

AT THE ENTRANCE OF THE TENT:
A Rabbinic Guide to Conversion

by Rabbi Jonathan Lubliner



מדריך גיור לרבנים

פתח האהל:

RABBINICAL ASSEMBLY
הרבנים כנסת

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INTRODUCTION

“וירא אליו ה' באלני ממרא והוא ישב פתח-האהל כחם היום.”
בראשית י"ח:א

Midrash teaches that Abraham often sat at the entrance to his tent, the better to observe from afar weary travelers in need of hospitality. Having welcomed the wayfarers with food and drink, our founding matriarch and patriarch used the opportunity to introduce strangers to the monotheistic faith they pioneered by urging them to acknowledge God's gracious beneficence. Said they: “הודו ושבחו וברכו למי שאמר והיה העולם” – “Thank, praise, and bless the One who spoke and the world came into being” (*Sotah* 10b). For these progenitors of the Jewish people, the path to helping others discover the Divine invariably began at the entrance of their tent.

In our day it is the rabbi who sits at the entrance to the tent of Jewish community. The manner in which we reach out to those contemplating conversion, their significant others and their children will not only determine whether or not such individuals choose Judaism, but the quality of their spiritual lives should they opt to live *tahat kanfei ha-shekhinah*. As mediators between the teachings of tradition and the challenges of the present, ours is the sacred task of welcoming entry into the tent of Jewish life without tearing the fabric that defines its structure. Accordingly, it is incumbent upon us to create a conversion process in which on-going dialogue takes place between expectation and acceptance, as well as between empathy and integrity.

Conservative/Masorti Judaism warmly welcomes Jews-by-Choice into its midst, and seeks to promote conversion as one effective response to the challenge of interfaith marriage. Indeed, we have achieved more conspicuous success in this area than other religious streams of Judaism. Yet until now the Rabbinical Assembly has not created a framework in which colleagues, congregations and converts themselves might define and describe the character of *giyyur* within a Conservative/Masorti context. The articulation of such will hopefully engender a more consistent approach to *giyyur* throughout the Movement and add clarity and meaning to the process of embracing Judaism as a Conservative/Masorti Jew.

Petah Ha-Ohel is the first comprehensive rabbinic guide to conversion from a Conservative/Masorti perspective. It outlines the sponsorship process from the time of first contact with potential Jews-by-Choice through the *bet din* and beyond, includes relevant rulings of the Committee on Jewish Law and Standards, and discusses in systematic fashion the halakhic, spiritual and emotional issues inherent in a variety of special circumstances impacting on conversion. The guide also contains an official statement regarding the Rabbinical Assembly's views on conversion, suitable as a basis for discussion and study, and includes information regarding the central registry for *giyyur*.

Notwithstanding those Standards of Practice already incumbent upon members of the Rabbinical Assembly and the specific requirements for inclusion in the RA's registry for *giyyur*, *Petah Ha-Ohel* is a largely suggestive work, rather than a strictly prescriptive one. The material contained herein reflects the best practices and successful strategies of colleagues with extensive experience in working with Jews-by-Choice and their families.

Far from diminishing rabbinic autonomy, it presumes that colleagues are eager to exercise the prerogative they possess to enhance the quality of the conversion process.

During his tenure as President of the Rabbinical Assembly, Rabbi Reuven Hammer laid the groundwork for this endeavor, envisioning the creation of a central registry for *giyyur* in the Movement, one defined by the ideals and best practices of Conservative/Masorti Judaism. His successors, Rabbis Perry Rank, Alvin Berkun, Jeffrey Wohlberg and Gilah Dror, offered continued support to this project during their respective presidencies.

The members of the RA's Task Force on Conversion, Rabbis Myron Geller, Stanley Greenstein, Avis Miller, Robert Scheinberg and Michael Siegel, graciously contributed time and wise counsel to the undertaking. I am also indebted to Rabbi Joel Roth for his careful reading of the document and his suggested clarifications of language and procedure. Rabbi Avram Kogen and Ms. Janice Knack painstakingly edited this work; I am appreciative of the care which they took in correcting the text. Special thanks are due to Rabbi Andy Sacks for volunteering his extensive knowledge of the complexities of Israeli law and *giyyur*; to Rabbi Joel Meyers, for offering encouragement and perspective; and to Rabbi Julie Schonfeld, Executive Vice President of the Rabbinical Assembly, for facilitating this work in countless ways, both large and small.

No expression of thanks would be complete without mention of my wife, Susan, whose loving support makes all that I do possible and meaningful; and my children, Avichai, Elior, and Itamar, who generously share their father with an entire community.

I am deeply grateful to my friends, Dr. Ronald and Joan Levin, for underwriting the cost of this publication; and to the many Jews-by-Choice of my congregation, the Jacksonville Jewish Center, who gave unstintingly of their time in sharing their thoughts, experiences and ideas about how to improve the conversion process and render it more meaningful. Their enthusiastic embrace of the Jewish identity they lovingly chose for themselves has ever been a source of inspiration for which I, in the words of Rabbi Nehunya ben Hakanah, “גורתן הורידה על חלקי.”

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PART 1: RABBINICAL ASSEMBLY STATEMENT ON CONVERSION

Tradition considers our ancestors, Abraham and Sarah, to be the spiritual parents of each and every Jew-by-Choice. No less than today's convert, these ancient progenitors of Judaism consciously embraced a religious identity for themselves very different than the one with which they were raised. To be known among our people as *ben/bat Avraham avinu v'Sarah immenu* is high praise indeed.

"Dearer to God is the convert who has come of his own accord than all the crowds of Israelites who stood before Mount Sinai" (*Tanhuma Buber, Lekh Lekha* 6:32a)... "The Holy One did not exile Israel among the nations save in order that proselytes might join them" (*B. Pesahim*, 87b)... "The Holy One loves converts exceedingly; we likewise must show favor to one who left his family, parents' home, people, and all the Gentile nations of the world to come to us" (*Bamidbar Rabbah* 8:2). Though one may also discern negative statements about conversion in Talmudic literature, the above utterances highlight a welcoming posture toward Jews-by-Choice throughout much of antiquity. The literary and historical record clearly reveals the centuries when Judaism warmly embraced those who chose to cast their lot with the destiny of the Jewish People.

The wariness with which Jewish communities regarded conversion at a later period often stemmed from the harsh decrees of the larger societies that forbade the embrace of Judaism... sometimes on pain of death. To accept conversion under such circumstances, let alone encourage it, was to court potential disaster not only for proselytes and those who converted them, but often enough, for entire Jewish communities as well. Nevertheless, throughout the Middle Ages there still were courageous individuals in every generation and region of the Diaspora who chose to become Jewish.

In our society the factors that once occasioned ambivalence toward conversion are no longer extant. On the contrary, given the demographic challenges of the present, we are determined to return to that strand of Rabbinic Judaism which welcomed sincere Jews-by-Choice.

Conservative/Masorti Judaism remains committed to the ascription of Jewish identity through matrilineality or halakhic conversion as religiously normative and essential to the cause of our people's unity. Yet far from seeking to distance ourselves from those of patrilineal Jewish lineage, we are sensitive to shared ties of history and kinship, and believe that we have a special role to play in the linkage of such individuals to the larger Jewish world. We assert that the rituals of *t'vilah* and *milah* or *hattafat dam b'rit* do not constitute a negation of prior affiliation, but on the contrary, serve as an affirmation of Jewish identity and a celebration of the unity of *klal yisrael*. In partnership with other arms of the Conservative/Masorti movement, we encourage families in which Jewish fathers and non-Jewish mothers are raising children with Jewish identities to consider halakhic conversion. We emphasize the ease with which such conversion is accomplished for those under the age of bar/bat mitzvah, and look forward to sharing with them the blessings of synagogue affiliation, Ramah camping, USY programming, and a Solomon Schechter Day School education.

Demographic studies remind us there are millions throughout the world with at least one Jewish grandparent, who are otherwise estranged from their Jewish roots. In the spirit of *hashavat avedah*, the commandment

to return lost property to its owner, we stand ready to help any and all of Jewish ancestry reclaim their inheritance through programs of *keruv*, education and halakhic conversion.

The Rabbinical Assembly also pledges its continued support to the campaign in Israel for the full enfranchisement of those whose entry to Judaism comes through our Movement. We will continue to advocate on behalf of the thousands of Israelis from the former Soviet Union and elsewhere, who would embrace conversion were it not for the intransigence of the religious establishment, even as we join hands with others committed to achieving genuine religious pluralism in our ancestral homeland.

Judaism has always affirmed that the righteous of other nations also have a share in the world-to-come (*Tosefta Sanhedrin* 13:12). Accordingly, our religious tradition does not proselytize for the sake of bringing others to a salvation that would otherwise be denied them. We acknowledge that many are the paths to a fulfilling relationship with the Divine, and do not believe that one must be Jewish to be worthy of God's concern.

Yet in a world where so many are bereft of roots within any faith tradition, Judaism can offer a compelling and satisfying religious identity, one fully capable of meeting the challenges of modernity while remaining grounded in the wisdom of a three-thousand-year-old tradition. We extend an invitation to anyone in search of a spiritual home to explore a faith and way of life that has had profound impact on the course of Western civilization and the development of ethical monotheism. To that end, we encourage the members and regional bodies of the Rabbinical Assembly to create, support and promote courses in basic Judaism open to the community at large.

There are many reasons that individuals embrace Judaism, including the desire to build a single-faith family with a Jewish identity. Far from deeming this motivation inadequate, we applaud those who wish to forge a *bayit ne'eman b'yisrael*, an exclusively Jewish home. We further recognize that, in due course, those motivated by romantic attachments may discover spiritual growth through Jewish living and learning. As our sages expressed it thousands of years ago, "*mi-tokeh lo lishmah, ba lishmah* – that which is not performed for its own sake may in time be performed of its own accord". Accordingly, we are fully invested in the efforts of the Conservative/Masorti Movement to encourage and promote conversion as a response to the challenge of interfaith marriage.

That many are the paths to membership in the Jewish People in no way detracts from our firm belief that conversion is a serious process, one in which *kabbalat ol mitzvot*, the acceptance of the yoke of the commandments, necessarily plays a role. To become a Jew-by-Choice implies a conscious decision to live one's life by the tenets of Torah and halakhah. The practice of *kashrut* and Shabbat, the observance of Jewish holidays, commitment to the ethical and moral teachings of Torah, participation in synagogue life and solidarity with Israel, the ancestral homeland of all Jews whether by birth or conversion, are fundamental to the formation of a healthy Jewish identity. To preserve the integrity of a process which aims at nothing less than spiritual transformation, we are also committed to the creation of serious conversion programs of Jewish learning that include an ability to read Hebrew. We further believe that a palpable growth in religious practice must precede conversion itself. The observance of Judaism is hardly incidental or ancillary to the process of becoming a Jew. On the contrary, it is both the goal of conversion, as well as the means by which one defines the spiritual journey toward Jewish life.

Yet nowhere does halakhah make conversion conditional upon the performance of specific commandments. Indeed, the traditional sources are deliberately vague, specifying only that we teach a convert “some of the major and some of the minor commandments” (*B. Yevamot* 47a). The sages were far more concerned that those who chose Judaism profess fealty to the binding character of a covenantal relationship with God, rather than create specific litmus tests of loyalty to certain precepts.

Accordingly, the sponsoring rabbi is best able to determine specific evidence of genuine growth in religious commitment. In contemplating whether or not individuals are ready to become Jewish, the rabbi shall consider the extent to which candidates have incorporated Jewish observance into their lives, and assess the likelihood of continued religious growth after conversion.

