

## Returning to the tribe: Matthew Culberson's conversion story

Hannah Davis, special to the WJN

**M**atthew Culberson recently converted to Judaism — “returning to the tribe,” in his words, a return driven by discovery of his Jewish heritage and a lifelong pull to the faith. Motivated by a desire to connect with other Jews about the beauty and strength of our shared heritage, he told WJN his story.

for Shabbat dinners, which he found “cool and kind of weird. It wasn’t my timing yet.” He ran into more Jewish people at university, including several professors who said they’d suspected he was Jewish too. He had a conversation with one such professor, Gene Gurkoff, about not knowing why both of their ancestors fled their homes in eastern

literally as if G-d was talking to me, saying, ‘You’re going to Michigan.’ And I remember laying there in bed, going, ‘No I’m not! I’m going to Berkeley!’ But lo and behold, I got rejected from Berkeley and accepted at U-M!” Matthew started graduate school at Michigan, even finding — once again! — Jews in his community, in his research lab. Kiara, now his wife, found community in Ann Arbor too: she ended up working at the JCC for Camp Raanana for some time, and “got her mind blown by seeing the Jewish beliefs, traditions, and songs.”

A chance discovery of the Chabad house on campus was finally the tipping point for him: he had to find out what Judaism was about. When he called Chabad to inquire, they asked if his mom was Jewish — no — and if he’d converted — also no. “The rabbi said, well, you’re not Jewish. But come by Friday night for services and we’ll go from there.” He and his wife went for a Shabbat service, and despite the new environment, he wasn’t afraid or nervous: he felt like he belonged. “I felt comfortable, I felt peace. When the prayers started and I opened the siddur, it was love at first sight: I’d never seen G-d talked about like this ... My soul left my body and went into the siddur. I knew I was going to be Jewish.”

Matthew and his wife had just started to explore different congregations and denominations when the pandemic hit and in-person events shut down. Nevertheless, they were able to do some shul shopping, and Matthew spent a lot of the lockdown researching Judaism. One big question he wanted to answer was how to find a place in Jewish community as a person of African American descent. He’d “never felt comfortable in white groups,” but in his research he found out about the racialized history of Jews, that Jews were not necessarily white, that Jews of color existed. He and his wife joked that the food they got to try at their first service was some of the best of their lives: they were shocked that people who looked white could season their food!

Orthodoxy felt like the right choice for him. He and his wife were already from an observant background, so it felt right to them. Kiara was hesitant about converting but supportive, and his family pushed back on his decision, but “I felt like I couldn’t let this go.” He felt like his whole life was bashert, destiny, leading him to this point: even the pandemic happened at the right time in his life for him to be able to make such a big change. The two of them began the conversion process, studying with Rav Jared Anstandig and the Ann Arbor Orthodox Minyan.

Conversion wasn’t a smooth process. The COVID pandemic shut down in-person events and made it harder to study and meet community members. Their sponsoring rabbi was leaving, and they scrambled to find a new sponsor. Kiara struggled with the demands of the conversion process while keep-

ing up her dental school studies. In the end she decided it was too much to handle, and she quit conversion work and declared she would be a Noahide, a non-Jewish person living by the seven laws of Noah. Matthew was torn between supporting his wife and following the calling of his heart. He stopped practicing for several months but wasn’t satisfied. “My soul felt dirty. I don’t know how to explain it, I felt empty those few months.”

He still felt strongly called to the faith and managed to find Rabbi Bergman at Adat Shalom in Farmington Hills to assist with his conversion. Rabbi Bergman assured him Kiara could convert when she was ready, if she was interested. Finally, Matthew was able to set a mikveh date (November 18, 2021) and match the halachah to the calling of his heart.

Still, despite his conversion, his ancestry, and his knowledge of the incredible diversity of Jews, he has run up against barriers in the community across the United States: he has found that “people still find a way to question how you are Jewish,” especially if you’re not white. People will listen for a Jewish last name when you introduce yourself; they’ll ask if you’re a convert despite asking nobody else in the room that question; they’ll bond with other cultural Ashkenazim in ways that aren’t available for people outside that ancestral group.

There are many paths to being Jewish — observant or not, by birth or conversion, belief or heritage or neither. Still, it is hard for many to overcome the impulse to look for people who fit a narrower definition of Jewishness. Matthew says he hates that Judaism has absorbed racial biases in the USA, saying, “it doesn’t align with Torah, and it is contrary to tikkun olam. I was told Jews should be the light, set apart, chosen to lead the world. Yet, racism and onas devarim are preventing this.”

Post-conversion, Matthew is continuing his studies, strengthening the Jewish community in Michigan, and working toward tikkun olam. Kiara also converted shortly after him because of her own personal calling. They have also restarted an Orthodox conversion because it feels like a better fit for them based on their religious practices and beliefs. Matthew believes you go to whatever movement calls you during a certain time period of your life, because “at the end of the day we are all Hashem’s children, and a mitzvah is a mitzvah.” He wants to learn Hebrew, learn the melodies, and visit Israel. He was motivated to share his story by the hope that other Jews could realize the beauty of their shared heritage (blood or otherwise). “Doing a mitzvah just because you know it gives you a sense of connection to who and what you are and to Hashem, that’s my motivation ... It has nothing to do with your race. There were 12 tribes, we’ve always been a diverse people: kol Israel.” ■



Matthew was born in Stockton, California. His dad had German Jewish heritage but refused to talk about it due to his own past trauma regarding that side of his family, and would only say he was Black. At the time, Matthew’s understanding of Judaism was very limited and definitely did not include Black people: Matthew remembers he and his siblings in their ignorance teasing their dad, saying “we know you’re white,” which upset him.

Matthew’s mother raised him Seventh Day Adventist, a branch of Christianity involving observing the Sabbath and keeping a modified form of kashrut. He had various experiences with Jewish people through the years — some who thought he was Jewish too, based on his religious practices, and some who seemed to recognize a kindred spirit in him — including a high school vice principal named Dustin Hunter. Hunter was a Black Jew who connected with Matthew over their shared observance of Shabbat (Matthew, who was regularly in trouble in school, couldn’t do detention on Saturdays!). Dustin would invite Matthew over

Europe. Gene replied, “we were all trying to escape for one reason or another.”

Matthew was intrigued as a result of these interactions with Judaism over the years. He felt dissatisfied in the Seventh Day Adventist church, and with Christian theology and his experience of being told not to question their practices and beliefs. However, he still found elements of his religious observance important, like keeping the Sabbath. He said, “I kept having these experiences, seeing a Star of David or a Holocaust memorial, and would wonder why I had this attraction to it.” This attraction was not yet strong enough to pursue his interest further, though.

This changed when he went to graduate school for chemistry. Having lived in California, he wasn’t aware of University of Michigan as an option: he was laughingly apologetic about the oversight, saying, “sorry, all I knew was Stanford and Berkeley!” But his fiancée, Kiara, was also looking for a dental school, so he had to find somewhere that would meet both their needs. The night he finished submitting applications, he remembers hearing a voice in his head: “It was