris Van Allsburg
A popular children’s book writer and illustrator, he sculpts mezuzahs

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I had, however, rejected the idea of a deity when I was an adolescent. But that doesn’t mean that I don’t appreciate the value of others’ beliefs and the value they have in a society. When our children were in Sunday school, they would come home with questions about supernatural issues. I tried to remain neutral and give them the opportunity to figure it out for themselves.

Most of my writings are based on childhood memories that predated my exposure to Judaism, but some are based on Jewish themes. Although I began my career as a sculptor, all I do now is design mezuzahs.

I’m the only person in my congregation named Chris, but all my life I have worn a beard, and I can look like the most Jewish guy in a Jewish group. My selection of yarmulkes is much nicer than most because my wife is always buying them.

Both sides of my family are hidden Jews. My father and mother, born in El Paso, Texas, were first cousins; their mothers were sisters. Their parents were small merchants in northern Mexico who escaped the revolution at the turn of the century by moving to Texas.

We’re descendants of Jews who came from Spain and Portugal to the New World in the 1500s. They came with Luis Carabajal, a hidden Jew, who was able to establish a colony in Nuevo Leon, far from the center of the inquisition in Mexico City but not far enough. The inquisition had Carabajal burned at the stake for Judaicizing; the same fate befell Lucas García, my paternal grandfather’s direct ancestor, in 1596.

In my childhood, we were Catholics to the umpteenth. I went to Jesuit high school in El Paso, but I knew I was of Sephardic heritage. However, I didn’t know what that meant. I was around nine when my aunt told me and in my teens when the 1967 Israeli War pushed my father to inform me. I had had some indication from some of my family’s customs; my relatives in Mexico covered mirrors and buried their dead immediately, and males were circumcised. When my eldest son, who is now 27, was born, I had to argue with a doctor about doing a circumcision because the procedure wasn’t being performed routinely. I didn’t know anything about ritual circumcision, but I had to do it for my son. It was a family tradition.

Our ancestry didn’t come to light until I was a young adult. My brother Ralph, a historian, uncovered our family history, and it made me realize that we really had no connection to Catholicism because of what Catholicism had done to my ancestors. I had been doubting Catholic teachings for many years but couldn’t make a break until I became familiar with Judaism. Because of centuries of lack of knowledge, we hidden Jews need to go through a formal process. We need to learn what Judaism means. But I see it as a “reversion” rather than a conversion.

Ralph and I were encouraged to explore by Rabbi Stephen Leon, a world-renowned authority on Sephardic heritage and “crypto-Jews” in the Southwest. We approached Rabbi Larry Bach, the Reform rabbi at El Paso’s Temple Mount Sinai, in June 2000, converted in March 2001, and I had a bar mitzvah three years later at age 53 at Temple B’nai Zion, a conservative synagogue. My first wife initially encouraged me, and my five adult children respected my decision.

My mother has a better son as a Jew than as a Catholic. She was apprehensive at first because she didn’t know what conversion meant, even though my brother David had become Jewish through marriage. So three of her seven children are now Jewish. My mother looks at us, and she’s happy because I honor her more now.

My second wife, a French Canadian, had converted to Judaism before we met. We have a kosher home, observe Shabbat and are now pursuing an Orthodox conversion. I have read that some leaders of the Orthodox community don’t believe that we are Jews. That bothers me a lot. We sometimes go to services at the Chabad House in El Paso. Some people look at us as a curiosity; some are very welcoming, as is the rabbi. But I’m not counted in the minyan.

I have come full circle. As a Christian, it was easy to say that I could be flawed but it didn’t matter because Jesus of Nazareth died for my sins and I could obtain forgiveness. I am more responsible for my conduct as a Jew. I feel much more principled and secure with my Jewish identity. My religion makes me happy; it connects me with Hashem and I feel more fulfilled.