On the basis of the foregoing the Rabbinical Assembly affirms the following principles governing conversion and endorses those practices and policies that further their implementation:

- i. Jews-by-Choice are a blessing to the people Israel. Rather than the ambivalence toward conversion dictated by the exigencies of an earlier age, we believe the welcoming stance expressed by much of rabbinic literature to be a more appropriate response for today’s world.
- ii. For the sake of Jewish unity and our responsibility to a Jewish future, we stand ready to assist those of patrilineal Jewish lineage to affirm their place within the larger circle of Jewish peoplehood through ritual immersion, and as applicable, *milah* or *hattafat dam b’rit*. We further believe that we have a special responsibility through programs of *keruv*, education and halakhic ritual to welcome all those of Jewish ancestry who have become estranged from their roots during the course of the generations.
- iii. The religious hegemony of one stream of Judaism is incompatible with Israel’s role as a homeland for all Jews. We pledge ourselves to the ongoing campaign to secure the full enfranchisement of our converts in Israel, and to ensure that our rabbis and institutions be freed of the legal and political obstacles that hamper their sacred endeavors on behalf of *k’lal yisrael*.
- iv. Judaism is capable of conferring enormous religious benefit to individuals and families in search of a spiritual home. We invite and warmly encourage those unconnected to any other faith community to consider the possibility of conversion to Judaism. The members of the Rabbinical Assembly are urged to facilitate the process of exploration for any individual sincerely interested in becoming a Jew-by-Choice.
- v. Our belief in the beauty of Judaism and our readiness to share it with others should not be mistaken for missionary activity by another name. We continue to affirm one of Judaism’s most noble and cherished values – namely, its recognition that all human beings are God’s children, and that one need not be Jewish to enjoy a relationship with the Divine.
- vi. We recognize that there are multiple portals to meaningful Jewish identity. A desire to marry a Jew, create a single faith home, and raise Jewish children is a legitimate catalyst to the pursuit of conversion. Indeed, we believe it our responsibility as rabbis to encourage interfaith couples to seriously consider the conversion of the non-Jewish spouse as a solution to the challenge of interfaith relationships.
- vii. The acquisition of a specific religious vocabulary and a working knowledge of Jewish history, culture and text are indispensable to becoming a member of the Jewish People. Given the central role that

Hebrew has played in the preservation of Jewish unity and identity throughout the generations and its prominence in Conservative/Masorti worship, instruction in Hebrew reading remains an integral component of conversionary study. Where feasible, we urge our regional bodies to sponsor conversion programs based on one of the suggested curricular models approved by the Rabbinical Assembly.

- viii. Spiritual transformation is the ultimate goal of conversion as well as the means by which it is accomplished. Whether for reasons of personal conviction, marriage or family, conversion is a serious process, one that must partake of substance and integrity. As Conservative/Masorti rabbis we affirm tradition's insistence that *kabbalat ol mitzvot* remains integral to the assumption of Jewish identity. While we acknowledge a variety of approaches to the incorporation of specific *mitzvot* in the lives of individuals, a genuine conversionary experience must include a commitment to some practice of basic observances such as Shabbat, *kashrut* and synagogue worship as a matter of course.
- ix. The rituals of conversion mark the beginning of one's Jewish journey rather than its culmination. We recognize that *keruv* cannot cease when a *ger* departs the *mikveh*. As Conservative/Masorti rabbis, it is our task to assist newcomers to Judaism by equipping them with the means to nourish and sustain their nascent spiritual identities within the context of Jewish communal life.

2 PART TWO: THE RABBINICAL ASSEMBLY DATABASE FOR *GIYYUR* AND THE CREATION OF CONVERSION DOCUMENTS

The Rabbinical Assembly has established a database to record all conversions performed by its members. While the electronic records will provide corroboration regarding the name, date, place and rabbinic sponsorship, they are not intended to replace physical copies of conversion documents, originals of which should be retained by *ger*, rabbinic sponsor and synagogue (or regional RA *bet din* where applicable). Nevertheless, should a combination of circumstances result in an absence of documentation for *gerim*, the database can furnish proof that a valid conversion did take place.

Access to the database is limited to members of the Rabbinical Assembly. It may be found within the "members only" section of the RA. Colleagues are urged to enter the information regarding individuals who have completed the *giyyur* process. Doing so will not only offer an additional failsafe for *gerim*, but also allow the Rabbinical Assembly to better understand the extent and evolving character of conversion within the Movement.

Individual rabbis have always had the right to determine the composition of *batei din* and the format of conversion documents. Adherence to the Standards of Rabbinic Practice notwithstanding, the Rabbinical Assembly acknowledges the ultimate authority of the local rabbi as *mara d'atra*. Nevertheless, there are myriad reasons to promote an approach to *giyyur* that is *lifnim m'shurat ha-din*, beyond the basic requirement. As has been demonstrated by the establishment of standards for *mesadrei gittin* and divorce procedure, the creation of norms regarding personal status strengthens the character of Conservative/Masorti Jewish identity.

In like fashion, the adoption of a normative approach to the creation of *giyyur* documentation will engender greater cohesion and consistency in conversions performed under the auspices of Rabbinical Assembly members.

We may further enhance the stature of *giyyur* within the Conservative/Masorti Movement by encouraging rabbis to utilize exclusively Rabbinical Assembly colleagues when convening *batei din*. Halakhah, of course, has never insisted that only rabbis may witness conversions – any more than it mandates that only rabbis perform life cycle events. Nevertheless, the presence of *k'lei kodesh* at baby namings, *b'nai mitzvah* or funerals adds spiritual significance to those events. As a milestone no less sacred, rabbis have far more than a generic role to play at a bet din; by virtue of their training and experience they are the ones best qualified to conduct the ritual welcoming Jews-by-Choice into the House of Israel. Equally important, when the composition of a bet din reflects the basic ideology and vocabulary of Conservative/Masorti Judaism, the experience partakes of greater religious clarity and cogency for those who join our communities and synagogues.

Uniformity in the content of conversion documents also plays a crucial role in the Israeli government's acceptance of our converts as *olim* (for more information, see Part Four, section XI, "Making *Aliyyah* and the status of Conservative/Masorti *Gerim* in Israel").

For all these reasons we recommend that members of the Rabbinical Assembly adhere to the following guidelines in the preparation and completion of conversion documents:

I. Who Should Sit on the *Bet Din*?

1. While preferable that all three members of the *bet din* belong to the Rabbinical Assembly, at least one must be an RA member.
 - 1a. When a female colleague is the sponsor, yet chooses not to sign the *teudot*, she should endeavor to arrange for the participation of at least one Rabbinical Assembly member on the *bet din*. Those who cannot arrange for such participation because they serve communities far removed from other RA colleagues should consider appending a letter affirming their oversight of and engagement in the conversion process.
2. Where such bodies exist, it is presumed that sponsoring rabbis will utilize the official *bet din* of the local RA region.

II. What Documents are Needed?

Members of the Rabbinical Assembly are encouraged to use the documents on the Rabbinical Assembly's website for all conversions, whether as computer templates or as blanks to be filled-in on an individual basis. The uniformity of appearance and language (the latter based on the text of *Moreh Derekh*) possesses the single greatest potential of ensuring greater consistency in the creation of the documents we prepare for those who convert to Judaism through our Movement.

Depending on the circumstances of the conversion (e.g., male or female, child or adult), we recommend the following documents be included:

1. For all adult converts, a declaration of faith attesting to *kabbalat ol mitzvot* (for *hashlamat giyyur* in cases of patrilineality, see number 7 below) based on the language of the document found on the RA

- website and *Moreh Derekh*, and signed by the convert as well as the members of the *bet din*.
2. For all adult converts Hebrew and English certificates, using the language found on the RA website and in *Moreh Derekh*, and signed in accordance with the signature protocol described below.
 - 3a. For adult males, a separate teudah for *hattafat dam b'rit* in Hebrew and English, using the text found on the RA website and in *Moreh Derekh*, and signed in accordance with the signature protocol described below.
 - 3b. For adult males undergoing *b'rit milah*, (as opposed to surgical circumcision followed by *hattafat dam b'rit*) a certificate or letter from the *mohel*.
 4. For the conversion of minors in an interfaith family, a declaration of parental consent using the text found on the RA website and in *Moreh Derekh* as a basis for such, signed by both parents and the members of the *bet din*.
 5. For the conversion of minors, the Hebrew and English certificates for minors based on the language found in *Moreh Derekh*, and signed in accordance with the signature protocol described below. When children are adopted, the language of the teudah should reflect such.
 - 6a. A separate *teudat hattafat dam b'rit* for male minors in Hebrew and English based on the language found on the RA website and in *Moreh Derekh* and signed in accordance with the signature protocol described below.
 - 6b. When *b'rit milah le-shem giyyur* has been performed on a child, a certificate furnished by the *mohel* should accompany the conversionary documents. If a document is no longer extant, the *bet din* should record as much information regarding where, when and who performed the *b'rit milah*, and submit it with the other conversion documents. Photographs, videotapes and/or family attestation that a *b'rit milah* took place serve as credible evidence.
 7. *Hashlamat giyyur* presumes that an individual has already embraced Jewish life whether through patrilineal lineage or a conversionary ceremony that did not include immersion and/or hattafah or *b'rit milah*. In sensitivity to the difference between an individual embracing Judaism for the first time and a person who has lived – perhaps for many years – with the self-presumption of Jewish identity, it is appropriate to create a document of *kabbalat ol mitzvot* reflective of this. An example of such may be found on the RA website. The Hebrew and English texts for *hashlamat giyyur* found on the RA website and in *Moreh Derekh* should be substituted for the regular certificates of conversion, and signed in conformity with the signature protocol outlined below.

In cases of *hashlamah* for a male, if a *b'rit milah* certificate is available it should also be attached. If one is no longer extant, the *bet din* should record as much information regarding where, when and who performed the *b'rit milah*, and submit such with the other conversion documents. Photographs, videotapes and/or family attestation that a *b'rit milah* took place serve as credible evidence. When an individual is circumcised, but has no information of any kind regarding whether or not it was performed as a *b'rit milah*, then *hattafat dam b'rit* is necessary, and the standard certificates for it in Hebrew and English are to be included in the packet of conversion documents.

III. How Should Documents be Signed?

We recommend that rabbis consistently employ the following signature protocol:

1. Hebrew signatures must include transliteration into Hebrew characters of civil surnames.
2. Civil signatures must also appear on all conversionary documents
3. Civil names must be typed or printed legibly on all documents
4. Rabbis should always include “Rabbi” before civil name.

IV. How Many Copies of the Documents Should I Prepare?

Rabbis and regional *batei din* are encouraged to create three sets of original document: the *ger* is furnished with one complete set; the sponsoring rabbi retains a second; the synagogue or regional *bet din* is given the third. It may seem redundant for both rabbi and synagogue (or regional *bet din*) to possess duplicate sets of documents, yet inasmuch as rabbis dispose of or misplace records and synagogues can move or merge, having a back-up does serve as a protective hedge. It is worth remembering that individuals may be called upon at some point to prove their Jewish identity not by virtue of their own conversion, but that of a parent, or even a grandparent. The responsible retention of conversion documents in the present is a promise of trust we extend to the children of those we convert today.

3 PART THREE: A GUIDE TO ADULT CONVERSION

I. First Contact: Undertaking the Journey

A. A call from an individual interested in exploring conversion should be received with warmth and encouragement. Phone or e-mail messages should be returned promptly, and a face-to-face appointment scheduled with reasonable alacrity. The midrashic directive to turn away a candidate three times before acceptance is homiletical rather than halakhic at best; literal fulfillment of this instruction is demeaning to those interested in conversion and incompatible with rabbinic integrity.¹ The goal is to help potential *gerim* explore honestly and thoroughly both the challenges as well as the rewards of becoming Jewish.

¹ The alleged requirement of turning a would-be convert away three times finds no expression in the *Mishneh Torah*, the *Tur*, or the *Shulhan Arukh*. On the contrary, once a convert's motivations have been ascertained, “He is accepted forthwith”. See *Shulhan Arukh, Yoreh Deah* 268:2; *Mishneh Torah, Hilkhhot Isurei Bi'ah*, 14:1. In each of the above sources the halakhic language echoes that of BT, *Yevamot* 47a, which expresses the same thought.

