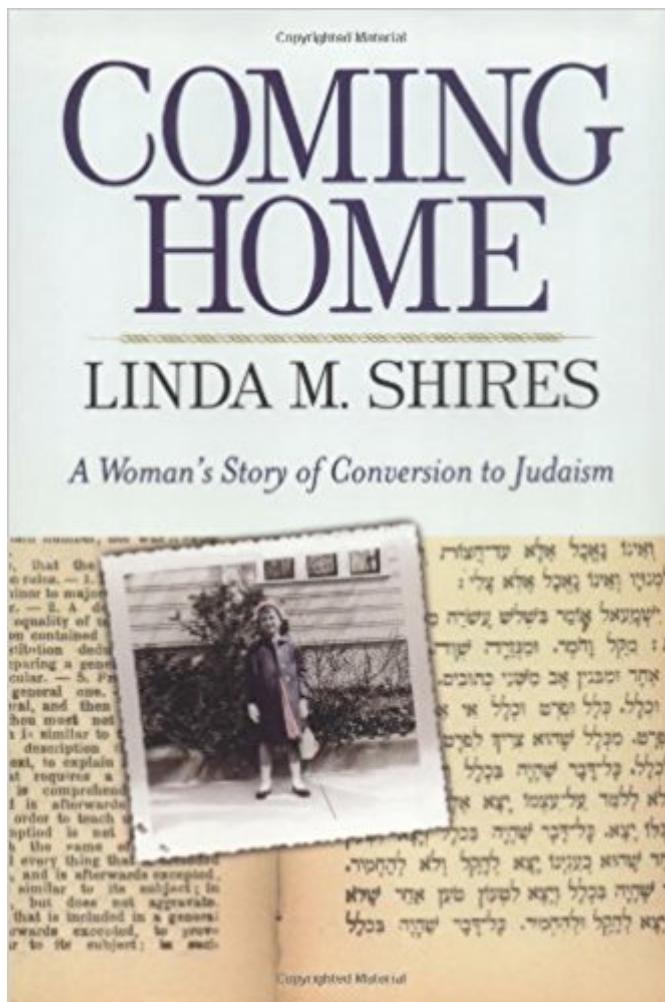


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Coming Home: A Woman's Story Of Conversion To Judaism



Synopsis

She grew up in an upper-middle-class Protestant family in New England. She can trace her father's family back to the Mayflower . Yet, "Judaism was to be my bashert , my destiny," maintains Linda Shires - wife, mother, professor, and author. For almost twenty years, she lived the life of a Jewish wife, passing as a Jew when she participated in Jewish holiday rituals with her husband and her three step-children. When she wanted, she thought of herself as a Christian. But after deciding to ground her child in one religious tradition, Shires discovered her own. Coming Home tells the story of why a former WASP Debutante opted for a position at the margins: a Jew-by-Choice and why she became committed to a life of religious observance and questioning. Her narrative is quietly passionate, spiritual, and learned as it moves from the halls of Princeton to the Holocaust camps of Germany and back again. This richly felt story of conversion to Judaism expands our idea of what constitutes a spiritual journey and a religious practice.

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Customer Reviews

In 1999 at age 48, Shires, daughter of a prominent Episcopalian and granddaughter of a devout Greek Orthodox Christian, did what she had been contemplating for nearly 20 years, ever since falling in love with the Jewish man who would become her husband: she immersed herself three times in a ritual mikvah and officially became a Jew. Her experience could have led her to write a memoir exploring why she felt an intense "desire to belong to the Jewish prayer community," as she puts it. Instead Shires, professor of English and textual studies at Syracuse University, devotes two-thirds of the book to a thoroughly referenced scholarly pondering of aspects of Judaism that

continue to discomfit her, such as Conservative and Orthodox attitudes toward women and homosexuals; and to commentaries on the parshiot (weekly Torah portions) related to her chapters. Still conflicted after converting, she writes: "My identity as a Jew was not only far from whole but also riven with contradictions," including "my feminism and my deep love of Torah" and "my strong belief in upholding traditions and my belief in questioning legalisms." Too many conversion memoirs limit their purview to the convert's personal experience and feelings; by contrast, Shires accords deservedly major roles to intellectual struggle and religious tradition. Readers, however, will need a considerable knowledge of Judaism and tolerance for academese to stay with her through her often labyrinthine scholarly explorations. Copyright 2003 Reed Business Information, Inc.