The idea of turning a person away three times comes instead from an aggadic source: “Rabbi Shmuel bar Nahmani stated in the name of Rabbi Yehuda bar Rabbi Hanina: Three times Scripture says ‘Return’ [i.e., in the case of Naomi’s discouragement of Ruth] to teach that one must discourage a person who seeks to become a proselyte three times; but if one continues to press to be received, then one is accepted.” *Ruth Rabbah* 2:1. Given the rabbinic predilection for right-handedness, it is also interesting to note the conclusion of the foregoing passage: “Always discourage with the left and draw near with the right.”

- B. It is recommended that a minimum of 45 minutes to an hour be set aside for the initial meeting between rabbi and potential *ger*. The rabbi may observe a variety of emotions at this encounter, ranging from diffidence and awkwardness to exhilaration and joy. Inasmuch as the potential candidate for conversion is unaware of what to expect, the rabbi should strive to engender a comfortable and supportive atmosphere.
- C. The initial meeting is critical to gaining an understanding of background, motivation, family dynamics, anxieties, and hopes. The rabbi may gently guide the conversation to elicit the necessary information, yet should also allow ample time to listen to the story of what has brought this person to a contemplation of Judaism. This initial conversation should touch on the following areas: the individual's family background and details regarding religious upbringing; the nature of current beliefs and practices; the desire for a new religious identity; the reasons why the individual feels that Judaism might be the most appropriate choice for such; the extent of exposure to and experience with Jews and Judaism to date; the reaction of family and friends to the person's exploration of becoming Jewish.
- D. When a Jewish significant other is part of the picture, it is important to ascertain his/her own feelings about Jewish identity, and the degree of willingness to be a supportive partner in the conversion process. How does the Jewish partner feel about his/her significant other's decision to explore Judaism? What family dynamics are at work in the Jewish partner's family – i.e., are family members supportive or skeptical of the conversion? While generally desirable for the candidate and the Jewish significant other to attend the initial appointment together, some rabbis prefer to limit the first meeting the potential *ger* alone. When this is the case, a subsequent appointment for both parties should be scheduled shortly thereafter.
- E. Rabbis should apprise candidates for conversion from the outset about the halakhic standards of the Conservative/Masorti movement, including the necessity of *milah/hattafat dam b'rit* and *t'vilah*. It is also appropriate to inform candidates wherein Orthodoxy and Reform Judaism differ in their approaches to conversion, and what the post-conversionary status of the *ger* would be within the various streams of Judaism, whether in Israel or the Diaspora.
- F. Rabbis need to offer clear guidelines from the start regarding both the academic pre-requisite of conversionary study, and basic behavioral expectations such as attendance at services and the incorporation of Shabbat and *kashrut* into the life of the potential *ger*. It is important to stress that the embrace of individual *mitzvot* need not proceed according to an artificial time table – rather, we understand that all candidates will embrace their new spiritual identity at their own pace.
- G. *For this very reason, it is generally inadvisable to set conversion dates before the process has been underway for some time.* While we recognize, accept and applaud the legitimacy of marriage as a catalyst for conversion to Judaism, we also understand that when a conversion must be completed by a wedding date – at times set before the couple has even met with the rabbi – the external pressure may

undermine the integrity of *giyyur l'shem shamayim*. When a couple is open to conversion, yet adamant about a particular wedding date, the rabbi might do well to encourage them to commence the conversion process, with the understanding that they are free to pursue a civil wedding on their own before the conversion, followed later by *huppah* and *kiddushin* once *giyyur* is complete.

- H. It is helpful to have on-hand at the initial meeting, any or all of the following: books such as Simcha Kling's *Embracing Judaism*, Anita Diamant's *Choosing A Jewish Life*, Lena Romanoff's *Your People, My People*, or Harold Schulweis's *Judaism: Embracing the Seeker*; a syllabus of a beginner's Judaism class offered in one's congregation or community; a bibliography of books and websites on basic Judaism; a listing of programs in the synagogue or community especially appropriate for Jews-by-Choice; synagogue bulletins and other membership literature describing events, services and activities, etc. Giving the potential convert such materials to take home is indicative of a thoughtful rabbi and a congregation prepared to support the individual through the conversionary process.
- I. At the conclusion of a first appointment, it is entirely appropriate to afford the individual time to digest the information shared. Those not prepared to embark immediately upon a conversionary course should not be pressured to do so. The potential *ger*, of course, may choose to refrain from further contact. The rabbi's ultimate role is to help individuals explore sensitively whether or not Judaism is appropriate *for them*. In some instances, a decision not to pursue *giyyur* may be the wiser choice. At times conversion is a non-linear process; a person may opt to renew contact with the Jewish community in a more sustained fashion at a later date.
- J. Should the individual express a desire to commence the conversion process after this initial contact, the rabbi must determine the best course of action to pursue. In certain situations it is entirely appropriate to discourage conversion. For example, persons with strong ties to religious beliefs incompatible with Judaism, those suffering from mental illness, or individuals in extreme distress occasioned by opposition of close family members to their plans are not likely to make suitable candidates for conversion. Except in the most extreme circumstances, one can invite continued dialogue and exploration of Judaism while remaining clear about the specific issues in need of resolution before proceeding further.
- K. Once both the rabbi and the individual decide to embark upon the conversion process, it is desirable to begin as soon as possible. "Our next Introduction to Judaism class doesn't start until October, call me in six months," may appear reasonable from the standpoint of scheduling, but can also place a damper on a potential Jew-by-Choice's spiritual yearning and enthusiasm. Becoming Jewish clearly has an institutional dimension; yet it also partakes of the intangible fanning of a spark into a flame. When impossible to begin the formal piece of the conversion process immediately, in the interim sponsoring rabbis should seek alternative ways of helping the potential *ger* establish and strengthen contact with Jewish life through periodic appointments, invitations to attend holiday and Shabbat services as well as other synagogue events, enrollment in adult education classes, introductions to other Jews-by-Choice within the community etc.

II. *Al Ha-Derekh*: On the Road to Conversion

A. Rabbi as Spiritual Coach and Facilitator

1. Rabbinic sponsors should meet with those engaged in conversion on a face-to-face basis to discuss spiritual progress, growth of religious commitment, integration within the synagogue community, joys and doubts about becoming a Jew-by-choice, or intra-familial tensions as they arise. It is recommended that sponsoring rabbis meet with candidates for conversion no less than once each month (not inclusive of time spent in conversion study); more frequently if the exigencies of specific situations require.
2. Rabbis may encourage candidates to keep a journal of the conversion process to good effect. This notebook can serve as a place to record questions that come up in between meetings with the rabbi, and serve as a place to record reactions and feelings about each step of the journey toward *giyyur*. Later on in the process the journal may prove helpful when the time comes for the candidate to write conversion essays. The journal should remain the private domain of the would-be *ger* for unfettered expression of sentiment.
3. Sensitivity to the fact that conversion candidates come with a lifetime of experiences, interactions and associations is well worth bearing in mind. Accordingly, it is essential to be open to discussion of a candidate's interpersonal dynamics with members of his/her own family, particularly those who may be distressed by the individual's choice to become Jewish. As deemed appropriate by the rabbi and with the candidate's consent, the former may offer counsel to the family as a group, or initiate contact with family members on an individual basis.
4. *Rabbis are urged to mandate the attendance of the spouse or significant other at classes, programs, and some meetings in recognition of the fact that Jewish family life is built in tandem with one's spouse rather than in isolation from one's life partner.* By the same token, rabbis must also take care to allow the potential Jew-by-choice to define a space that is uniquely his/her own within the rubric of the community. Successful integration into Jewish life requires converts to develop their own links to Judaism and synagogue activity, rather than filter their religious experiences exclusively through their Jewish spouses. Rabbis might well consider affording potential *gerim* and their significant others the opportunity to meet separately on occasion to share individually their respective feelings about the conversion process.
5. Sponsors must be equally sensitive to the interpersonal dynamics a Jew-by-choice has with members of his/her significant other's family, particularly those who believe that conversion doesn't "really" make a person Jewish. More often than not, the negative attitude of Jews-by-birth toward *giyyur* is one of ignorance, rather than innate prejudice. The education of Jewish family members in this regard is of signal importance. As appropriate, the rabbi should initiate family counseling to promote maximal acceptance.

6. A candidate for conversion has a reasonable expectation of privacy and confidentiality. While frequently the impetus for conversion may come from a future in-law or other relative who is a long-standing member of a rabbi's congregation, it is understood that the sponsoring rabbi's ultimate responsibility is to the candidate for conversion and the integrity of the process.
7. Sponsoring rabbis are urged to integrate potential Jews-by-Choice into the community through programming, personal invitation, encouragement, or matching them with committed members of the congregation who share similar interests. Creating a data base of Jews-by-Choice who have integrated themselves into the fabric of congregational life can be a particularly powerful tool in this area. Many synagogues also offer free High Holiday tickets, and complimentary invitations to congregational events to those engaged in conversion. It is also vital for rabbis to enlighten those synagogue members ignorant of authentic Jewish teaching on the subject of conversion, and to ensure support for *gerei tzedek* in accordance with the rabbinic dictum that we may not wrong a convert, even in our verbiage.
8. Except in the most unusual of circumstances – e.g. the conversion of an individual living in a remote area, far removed from Jewish life and the regular presence of a rabbi – long distance sponsorship is discouraged. The act of sponsorship by definition involves assisting and actually witnessing the religious growth of an individual as s/he becomes integrated within the community and increasingly embraces personal practice of Judaism. When utilized to the virtual exclusion of regular interaction within a community itself, telephone and e-mail contact are palpably inadequate to the task of meaningful sponsorship.
9. One common case of long distance sponsorship to be avoided involves an individual who has grown up in a particular synagogue, but subsequently moves to another region where a romantic attachment is forged with a non-Jew. Whether at the behest of the parents who remain members of the congregation or the individual who enjoyed a positive relationship with the rabbi in previous years, a request is made to supervise the non-Jewish partner's conversion from afar. Should this situation arise it would be clearly better for the rabbi to connect the couple in question with an RA colleague and USCJ affiliated synagogue in the community where they reside, rather than attempt to supervise the conversion from far away for the reasons elucidated above. Helping such individuals become linked to their local Jewish community in no way precludes the rabbi from continuing to have a meaningful relationship with the couple through their occasional visits back home and periodic phone calls. In cases where the rabbi of the Jewish partner's previous congregation is asked to officiate at the couple's wedding, it is highly advisable to contact the sponsoring rabbi to ascertain the progress of the conversion. By the same token, during the *giyyur* process the sponsoring rabbi should also communicate with the colleague serving as the *mesader kiddushin*.
10. A powerful bond is often formed between rabbis and those who would cast their lot with the Jewish people. For the former, there is a sense of spiritual kinship, and the joy of watching another person

awaken to the limitless possibilities of Jewish living; for the latter, a rabbi can become an idealized teacher, the living embodiment of all that the future Jew has come to love about being Jewish. The danger for such relationships to move beyond the bounds of propriety and the standards of ethical conduct is very real. Those who would undertake the responsibility of sponsorship must remain ever alert to this potential abuse of rabbinic power. When necessary, rabbis should not hesitate to terminate a sponsorship rather than risk compromising their roles as *k'lei kodesh* within the communities they serve.²

B. Rabbi as Educator

1. In order to absorb and integrate successfully the information necessary to function comfortably within a Jewish community, it is recommended that a course of conversionary study take place over a period of no fewer than six months, include Hebrew reading, and consist of a minimum of 50 hours of instruction in all subject areas.
2. Basic conversion study should cover the following subject areas: exposure to *TaNakh* and rabbinics, as well as the relationship between biblical and rabbinic Judaism; Jewish views of God; the significance of *hesed*, *tzedakah*, *k'vod ha-b'riyot* and other *mitzvot beyn adam l'havero*; the role of halakhah in Jewish life and the evolution of Jewish Law; the totality of the Jewish life cycle, including birth and its attendant rituals, Jewish parenting, bar/bat mitzvah, marriage and divorce, dying, death and mourning; the structure of the Jewish calendar and its operation; all Jewish holidays, whether of torahitic origin or post-biblical; *kashrut* – its sources, meaning and practice; Shabbat – its sources, meaning and practice; prayer – the structure of the liturgy, its historical development, communal vs. individual worship, the themes reflected in Jewish prayer, and its choreography; Jewish views of human sexuality; Jewish views regarding bioethical and medical issues, e.g., organ donation and transplantation, fertility treatment, abortion, and euthanasia.; an overview of Jewish history from the biblical period through the present, and an acquaintance with major figures and personalities from our past; the specter of anti-Semitism and the tragedy of the Shoah; the intimate linkage between the Land of Israel and Judaism; modern Zionism, the State of Israel, and its relationship to Diaspora Jewry; the various religious streams of Judaism in the modern world, their religious differences and similarities; the unique challenges of the melting pot, cultural pluralism and contemporary Jewish life.
3. Conservative/Masorti Judaism offers a unique perspective on many of the above issues; it is incumbent upon us, therefore, to ensure that those who would join our congregations understand that which all Conservative/Masorti Jews share. As rabbis committed to our movement, moreover, we are responsible to make a compelling case for our own view of tradition. To that end, where available, programs of conversion study sponsored by the various regions of the Rabbinical Assembly, jointly sponsored by several USCJ-affiliated synagogues and supervised by local RA members, or offered

² See The Rabbinical Assembly's *לכתב הדפוס: Code of Professional Conduct* (February 2006), Part V: "Rabbinic Authority, Responsibility and Power, Boundary Violations" (section 2), pp. 6-7.

through the aegis of a single Conservative/Masorti synagogue, are preferable to non-denominational or interdenominational classes.

4. It is also understood that programs under the auspices of Conservative/Masorti rabbis and synagogues are not universally available. When the only option for group learning involves enrollment within an inter-denominational or non-denominational group, this is far preferable to study in isolation. In such situations the sponsoring rabbi needs to shoulder the responsibility of distinguishing the unique parameters of Conservative/Masorti Judaism and wherein it offers a different view of specific religious issues.
5. Instruction in Hebrew reading should be built into the program of conversionary study. Potential gerim should also receive copies of a Conservative/Masorti siddur as a matter of course. The involvement of lay teachers in the acquisition of basic Hebrew may facilitate integration within the synagogue community. The scheduling of Hebrew reading classes on Shabbat mornings before or after communal worship accomplishes the same as a weekday class, with the additional bonus of providing a “language lab” in real time as students try out their Hebrew skills at services.

III. *Tabat Kanfei Ha-Shekhinah*: Preparing for the Conversion Experience

A. Length of Process

1. By its very nature, conversion to Judaism involves an intensely personal journey; there can be no generic measurement as to how long a conversion takes. Indeed, where there are no external pressures, an individual might choose a slow track deliberately in order to integrate Jewish learning and living maximally into his/her life prior to *giyyur*. With the above caveat about timelines in mind, one may generally assume a preparatory period of nine to twelve months, inclusive of a course of conversionary study, to afford the potential ger sufficient time to grow in religious commitment, as well as participate in a full cycle of Jewish calendar observances. In addition to the length of time spent in preparation, sponsoring rabbis must also consider the extent to which there has been a discernible increase in personal observance, the likelihood that there will be continued post-conversionary involvement in Jewish life, as well as expression of the candidate’s own views about becoming a part of *k’lal yisrael*.
2. As the preparatory period draws to a close, the sponsor should share the Declaration of Commitment found in *Moreh Derekh*, and evaluate the extent to which the candidate practices the specific mitzvot mentioned therein. Doing so clearly constitutes one of the litmus tests to determine a person’s readiness for *giyyur*: To what extent can the potential ger genuinely affirm adherence to such practices in a substantive manner? To what extent does the sponsor believe that the Declaration of Commitment truly reflects the candidate’s religious growth?

A more detailed discussion of *Kabbalat Ol Mitzvot* within a Conservative/Masorti context may be found in the appendix.

B. Preparing for the *Bet Din*

1. Before scheduling a meeting with the *bet din*, candidates should complete the conversion essays found in *Moreh Derekh*. Literary length is irrelevant; content is paramount. The sponsor should discuss the candidate's essays with him/her, and indicate that they will be shared with the other members of the *bet din* as well. When a spouse or significant other is involved, the rabbi may consider asking the Jewish partner to write parallel essays on how the conversion process has changed his/her relationship to Judaism and the ways in which s/he plans to be supportive of the other person's nascent Jewish identity.
2. The sponsor should spend time with the candidate helping him/her choose a Hebrew name. Selecting a name for oneself underscores the assumption of a new identity, and makes the reality of an impending conversion all the more concrete.
3. If not discussed earlier in the process, the sponsoring rabbi should initiate a conversation about the purchase of *tallit* and *tefillin* for male *gerim* (and, depending on the circumstances, for female *gerim* as well) before the meeting of the *bet din*. Rabbis and congregations might consider presenting *tallit* and/or *tefillin* as a gift to the new Jew-by-Choice, or perhaps offer them at discounted cost through the synagogue gift shop.
4. As the conversion process draws to a close, it is appropriate for the rabbi to describe the *giyyur* process itself, e.g., what happens during the proceeding, the kinds of questions the *bet din* might ask, the appearance of the *mikveh* and pre-immersion preparation, the amount of the fee due the *mikveh* and any other associated costs.
5. There are several models regarding honoraria for the members of the *bet din*. In some communities it is customary not to receive honoraria at all. In other places, the sponsoring rabbi opts to provide such to his/her colleagues from a discretionary fund. In still other venues, the local rabbinic establishment establishes a set fee, a portion of which is given to the members of the *bet din* in recognition of *skhar battalah*. In those communities where rabbis receive honoraria, it is preferable that collection and disbursement of these funds take place at a time other than the *giyyur* itself to ensure the occasion's maximal dignity. Sensitivity to those of little means is vital; an inability to pay associated costs should never serve as a bar to conversion.
6. It is the task of the sponsor to familiarize the other members of the *bet din* with the background and particulars of the conversion candidate. Sharing the candidate's essays with the other members of the *bet din* prior to convening facilitates this goal. Sponsors should also contact the members of the *bet din* to offer their rabbinic perspective on the candidate's progress. These steps will ensure some of the questions posed to the *ger* partake of relevant specificity. Instead of relying on generic queries alone, questions based on the essays lend a more serious dimension to the proceedings. They also attest to the presence of a *bet din* that has made an effort to familiarize itself with the candidate as an individual.

7. Knowing the religious standards of one's colleagues serving on the *bet din* before convening is vital. Because rabbis have different views regarding levels of personal observance necessary for conversion, sponsors should not take it for granted that their colleagues serving on the *bet din* will automatically feel the same way. By the same token, those asked to serve on a *bet din* need to inquire of the sponsoring rabbi as to the practices of the individual seeking conversion. Collegial etiquette dictates that rabbis uncomfortable with the requirements of the sponsor and vice versa be able to decline participation gracefully without pressure. When utilizing a regional *bet din* of the Rabbinical Assembly, sponsoring rabbis should acquaint themselves with that body's policies and procedures, and are responsible to share such information with the candidate for conversion.

8. The Committee on Jewish Law and Standards sanctions multiple views regarding the *edut* of women. Some colleagues – among them women – adhere to the position that limits participation on *batei din* to men. When this is an issue for the sponsor, the other members of the *bet din*, or the *ger* (e.g. in a case where an individual converts into a family with a more traditional orientation), the composition of the *bet din* should be sensitive to this fact. Even when female colleagues opt not to sign a *teudah* in such circumstances, they can participate fully in the interview of the *bet din*, and otherwise direct the ritual proceedings. It is also incumbent upon regional bodies of the Rabbinical Assembly to be sensitive to those sponsors, colleagues serving on regional *batei din* and *gerim* uncomfortable with the *edut* of women.

9. One may certainly encourage the candidate to bring his/her significant other, family members and/or friends. Traveling with loved ones to the *bet din* can provide personal support and lessen anxiety. Depending upon the circumstances, the *bet din* may wish to invite family members and/or significant others to be present during some or all of the interview; it may even be appropriate to solicit their participation in some areas of the discussion. Nevertheless, the focus of the interview is on the *ger* and his/her motivations, beliefs, commitments etc. The presence of loved ones should neither distract the *bet din* nor dilute its give-and-take with the candidate. Questions intended for the *ger* should never be answered by anyone else present.

The members of the *bet din* should exude warmth and possess a pleasant demeanor. As anyone who has ever served on a *bet din* knows, the experience is innately intimidating for the convert, no matter how reassuring the sponsor is. It is helpful for the members of the *bet din* to introduce themselves. A casual atmosphere is encouraged; to that end preliminary chatting can help put the candidate at ease. Ideally, the interaction between future Jew-by-Choice and *bet din* should possess the give-and-take of comfortable conversation.

10. The role of the *bet din*, however, is to serve as more than a rubber stamp for conversion. The conscientious sponsor will have thoroughly considered the candidate's readiness and will have apprised the other members of the court about the would-be candidate's progress in advance. Yet even if the ultimate approbation of the *bet din* is presumed, five minutes of pro forma ques-

tions about the candidate's favorite Jewish holiday, food, or biblical character dilutes the religious potential of the moment. If we believe that Judaism seeks to stretch and grow us spiritually, then the *drisha v'hakira* of the *bet din* must also test the willingness of the *ger* to challenge him/herself. Indeed, the rabbinic sources are clear that the ultimate function of the *bet din* is not to witness immersion and/or *hattafat dam b'rit* (which can be affirmed by two witnesses *b'di'avad*), but to ascertain whether or not there has been *kabbalat ol mitzvot* in any meaningful sense. At its most effective, the *bet din* offers a mirror and a sounding board to the candidate for conversion. Does the individual understand that from a Jewish perspective, conversion is irrevocable? Has one really made peace with severing ties to a former faith? Does the person fully understand what *kabbalat ol mitzvot* means? Is there real commitment to continued Jewish growth? How does the person conceptualize a relationship with Israel and Jewish Peoplehood? Has the individual reached a point where Jewish identity is desired truly for its own sake, regardless of other considerations?

11. Questions of basic knowledge and literacy should also be included in the interview. Such questions may be drawn from the conversion curriculum, and/or consist of practical matters fundamental to basic Jewish literacy, e.g., what does the candidate know about the laws of *kashrut*? What are the *mitzvot* connected to Sukkot? Why is Tisha b'Av a day of mourning? How do Jews mourn the dead?
12. At the conclusion of the interview with the candidate, the *av bet din* should thank the candidate and request him/her to wait outside for a few moments. Even if the sponsor has conscientiously laid the groundwork to ensure the acceptance of the *ger*, it is proper and helpful to allow the members of the *bet din* to share impressions with one another. In the rare instance that a problem arises during the interview, a private exchange of views will afford the *bet din* an opportunity to decide on a course of action.