Shires was raised in an upper-middle-class Protestant family in New England, then she married a Jew with three children from a previous marriage. For the next 20 years, as she informs us, "I passed as a Jew whenever I pleased, without knowing much about the religion or the traditions and without learning Hebrew." When she became pregnant in 1989, her husband asked her to raise their child in the Jewish faith, and she agreed. In 1999, she converted to the religion. The book's first two chapters detail Shires' personal reflections about her conversion experience. Chapter 3, she says, "betrays disquiet at my almost uncritical devotion, which was apparently necessary to get me to conversion day." Chapters 4 and 5 further explore important aspects of Judaism concerning sexuality, purity standards, and the holiness of relationships. The final chapter continues the ethical, social, religious, and psychological inquiry, but it moves into history and the future. A lucid and powerful book from a professor of English and textual studies at Syracuse University. George CohenCopyright © American Library Association. All rights reserved

I have read many individual conversion stories to Judaism. The majority are remarkable and beautiful as they highlight the personal transformation of an individual's path to conversion. That said, I found this book to be very tedious. The textual analysis did not flow well and it did not keep my attention.

I've been thinking about converting for two years. I read Kukoff's book and *Embracing the Covenent* for the same reasons but was looking for a single person's journey in depth rather than a bunch of quotes or a series of stories by others. Shires doesn't speak just for herself, though, but for many who are wondering about taking such a huge step. Judaism is a different world view. Even making a meal involves questions and decisions. She talks about moments like that. This is not a

how-to book but it treats the steps that someone takes who has to go slow towards life change. Courses, rituals at home, going to synagogue, coming to terms with family and the past. The parts on Torah didn't bother me. I read them as another aspect of Jewish life that a convert deals with. There is a section early in the book where she stands up for Judaism before she knows she will convert that I found convincing as part of the process of deciding. Plus she's not afraid of being wrong or appearing stupid. Shires even laughs at herself now and then which is good in a book like this. Two of the interesting women she met on the journey were the artist Helene Aylon and the author Blu Greenberg. I believe the chapter on women and Judaism brought together well a lot of ideas that I've read about here and there but hadn't put together before. I found the book helpful and will go back to it.

I agree with the reviewer who felt that Ms. Shires's textual analysis didn't flow well. I found the majority of this book to be rather dull, tedious, slow-going, and uninvolving. It was an original idea to tell the story of her conversion by relating issues she had difficulty with or areas she found inspiration in to certain passages of Torah and the similar writings of others, but it just didn't seem executed well. If this is supposed to be a conversion memoir, why does so little of the book actually concern her conversion or even her herself? The sections when Ms. Shires is writing about herself, such as in the beginning section, the ending chapter about her visit to her husband's native Germany, and the middle chapter about the mikvah, are quite good and interesting, because they're actually related to her life and to her conversion and not just tediously rambling on about certain Torah passages. From reading this, it seems as though she were the classic child who does not know enough to ask. She says she did a lot of reading prior to her conversion because she really wanted to know the religion and to approach it from a variety of disciplines, but in many sections she admits that she didn't know about some pretty important things or issues till after she converted. For example, she says that she hadn't had a lot of education about the mikveh and had been too embarrassed to ask her converting rabbi, and therefore went into her conversion day feeling she had to immerse herself because she was thought to be "contaminated" and "dirty" as a non-Jew and had to cleanse herself before being admitted to the tribe. How could anyone in any denomination, particularly if she's had such a long process of education and learning as Ms. Shires evidently had, reach conversion day thinking such a thing and not having learnt more about the custom of mikveh? (I was also annoyed that her chapter on the mikveh used the dated and inaccurate translations "contaminated" and "unclean" for the Hebrew words "tumah" and "tamei." That continues to give the completely false impression that menstruating women are thought to be dirty

and unclean, when in actual fact the words surrounding this state of being are translated more like "ritually impure," and the impurity refers to a spiritual, not a physical, state of being.) I was also left wondering why she converted under the auspices of the Conservative Movement when she so clearly feels ill at ease with many of their official positions, or at least the positions her own community seems to take. She really seems like she'd feel more at home in a Reform, Reconstructionist, or Renewal community. I'm also baffled as to why she frequently says that the Conservative Movement hasn't done enough for the inclusion of gays and women, unless her community isn't as liberal as many other Conservative communities are. Or are the changes of the past few decades not radical and sweeping enough for her? I also share her belief that women, gays, the disabled, and other groups that traditionally haven't always been included fully in Jewish life need to be completely integrated and granted full equality and participation in the community, but at times her call for this reads more like a political polemic and speaking from personal experience as opposed to really representing the great strides the Conservative Movement has made in these areas in the past few decades. I'm not doubting her personal experiences with people she's known and what she's dealt with in her own community, but it just seems baffling if she's trying to say the entire Conservative Movement takes those positions as well. A couple of interesting chapters do not a very recommendable book make. Most of this was just very slow going for me, and the *divrei Torah* weren't that novel or insightful either. I've heard most of these interpretations and analyses before, only not in such dull language. I'm actually disappointed I bought this book, though at least I got a cheap used copy. I'd looked forward to reading a conversion memoir, but instead got a tedious exercise in boredom that had almost nothing to do with the author's life, either before, during, or after her conversion.

Some books make you think and this is one of them. She engages with the traditions in different ways than most. It challenged me to think about Jewish life and Torah freshly. I found the beginning and the last section about going to Germany most moving.

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