C. The Ritual of *Giyjur*

1. In some communities, the interview with the candidate will take place at the mikveh itself, in other locales the *bet din* will first meet with the candidate in one venue, and only then travel to the local *mikveh* (or other source of *mayim hayim*) located elsewhere. In similar fashion, *hattafat dam b'rit* may be performed after meeting with the *bet din* in the first locale or prior to *t'vilah* at the *mikveh* itself. Much depends on communal custom, the geographical proximity of the *mikveh* to the members of the *bet din* and the *ger*, and the availability of a room in which the *bet din* may privately convene without disruption. The following serves as a general guideline to the steps of the *giyyur* ritual:
 - a. After the interview with the candidate, and a few minutes of private discussion among the members of the *bet din*, the candidate may be asked to return to read his/her statement of *kabbalat ol mitzvot*. Alternatively, s/he may do so at the *mikveh* itself before preparing for

immersion. After having read the declaration, the candidate and members of the *bet din* should sign a minimum of three copies of the document: one for the *ger*; one for the sponsoring rabbi or regional *bet din*; and one for the records of the synagogue with which the candidate is affiliated. When sending conversion documents to the RA registry for *giyyur*, a photocopy of the signed *kabbalat ol mitzvot* document must accompany the conversion certificates (see Part II for more information).

- b. *Hattafat dam b'rit* is performed before immersion. It is not necessary to engage a *mohel*. A spring-loaded lancet, such as the ones used by diabetics to test their blood sugar, is readily available from pharmacies and medical supply stores. An antiseptic solution should be applied to the skin before/after the *hattafah*. If the candidate is embarrassed by the thought of the rabbi performing the *hattafah*, there is no reason why he cannot perform the ritual upon himself. It is presumed that women rabbis will not perform *hattafat dam b'rit* on older children or grown men for reasons of *tz'ni'ut*. When the candidate executes *hattafah* upon himself, he may turn away from the members of the *bet din* for the sake of privacy, use the lancet, and then dab at the site with a piece of gauze until it has absorbed a clearly visible drop of blood. The *hattafah* should take place under the glans (head) of the penis where it joins the shaft, i.e., the place where the foreskin was once attached³. The *bet din* should see the blood on the gauze as attestation of *hattafat dam b'rit*.
- c. It is traditional not to recite any *b'rakhot* for *hattafat dam b'rit*⁴, though the Committee on Jewish Law and Standards permits the recitation of the two blessings required at a *b'rit milah* for the sake of conversion. Should a rabbi decide to include the *berakhot* in the ceremony of *hattafat dam b'rit*, they are recited by a member of the *bet din*, not the proselyte himself.
- d. The candidate for conversion now prepares for the *mikveh*. The sponsoring rabbi reminds the individual of their conversation some weeks ago regarding pre-*mikveh* preparation. Band-aids, earrings, rings, acrylic nails, and nail polish are removed. Most *mikva'ot* ask that users shower prior to immersion for sanitary reasons. The door from the vestibule leading to the bathroom and the *mikveh* should remain closed at this time to ensure the candidate maximal privacy. It is preferable for immersion not to occur during a woman's period because of the issue of *hatzitzah*, i.e., an obstructive barrier to total immersion such as a pad or tampon. Because *t'vilah* for the sake of conversion has nothing to do with the laws of *niddah*, there is no need to wait an additional period of seven days following the disappearance of menstrual blood. Alternatively, if a conversion must be scheduled during a woman's period (e.g. the only time available to convene a *bet din*), she should be instructed to remove her pad or tampon during the brief period of the actual immersion.

3 *Sefer Zokher Ha-B'rit*, *siman* 16:12

4 *Shulhan Arukh*, *Yoreh Deah* 268:1.

- e. While *edut* by its very nature involves being an eye witness to an event, matters of *tzni'ut* and *kavod* are also important considerations. When the candidate and members of the *bet din* are of different genders, one should ask an individual of the candidate's gender, who is also familiar with *t'vilah*, to stand at the edge of the *mikveh* to instruct and witness the person's immersion. Members of the *bet din* should stand outside the *mikveh* area itself, yet remain within earshot to communicate with the *ger* and the individual supervising his/her immersion. When the candidate and members of the *bet din* are of the same gender, the latter should witness the immersion itself.
- f. For the sake of proper *t'vilah*, the *bet din* should instruct the *ger* to spread his/her fingers while lifting the soles of the feet off the *mikveh* floor, thereby ensuring the water to completely surround the individual for an instant. When the *bet din* is not within visual range for reasons of *tzni'ut*, it is critical for the individual supervising the immersion to ensure its correct performance.
- g. A man (and, where customary, a woman) dons a kippah for the recitation of the *b'rakhah*. The kippah is removed prior to each immersion. The order of *t'vilah* is as follows: Immerse once⁵ and then recite the *b'rakhah al ha-t'vilah*; (remove kippah, if applicable) and immerse a second time. Though not required,⁶ the *bet din* may direct the *ger* to recite *sh'hehyanu* after the second immersion, and then immerse a third time. The third immersion is not required, and may certainly be omitted when a person has a fear of water or is physically challenged.
- h. *T'vilah* can be a moment of great spiritual significance – a culmination of many months of preparation, a feeling of having crossed a bridge of immense meaning. Rabbis are encouraged to recognize this with the inclusion of a prayer or suitable text upon the conclusion of *t'vilah*. Some recite Ezekiel 36:25-26, others opt for an appropriate poem or reading. A chorus or two of *siman tov u'mazel tov* sung by those present is certainly fitting on this happy occasion.
- i. While the newest member of the Jewish People is dressing, the various documents are signed by the *bet din*. The signing of multiple copies provides a safety net for proof of conversion should an individual ever lose his/her own *giyyur* paperwork. Once the convert emerges from the dressing room, the conversion documents should be read aloud, and a set given to the *ger*. The sponsor should impress upon the *ger* the importance of storing these papers in a safe place with other vital personal documents.

5 “The reason the blessing is recited after the immersion rather than before, as is the usual procedure with blessings recited on the performance of a *mitsvah*, is that the proselyte cannot say ‘who commanded us’ before he has accepted the obligations of his new faith by immersing himself.” Isaac Klein, *A Guide to Jewish Religious Practice*, p. 444

6 According to the view of Rav Sherira Gaon, *Sh'hehyanu* is obligatory only on joyous occasions of a cyclical nature, rather than for one-time events. For example, the liturgy stipulates the recitation of *sh'hehyanu* when we perform the *mitzvah* of *lulav* or that of reading the *megillah* each year, but not at a *brit milah* or wedding (though some sources advocate its inclusion at a *pidyon ha-ben!*), *Tosafot* to BT, *Sukkah* 46a, “העושה” ד”ה. Nevertheless, its recitation on other happy occasions is certainly permissible. See *Pithei Teshuva* 1 to *Shulhan Arukh*, *Yoreh Deah* 268:2, which encourages the inclusion of *sh'hehyanu* after a convert's immersion.

- j. Rabbis are encouraged to prepare conversion documents in conformity with the RA's protocol described in Part Two of this booklet. Photocopies of those teudot in compliance with the guidelines for certification may be sent to the RA's central registry for giyyur. It is prudent to create three sets of conversion paperwork with original signatures – one for the ger, one for the rabbi's or regional bet din's records, and one for the synagogue with which the Jew-by-choice is affiliated. Retiring rabbis in the process of sorting through their files are urged to retain possession of conversion records for reference should a future question arise about an individual's status, or alternatively, to transfer them to the custody of the synagogue's office for safekeeping.
- k. The day of a person's conversion is one of sacred significance, and a time for rejoicing. Inasmuch as the emergence from the *mikveh* is likened to birth, it might be said that the day of *giyyur* is a kind of spiritual birthday, one that should be celebrated accordingly. Rather than simply return to work, the Jew-by-choice might wish to consider taking the day off to spend with family and friends. It would certainly be consonant with the spirit of the day for the rabbi to join the convert and his/her family/friends for an appropriate *seudah* following the ceremony. This is a milestone and a life cycle event by any definition and should be treated accordingly. It is fitting to include the recitation of *Shir Ha-Ma'ablot* (Psalm 126) in the *Birkat Ha-Mazon* following the repast, much as one would on any festive occasion.⁷
- l. While the interview with the *bet din*, *kabbalat ol mitzvot*, *t'vilah*, and when applicable, *hattafat dam b'rit*, satisfy the formal halakhic requirements of conversion, a post-conversion welcome ceremony is strongly encouraged. In some instances the ceremony might take place as part of a regular synagogue service – e.g., calling the individual to the Torah for his/her first *aliyyah* with a special *mishabeyrakh*, and/or other readings. Some communities incorporate candy throwing and/or singing *siman tov u'mazel tov* into the proceeding. Other congregations schedule a special *Shavu'ot* ceremony at which those who have become Jewish in the past year are given a role, frequently in conjunction with the reading of *Megillat Ruth*. Some communities also opt to provide the newly converted a gift from the congregation, such as a copy of *Humash Etz Hayim* or a basic reference text of Judaica. In yet other locales, rabbis and/or the *gerim* themselves prefer a more private ritual, limited to family and friends. Regardless of whether held in a public setting or not, the sanctuary remains an ideal place for this observance. In creating a welcoming ceremony, rabbis may utilize the liturgical suggestions found in *Moreh Derekh* (pp. J20-27), or create their own.
- m. It is appropriate to offer a newly converted person (and his/her family) a *mazal tov* in the synagogue newsletter, or from the *bimah*. Before doing so, however, the rabbi should ascertain the wishes of the *ger*, and respect any reluctance to occupy the limelight. When a newly

⁷ One might also opt to add the following *harahaman* to *Birkat Ha-Mazon* in the same place that insertions are made at a *b'rit milah* or *simhat bat*, i.e., just after the petition to send Elijah the Prophet with “glad tidings of salvation and consolation:

“הרחמן הוא יברך את מי שהובאה תחת כנפי השכינה, ויגן אותו מכל צרה וצוקה, ויצליח דרכו בהיבת התורה. – May the All-Merciful bless him/her who has found shelter in the Divine Presence; shield him/her from sorrow and distress, guide his/her embrace of Torah with success.”

converted individual is reticent about receiving public recognition, one may send a warm personal note instead.

IV. *Kol Hathalot Kashot*: After Conversion Takes Place

- A. Rabbi Alan Silverstein emphasizes the importance of not leaving a proselyte, “dripping at the *mikveh*.” Tradition accords the newly converted Jew the status of a spiritual new-born. Far from being a pejorative characterization, the rabbis understood that religious transformation and the growth of one’s spiritual identity is the work of a lifetime. A recently converted Jew depends on a rabbi and a community that will be cognizant of his/her ongoing needs to connect and grow as a Jew.
- B. Indeed, many Jews-by-Choice report a kind of anti-climax following their conversion. As Lydia Kukoff observes in her book, *Choosing Judaism*, “I didn’t feel as though I owned Judaism. Judaism didn’t feel like mine yet . . . I was still closer to my non-Jewish past than my Jewish present. I suppose I expected a flash from the heavens to give me an instant personal Jewish past at the moment of my conversion. No such luck” (*Choosing Judaism*, p. 24). Newly converted Jews often express feelings of inauthenticity – frequently articulated sentiments include not “looking” or “sounding” Jewish. Sensitivity to this phenomenon and reassurance on the part of rabbis are of signal importance.
- C. After a person converts to Judaism there are other forms of letdown as well. Having worked closely with a rabbi toward the achievement of a goal over the course of a year, the sense of structured growth and encouragement built into the conversion process suddenly ceases to exist. The Jew-by-Choice watches as the rabbi turns to other programs and projects, no longer affording the individual the time and attention s/he once received.
- D. For these reasons, the first year or two after conversion to Judaism is of paramount significance to the formation of a strong and healthy Jewish identity. Rabbis are encouraged to maintain at least monthly contact with new Jews-by-Choice. Such calls offer opportunities for reassurance and are an ideal time to encourage greater involvement in Jewish life.
- E. Having discussed plans for future growth with the convert prior to conversion, the rabbi should endeavor to help the *ger* follow through. An invitation from the appropriate synagogue personnel to serve on specific committees, volunteer for special projects, enroll in an adult *b’nai mitzvah* program, or mentor others undergoing conversion are but a few of the ways to bridge the gap of cognitive dissonance between knowing that one is Jewish and feeling Jewish by being an integral part of the community. It is critical that these invitations *not* come through the rabbi exclusively. Rather, the rabbi should help the *ger* and the community to forge links directly to one another – the degree to which there is true integration of Jews-by-Choice into a community depends on the extent to which they are on the radar-screen of fellow congregants and have the self-confidence to engage in shul life without needing the rabbi to facilitate such.

- F. Rabbis are encouraged to discuss with their synagogue's lay leaders the possibility of offering newly converted Jews (and their family members when applicable) a year of free or reduced membership. For many, it will be the first time they have ever had to pay dues to belong to a congregation. Offering discounted membership for converts also sends a positive message about the synagogue's welcoming stance toward *giyyur*.
- G. Rabbis should ensure that the name of new Jews-by-Choice be given to any and all relevant personnel and organizational arms of the synagogue, including Sisterhood and Men's Club, which should offer the Jew-by-Choice their own invitations to become involved.
- H. Rabbis can also help facilitate the enfranchisement of Jews-by-Choice by helping them understand the "alphabet soup" of Jewish communal institutions and their respective functions. While clergy function primarily within the context of synagogue life, rabbis are also keenly aware of the important roles played by JCCs, Federations, Jewish Family Services etc. Familiarity with the overall structure of the organized Jewish community can engender a broader understanding of and commitment to *K'lal Yisrael* outside the synagogue's walls.
- I. The creation of an emotional tie with the State of Israel can often be one of the most challenging aspects of Jewish identity for *gerim*. As Lena Romanoff notes in *Your People, My People*, "Jewish attachment to the State of Israel is a foreign concept and a seemingly unattainable feeling... Many converts at first find it awkward to integrate Israel into their new lives as Jews" (*Your People, My People* p. 170). Given the common cultural perception that Judaism is a faith – like Christianity and Islam – rather than an identity that embraces both religion and peoplehood, this is hardly surprising. In addition, many Jews-by-Choice naturally see their roots as stemming from their ancestors' countries of origin. Clearly it takes time and effort before an individual truly feels that Israel is the land of his/her ancestors as well. Israel Affairs committees should be encouraged to extend invitations to Jews-by-Choice to attend and participate in all programming related to Israel. Invitations to any and all communal celebrations regarding Israel are equally important. Synagogue trips to Israel furnish a particularly compelling way to connect a Jew-by-choice with Israel while in the company of his/her rabbi and fellow synagogue members. When congregations plan trips to Israel, rabbis might especially encourage Jews-by-Choice and their families to go to Israel.
- J. Individual communities, synagogues and RA regions are encouraged to offer special programs for Jews-by-Choice, recognizing their unique concerns and perspectives. In communities large enough to host a beginning Judaism class for *gerim* and their significant others, "class reunions" might be offered, a Shabbaton experience in the year following conversion, or other enrichment activities.
- K. Those who have embraced Judaism are also the most valuable resource for feedback regarding how well the community welcomes and integrates converts. It is worth the effort to solicit the perspective of Jews-by-Choice and consider how the community might strengthen its programs of *keruv* and integration. In addition, rabbis should help foster ties between Jews-by-Choice who

have successfully become a part of synagogue life and those undergoing the process of conversion. Those who were befriended, guided and nurtured during their own conversions to Judaism are best equipped to offer the same helping hand to others.

- L. The anniversary of a person's conversion creates a wonderful chance to wish the individual a "Happy Birthday," and affords an opportunity to offer a person an *aliyyah* to the Torah. The injunction in Jewish Law not to remind a convert of his or her conversion is rooted in tradition's determination to protect the ger from invidious comparison or insult. In our day when we celebrate those who choose Judaism, however, such recognition in no way diminishes the individual's status within the community. On the contrary, it provides a well-deserved honor to those whose presence is a blessing to our community.
- M. Jews-by-Choice might also be encouraged to use the anniversary of their *giyyur* as a time for spiritual and personal reflection, by re-reading their journals and conversion essays. To what extent has Judaism provided them with a true spiritual home? In what ways would they like to continue their Jewish journey? Where do they feel they have achieved the most religious success, and where would they like to increase their knowledge and observance? Rabbis might well consider offering the Jew-by-Choice the chance for an annual "spiritual physical" to contemplate the distance traveled and the journey yet to begin.
- N. There is no such thing as a community being "too welcoming" of those who have come *tahat kanfei ha-sh'khinah!*

4 PART FOUR: SPECIAL CASES & CIRCUMSTANCES

I. Conversion of Children in an Interfaith Marriage (Jewish father, non-Jewish mother⁸)

While the conversion ritual for a minor *al da'at bet din* is quite simple to perform and requires no formal period of conversion study, rabbis need to be sensitive to and aware of specific family dynamics that might confirm the wisdom of converting the child . . . or lead to the opposite conclusion. Under no circumstances should a rabbi agree to supervise the conversion of a child without discussing the matter with both parents first. In addition, agreement to perform a conversion requires the explicit consent of both parents – even if they are divorced.⁹

⁸ Because of its contextual relevance to issues of *giyyur*, the following pages presume a Jewish father and a non-Jewish mother. The issues herein raised, however, are equally germane to situations in which a child is Jewish according to halakhah, but is being raised within an interfaith family.

⁹ Teshuvah by Rabbi Avram Israel Reisner, *Proceedings of the Committee on Jewish Law and Standards*, 1986-1990, pp. 161-162, 172.

There are many legitimate reasons why the non-Jewish partner of an interfaith marriage chooses not to convert (e.g., respect for parents, integrity of personal beliefs, adherent of another religion etc.). Indeed, they are frequently the same reasons why many Jews in intermarriages opt not to embrace the religion of their spouses. In meeting mixed couples interested in converting their children to Judaism, it is important to discuss the totality of family life – including the non-Jewish partner's attitude toward Judaism and conversion. On a more subtle level, the conversion of a child can and sometimes does presage the eventual conversion of the parent. Rabbis should be aware of this and take note of the information for future efforts at *keruv* as appropriate.

A commitment to dual faith parenting on the part of an interfaith couple necessarily precludes a child's conversion. Nevertheless, the rabbi should communicate that refusal in a way that invites the couple to reconsider the dilemma of raising a child in two mutually exclusive faiths. The rabbi may wish to recommend, or even better yet, furnish some of the literature that sensitively, yet honestly, deals with the pitfalls of dual faith parenting.¹⁰ It may also be appropriate to encourage the parents to consult with clergy of the other faith; hearing the same conclusion articulated by a minister or priest may help a couple understand this is not a Jewish issue alone. Rather than decline involvement with no explanation or castigate the family's decision, the rabbi should view this as an opportunity to educate parents, who may not have fully grasped the harm of raising children with a fragmented and conflicted sense of religious identity.

Assuming that dual faith parenting is not an issue per se, there are other considerations to explore with the family. They include:

- 1) **Why do we really want to convert our child?** Parents who seek to convert a child must consider their motivations for doing so no less than an adult candidate for conversion. Are they motivated by their own values and commitments, or responding to the pressure and expectations – spoken or not – of parents and in-laws? Rabbis can serve as sounding boards to assist parents better grasp their own motivations.
- 2) **Who will bear the primary responsibility of supervising the child's Jewish development?** Raising a Jewish child requires parents to be partners in the process of religious education. It is the home, rather than the synagogue, which serves as the matrix of Jewish identity. Parents are role models; in ways both obvious and subtle, they are constantly called upon to share their own memories and experiences of growing up, observing holidays, attending synagogue, celebrating a Bar/Bat Mitzvah. To what extent will the Jewish father be available, ready and willing to take the lead in furnishing these experiences?

Even if the father is prepared to take an active part in raising his child as a Jew, the mother who has agreed to bring her children *tahat kanfei sh'khinah ha-shekhinah* has an important role to play as

In very extenuating circumstances, permission of the non-custodial parent may be waived if completely estranged from the child or deemed a menace to the youngster in some way.

10 E.g., Rabbi Alan Silverstein, *Dual Faith Parenting: Second Thoughts on a Popular Trend* (New York: Federation of Jewish Men's Clubs, 1993). Having a supply of these inexpensive booklets on hand is recommended.

well. If she is, in essence, being called upon to engage in Jewish parenting, what will she do to acquire the requisite knowledge of Jewish values, rituals, celebrations and vocabulary? The rabbi should strongly encourage enrollment in “Basic Judaism” classes where locally available or supervise a program of guided reading for the non-Jewish mother. A willingness to acquire knowledge of Judaism and the development of Jewish parenting skills become even more crucial when circumstances (e.g., the father’s working hours) require the non-Jewish mother to play a primary role in supervising the day-to-day activities of the child, including religious education.

- 3) **Is the non-Jewish mother an active adherent of another faith?** If so, has the couple considered the challenges of maintaining the religious integrity of the non-Jewish spouse while safeguarding the child from confusion where Jewish identity is concerned? How will the mother respond to questions such as, “Why don’t you want me to be what you are?” How will the non-Jewish parent handle issues of worship and the observance of her holidays within the context of home life? Is there a readiness to forego the presence of another religion’s symbols in the home (e.g., a Christmas tree) precisely because they engender religious confusion among youngsters? It is imperative for a couple in which the non-Jewish partner is an adherent of another faith to talk about these issues prior to the conversion of their child. If discussion of these matters has not yet taken place, the responsibility lies with the rabbi to initiate the conversation.
- 4) **What is the current level of religious involvement of the family?** Are they affiliated with a synagogue? Do they observe Shabbat and holidays in some fashion, and use Judaic ritual objects at home? Are they committed to providing their children with a religious education? Above all, are they open to the expansion of their Jewish commitment, qualitatively and quantitatively? Beyond a discussion of current involvement the rabbi should assist the family in formulating concrete plans for synagogue affiliation and religious school enrollment as a pre-requisite to conversion.
- 5) **What role will the grandparents have in imbuing Jewish values or undermining them?** The proximity of committed Jewish grandparents, particularly when involved in the regular care of their grandchildren, can play a role of enormous value. In weighing the pros and cons of conversion for a child, in addition to the other factors outlined above, rabbis would do well to consider the tangible benefits of Jewish grand-parenting when part of a child’s daily life. Conversely, if there are non-Jewish grandparents involved in the child’s life, one must also consider their religious commitments and the role they might play in either supporting the youngster’s Jewish identity or countering it.

In sum, before agreeing to supervise the conversion of a child the sponsoring rabbi should consider the totality of the family environment prior to arranging a *bet din*. At one extreme a rabbi might encounter a couple in which the Jewish parent will have little or no involvement, the non-Jewish spouse little interest, and the Jewish grandparents no tangible role. At the other end of the spectrum, one might be approached by an interfaith couple eager to maximize their child’s Jewish identity. Since the majority of situations fall

somewhere in between, rabbis should explore the full range of lifestyle issues before agreeing to supervise a child's conversion. In the final analysis, there are no compelling reasons to convert a non-Jewish child to Judaism except one: a genuine commitment of parents to raise children with a meaningful Jewish identity.

II. Blended Families

Blended families are an increasingly common phenomenon. When parents with children from previous relationships merge their families into one, the conversion of the non-Jewish partner can entail a unique set of issues requiring attention. In some instances, the Jewish spouse will have children from a prior union; at other times, it will be the spouse seeking conversion with progeny from a former relationship. In still other instances, both partners will have offspring. The sponsoring rabbi will need to consider the following factors:

- A. **Patrilineality** – It is not inconceivable for the Jewish partner to be the parent of children that aren't halakhically Jewish and/or the non-Jewish partner seeking conversion to be the parent of children who are! When meeting couples with children from a previous marriage, the rabbi needs to ascertain the halakhic status of their offspring.
- B. **Age of children** – The feasibility of *giyyur* for children in blended families depends on the age of the youngster. Children with no prior exposure to Jewish life on the cusp of adolescence or well into their teen years may understandably resist the idea of conversion. One cannot ignore, however, the challenges that a non-Jewish child will face living in an environment suffused with a new and unfamiliar faith identity. When a blended family includes older children that aren't Jewish, the sponsoring rabbi must initiate open yet sensitive dialogue between family members to establish a comfortable atmosphere of mutual support, trust and respect.
- C. **Custodial rights** – Though ex-spouses themselves may not be members of a newly blended family, they rightfully continue to play pivotal roles in the lives of their children. Except in those situations where parental rights have been terminated by the court for cause, or a non-custodial parent has no contact with the children, the sponsoring rabbi must ascertain the sentiments of the other parent regarding the conversion of the children. Even when a child's primary residence is with the Jewish parent or the one planning to embrace Judaism, the consent of both parents is required.

In cases where the Jewish partner's previous marriage was to another Jew, the sponsoring rabbi should also communicate the importance of obtaining a *get* prior to re-marriage as required by Jewish Law and the Rabbinical Assembly's Standards of Practice.

III. Awareness of Patrilineal Issues

Without compromising the Rabbinic Standard of Practice incumbent upon all members of the Rabbinical Assembly,¹¹ it is nevertheless vital to distinguish between those who are currently raising unconverted children “with appropriate and timely public and formal acts of identification with the Jewish faith and people”¹², and those who have yet to do so.

The rabbi should be informed of patrilineal families in the congregation as soon as possible. At the time of affiliation with the congregation – preferably even sooner – sensitive discussion should take place regarding personal status *vis a vis* movement standards. The integrity of our institutions and fairness to the family require nothing less.

Without personal acquaintance of the family and its background, it is impossible to know the extent of the family’s awareness of the issues surrounding patrilineality and the differences between Reform and Conservative/Masorti approaches. Thus, if the children are of school age, it is best for the initial conversation regarding status to take place between parents and rabbi without the youngsters’ presence. The rabbi should emphasize that halakhic conversion is NOT a negation of the couple’s Jewish parenting, nor is it a negative comment on their child’s religious identity. On the contrary, it is an affirmation of Jewish identity, an opportunity to widen the circle of their child’s recognition as a Jew. The ease with which halakhic conversion for minors may be accomplished can also be stressed to good effect.

If the child is of sufficient age to understand matters, the rabbi needs to take time to discuss the matter with the youngster in an age-appropriate fashion at a separate meeting with the parents in attendance. The rabbi should encourage questions regarding the ceremony of conversion and its various components. In particular, the rabbi should be sensitive to childhood anxieties regarding putting one’s head under water, being naked in front of strangers, or being stuck with a needle. Reassurances should be offered accordingly.

It is generally advisable to perform these conversions as soon as possible after affiliation – subject to the time frame necessary for such discussion with the parents and child, the family’s acceptance, and scheduling the *mikveh* and *bet din*. While there may be exceptional circumstances – e.g., poor health, familial dysfunction, having just moved to a community and not yet being acclimated – there are few benefits to long-term postponement of a minor’s conversion. While individual synagogues and rabbis have formulated a variety of policies concerning religious school enrollment and youth group membership for youngsters of patrilineal descent who have not yet converted, conversion must take place before the celebration of Bar/Bat Mitzvah.¹³

11 *Proceedings of the Rabbinical Assembly*, 1986, pp. 313-322; *Proceedings of the Committee on Jewish Law and Standards*, 1980-89, pp. 177-178.

12 Quoted from *Ma’aglei Tzedek-Rabbis Manual*, ed. David Polish, (New York: CCAR Press, 1988), p. 227.

13 *Committee on Jewish Law and Standards*, 110658B, 041459B, Minutes of the CJLS; 102656, 013061, Correspondence of the Chairperson.

When teens of patrilineal Jewish descent are raised in a Jewish environment – albeit without the sanction of halakhic status – there is no need for a full-fledged course of conversion study. The immersion in a *mikveh* (and if indicated, *b'rit milah/hattafat dam b'rit*) constitute acts of *hashlamah* rather than conversion *ab initio*. In such cases we presume their primary Jewish education has already served as the functional equivalent of a conversion class. Enrollment in a local program of high school Jewish study certainly fulfills the same purpose.

It is equally important to demonstrate the same sensitivity to adults who have made their home exclusively within the Jewish community since childhood. *Mikveh* and *b'rit milah/hattafat dam b'rit* serve as formal affirmations of belonging; they constitute a completion of religious identity rather than its creation.

IV. Conversion through Other Religious Streams of Judaism

The acceptance of a conversion performed under the auspices of a rabbi affiliated with one of the other religious streams of Judaism is contingent upon several factors, including whether or not there was *hattafat dam b'rit* or *milah l'shem giyyur* in the case of males, and *t'vilah* for both males and females. The conversion ceremony should have included as well a declaration of commitment to Judaism as evidence of *kabbalat ol mitzvot*.

According to the Correspondence of the Chairperson of the Committee on Jewish Law and Standards, “In the absence of positive information [to the contrary], it is not necessary to raise questions about the Jewish status of members of a Reform *bet din*.” This would be equally true of Reconstructionist *batei din* as well. Nevertheless, pursuant to the Rabbinical Assembly’s Standards of Rabbinic Practice regarding the ascription of Jewish identity, it is necessary to ascertain whether or not the actual conversionary ritual involved *t'vilah* and, where applicable, *milah l'shem giyyur* or *hatafah*.¹⁴

V. Conversion of Teenagers from Unaffiliated Interfaith Families

The conversion of teenagers from a disengaged interfaith family presents a set of unique challenges. On the one hand, as adolescents these individuals enjoy the halakhic autonomy accorded adults; on the other hand, reality dictates that teens continue to live within the boundaries and constraints of parental authority.

In some instances the articulation of a desire to become Jewish is designed to test the limits of parental control. In other cases, a parent’s wish to facilitate conversion may contravene a teenager’s own preferences. In still other cases, parents may be nominally supportive of their child’s decision to become Jewish, yet unwilling to furnish the financial and logistical support necessary to the establishment of meaningful affiliation with the community.

When a teen from an unaffiliated interfaith family, in which there has long been estrangement from any meaningful Jewish practice, indicates an interest in conversion, rabbis need to proceed with caution. Contact with the parents and discussion between rabbi, teen and parents must ensue before any further step is undertaken. Unless parents are willing to be proactive in helping their adolescent son or daughter

¹⁴ Correspondence of the Chairperson, CJLS, 102099. The acceptance of Reform rabbinic authority, so long as conversions conform to the requirements of Jewish law, is also upheld by Isaac Klein, *A Guide to Jewish Religious Practice*, p. 447.

to embrace Jewish living, it is counterproductive to place the integrity of the conversion process in the middle of a tug-of-war between parent and child. Teens interested in Judaism can be encouraged and offered guidance with the clear understanding that when they are older and on their own, they can pursue the process in a purposeful manner, if still interested.

When a teenager does convert to Judaism, enrollment in the local Hebrew High School program can be used toward the fulfillment of pre-conversionary study. Depending upon the age and understanding of the individual, a beginning Judaism course for adults may be used to supplement the program of Jewish high school study.

VI. Adoption

A child adopted by a Jewish couple must be converted, unless there is conclusive evidence of a Jewish birth mother. The fact of adoption should be noted in the conversion certificate.¹⁵ A child adopted by a Jewish couple may use the names of the adoptive parents instead of *ben/bat Avraham avinu v'Sarah immenu*.¹⁶

Consideration of upbringing and Jewish environment factors no less in the conversion of children adopted by interfaith couples than in those born of a non-Jewish mother whose parents seek conversion. In naming such children, the patronymic or matronymic of the Jewish parent is used.

When both parents are Jewish, the adoption of a child warrants nothing other than performance of the conversion ritual itself. There is no reason to explore the motives of an adoptive Jewish couple any more than one that has had a child through natural biological means.

VII. Cases of Gestational Surrogacy

While the Committee on Jewish Law and Standards has embraced a variety of approaches to gestational surrogacy, the sole position of the CJLS is that the status of the progeny follows the gestational mother, rather than the genetic one.¹⁷ In the case of an intermarried couple where the woman herself is not Jewish, the use of a non-Jewish surrogate will pose less of an emotional issue when the question of conversion is raised for obvious reasons.

In particular, given the common – if erroneous – belief that when both spouses are Jewish, children born via surrogacy are automatically Jewish, tact is very much in order. This is all the more critical when one considers that the use of a surrogate generally follows unsuccessful fertility treatments, medical conditions and/or procedures that have rendered a couple unable to have children through the normal workings of nature. Given a background of feelings of inadequacy, failure and anxiety, followed by the joy of success and the birth of a child, rabbis should display personal and pastoral sensitivity when broaching the subject of Jewish status with the parents.

15 “כי זה הילד המאמץ . . .” See document blanks in *Moreh Derekh* pp. J51-57.

16 Teshuvah by Rabbi Avram Israel Reisner, *Proceedings of the Committee on Jewish Law and Standards*, 1986-1990. “Some colleagues distinguish the adoptive parents from the biological parents by appending some form of the term המגדל to the adoptive parents’ names. For example a boy adopted by two Jewish parents ‘המגדלתי והמגדלתי’.” See *Moreh Derekh* p. J30.

17 Rabbis Aaron Mackler and Elie Spitz, “On the Use of Birth Surrogates,” *Committee on Jewish Law and Standards*, September 17, 1997.

Nevertheless, rabbis perform a disservice to families who have children through surrogacy by postponing such discussion until long after a youngster's birth. To be told prior to enrolling one's child in religious school or the celebration of bar/bat mitzvah that the ritual of conversion is necessary may invite anger, cognitive dissonance, or feelings of betrayal – rather similar to those of patrilineal descent who grow up unaware of the requirements of Jewish Law, only to discover as adults that halakhah does not accord them Jewish status.

In initiating such conversation, rabbis are encouraged to accentuate the positive, i.e., touching upon the parents' own desire for their child to be Jewish in the eyes of a larger Jewish community, and inviting parents to look at the ritual as an act of affirmation. Here, too, as in the case of conversion of those of patrilineal descent, the ease of conversion for minors may be stressed to good effect.

VIII. A Step-by-Step Guide to the Conversion of Minors

After the sponsoring rabbi has determined that the child's conversion is advisable, the necessary arrangements are made as outlined below. In cases of adoption where both parents are Jewish, for boys begin with step #3, for girls with step #5a or b.

- 1) Prior to the *bet din's* meeting, the sponsoring rabbi should acquaint the other members with the circumstances of the child's conversion, noting any unusual aspects of the situation. Even though no formal interview of a child is necessary prior to *giyyur*, it is precisely because the conversion is *al da'at bet din* that it behooves the *bet din* to know the circumstances of the conversion, and not merely serve as a rubber stamp. Aside from anecdotal evidence from the sponsoring rabbi, the parents of the child may be invited to write a brief statement, or in the case of older children, even the child him/herself. These compositions can be sent to members of the *bet din* in advance of the conversion date. All of the considerations and sensitivities regarding the composition of the *bet din*, the views of different rabbis, and the *edut* of women discussed in Part One are of no less relevance to the conversion of children than adults.
- 2) Prior to the actual ceremony the *bet din* should spend some time in conversation with the parents and children (the latter only if age appropriate). What occasioned this step in their lives? How does it feel? What excites them about raising (or being) a Jewish child? What are their concerns about raising (or being) a Jewish child? It is best for this conversation to take place in a relaxed manner, rather than as a quiz. The conversation should conclude with both parents reading and signing three copies of the "Parental Affirmation of Commitment" certificate prior to (*hattafat dam b'rit* as applicable and) *t'vilah*. For girls continue with step #5.
- 3) If the child has not been circumcised, arrangements for a *mohel* should be made. The *b'rakhot* recited are those for conversion (*Moreh Derekh* pp. J8-9). The *b'rit milah* may take place on the eighth day, but certainly need not do so. A *b'rit milah* for the sake of conversion may not take place on *Shabbat* or *Yom Tov*. While it is optimal for a *bet din* to witness the circumcision, if not possible the *mohel* should be instructed to have two acceptable witnesses sign the certificate of circumcision. The

sponsoring rabbi should have a copy of the certificate for his/her records. Once *b'rit milah l'shem gerut* has been performed and the circumcision is healed, proceed to step #5.

- 4) If a child was surgically circumcised, *hattafat dam b'rit* is necessary. Because no period of healing is required, it usually makes most sense to do the *hattafah* at the time of immersion in the *mikveh*. If *hattafah* alone is required, no *b'rakhot* are necessary, though the CJLS allows for the recitation of the blessings otherwise recited at a *b'rit milah l'shem gerut*. One need not engage the service of a *mohel* to perform *hattafah*. One may employ a spring-loaded lancet, much like the ones diabetics use to test their blood sugar to perform the *hattafah*.

To preserve the modesty of older children, the person performing the *hattafah* may conduct the procedure in another room away from the *bet din*. It is advisable, however, for the father to be present in the room. If a child is old enough and willing, he may be permitted to perform the *hattafah* upon himself. A drop of blood should be absorbed with a piece of gauze and shown to the other members of the *bet din* as proof that *hattafah* took place. At this time, three copies of *teudat hattafat dam b'rit l'katan* (*Moreh Derekh*, pp. J42-45) is signed to indicate the completion of the proper halakhic procedure, even though passing reference to *hattafah* is made in the conversion certificate itself. Certainly, a *teudat hattafat dam b'rit l'katan* would be absolutely necessary if, for some reason, the *hattafah* did not take place at the *bet din* but occurred at an earlier point in time.

- 5a) Immersion of infants and toddlers – The Jewish parent (or either Jewish parent in cases of adoption) dons a bathing suit and carries the child into the *mikveh*. It is inadvisable to immerse babies younger than six months. It is recommended that the child, if not toilet trained, wear a swimmer-type diaper, which should not be removed until the instant before immersion. If male, the Jewish parent must wear a kippah for the recitation of the appropriate *b'rakhot* (if female, where local custom indicates the use of *kippot* for women). Unlike the immersion of adult candidates, who, technically, must first immerse before being able to recite the *berakha*, no immersion is necessary before the Jewish parent recites the blessing *al ha-t'vilah* followed by *sh'heh'yanu*. After completion of the second *berakha*, immersion takes place. The rabbi may direct the parent to blow in the child's face a fraction of a second before letting go, thereby causing the baby to reflexively close his/her eyes and mouth. The child is submerged vertically, the parent releasing the child for a fraction of a second to be completely surrounded by the water for an instant. The child's head must be completely submerged for the *t'vilah* to be valid. The parent then brings the child to the surface immediately. Continue with step #6.

- 5b) For older children: Older children prepare for immersion in a manner similar to adults. They should shower before entering the *mikveh* and remove band-aids, acrylic nails, nail polish, and jewelry. A child that is old enough may go into the *mikveh* alone. The only difference between immersion of an older child (though still under the age of bar/bat mitzvah) and that of an adult concerns the *b'rakhot*, which are recited by a parent rather than the child. Depending on the gender and age of the child, the Jewish parent and the *bet din* may remain present at the side of the *mikveh*, or

arrange for a Jewish person of the child's gender familiar with *t'vilah* to serve as witness and provide instruction at the side of the *mikveh* while the rabbis remain within hailing (hearing?) distance behind the door.

- 6) Following immersion, the members of the *bet din* sign documentation, including an attestation of the "Parental Affirmation of Commitment" (not applicable when both parents are Jewish), the *teudat hattafat dam b'rit l'katan* (if applicable) and the conversion certificates. Three originals of each document should be signed – one to be given to the parents; one for the rabbi's (or *bet din*'s) records, and one for the records of the synagogue with which the family is affiliated. As applicable, a copy of the *b'rit milah* certificate should be included with each set of documents. Rabbis are encouraged to send a photocopy of the foregoing documents to the RA for inclusion in the central registry for *giyyur*.

The following chart lists the different kinds of documentation employed in the conversion of minors depending upon the specific circumstances:

MOTHER NOT JEWISH

Documented Needed if:	Jewish Parents adopt boy	Jewish Parents adopt girl	Inter. Parents adopt boy	Inter. Parents adopt girl	Gives birth to a boy	Gives birth to a girl
<i>Teudat Milah</i>	if uncircum'd	N/A	if uncircum'd	N/A	if uncircum'd	N/A
<i>Teudat Hattafah</i>	if circumcised w/o <i>b'rit milah</i>	N/A	if circum'd w/o <i>b'rit milah</i>	N/A	if circum'd w/o <i>b'rit milah</i>	N/A
<i>Teudat Gerut</i> *	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES
Parental Affirm.	NO	NO	YES	YES	YES	YES

* *Teudat Gerut* is that for minors in all cases.

- 7) While the conversion is technically complete at this point, rabbis are urged to include a ceremony of welcome for the child and his/her parents. This may be done while still at the *mikveh*, or at the synagogue in front of the *aron kodesh*. Depending on the circumstances, this welcoming ceremony may take place during communal worship or as a more private gathering in the presence of family only. In the case of girls, having formally received their names at the conversion by no means precludes the celebration of a *simhat bat* subsequent to *giyyur*. When a ceremony of welcome is held in honor of male children, the rabbi should take care to dispel any impression that a boy may receive a Hebrew name at a service or ceremony unconnected to *b'rit milah*.
- 8) As in the case of adult conversions, it is incumbent for rabbis and synagogues to invite families in which children have been converted *al da'at bet din* to participate in a wide variety of activities appropriate to families with children. Having crafted an action plan with an interfaith family regarding affiliation and religious education of their converted child, rabbis should endeavor to ensure implementation through follow-up contact with the parents.

- 9) Because the conversion of a minor is *al da'at bet din*, Jewish Law accords the right to opt out of Judaism upon reaching the age of *mitzvot*. To do so requires a deliberate declaration of rejection. In contrast, no statement of conscious affirmation is necessary to seal permanently the validity of the child's conversion. The youngster's training for and celebration of bar or bat mitzvah is deemed sufficient affirmation of the parents' decision to arrange for conversion.

IX. Conversion of Married Adults with a Non-Jewish Spouse

On occasion a non-Jew whose spouse is not Jewish will approach a rabbi to discuss the possibility of conversion. The Committee on Jewish Law and Standards maintains, "It is permissible to convert a non-Jew whose spouse does not wish to convert, even though this will create a situation of intermarriage."¹⁸

Individuals with non-Jewish spouses can certainly become true *gerei tzedek*. Indeed, because such conversions may themselves create marital and familial tension, they generally lack even the appearance of ulterior motive. Nevertheless, it is precisely because of the potential for marital discord and familial dysfunction that rabbis are urged to proceed with great care. Mindful that a successful conversion will automatically create an interfaith marriage where none previously existed, *giyyur* under these circumstances should take place only in the most exceptional of circumstances.

The rabbi should begin by thoroughly exploring the candidate's family background and personal history over the course of several preliminary meetings. What occasioned the person's interest in Judaism – a Jewish ancestor? Growing up with close Jewish friends or in a largely Jewish neighborhood? Intellectual or spiritual disenchantment with the birth religion? The rabbi needs to be alert to any cues that might point to the sublimation of emotional distress or familial discord.

It is especially important for the rabbi to note the nature of the individual's interpersonal family relationships – How long has the couple been married? Has the idea of conversion been discussed with the spouse? What was the spouse's reaction? What is the overall tenor of the marriage? Has the couple ever experienced significant marital discord? If so, did they seek counseling, and were they able to strengthen their relationship as a result? Does the couple have children? What are their ages and in what faith are they being raised? If the couple doesn't presently have children, but plans to raise a family, how will the conversion to Judaism of one spouse impact on family life? Is the spouse who plans to remain a non-Jew prepared to agree to raise children with an exclusively Jewish identity? These questions should be posed in addition to the normal inquiries regarding the feelings of the potential convert's parents, siblings, and extended family.

The rabbinic sponsor must endeavor to bring the non-Jewish spouse into the conversation as soon as possible. If the spouse is supportive of the process, it is vital for him/her to understand the ramifications of conversion and its effect on the life of both Jew-by-choice and non-Jewish spouse. It is recommended that the non-Jewish partner accompany his/her spouse to periodic meetings with the sponsoring rabbi to discuss and share feelings about the changes taking place in home life, such as the appearance of new

18 Teshuvah by Ben Zion Bergman, 1993; 031356B, *Minutes of the CJLS*; 102875, 071679, 101579, *Correspondence of the Chairperson*.

observances and the disappearance of old ones. In addition, the rabbi should invite non-Jewish spouse to attend educational, social and cultural events within the synagogue and the Jewish community at large. Doing so will engender greater understanding of Judaism on the part of the non-Jewish spouse, and may help dispel the separation anxiety, alienation and fear of “losing” one’s partner that is natural under these circumstances.

When children are part of the picture the rabbi needs to help create a comfort zone for the couple’s offspring in much the same way as for the potential proselyte’s spouse.

Should it ever become apparent that the path to conversion threatens to undermine a marriage or destroy the relationship between a parent and his/her non-Jewish child, the rabbis must halt the proceedings until resolution of the marital and/or parental conflict occurs.

X. Return of Apostates to Judaism

While Judaism does not recognize the self-termination of Jewish status, the embrace of another religion does constitute a serious breach of faith with one’s own Jewish identity. The technicality of halakhah on this point notwithstanding, conversion to another faith is nothing other than an abandonment of Judaism by any reasonable measure of religious identity. Consequently, should an apostate return to Judaism it is appropriate to frame re-entry in some ritual fashion, even if not in a manner precisely identical to that of a non-Jew who converts.

The CJLS suggests that a Jew who has converted to another religion and then returns to Judaism should undergo immersion in a *mikveh* without a *b’rakha*, and make a declarative statement in the presence of a *bet din* regarding the return to Judaism.¹⁹ (A document for this occasion is found in *Moreh Derekh*, pp. J64-68).

As for the return of second generation apostates, i.e., the child of a Jewish mother raised in another religion, the CJLS maintains that it is for a *mara d’atra* to determine whether or not the individual in question was ever formally committed to another faith. If so, admission to Judaism would require all the normative components of *giyyur*. If, however, the *mara d’atra* adjudges that formal acceptance of another religion never took place, the offspring of the apostate should be resocialized into Judaism through one or more entry mechanisms, e.g., *mikveh*, a personal statement renouncing the former faith and affirming Judaism, and enrollment in an educational program such as those utilized by prospective converts. When the individual is male, he must undergo *b’rit milah* or *hattafat dam b’rit*, if not previously done – just as any Jewish male would.²⁰

19 CJLS, 123149, 062861, 103162, 051363, *Correspondence of the Chairperson*

20 Teshuva by Gerald L. Zelizer, *Committee on Jewish Law and Standards*, 1991-2000, pp. 146-150

XI. Making *Aliyyah* and the Status of Conservative/Masorti *Gerim* in Israel

With the presentation of the proper credentials, Jews-by-Choice converted outside of Israel by non-Orthodox rabbis are eligible for Israeli citizenship under the Law of Return and may register themselves as Jews. This does not signify, however, that Israel's religious establishment accepts the policies of the Interior Ministry, which supervises the process of such registration.

Given the complexity of the relationship between Israel's chief rabbinate, the Knesset and Israel's Supreme Court, the status of those converted under the auspices of Conservative/Masorti rabbis has evolved over the past several years. As a result of the fluid nature of the situation, sponsoring rabbis of Jews-by-Choice interested in making *aliyyah* should contact the Rabbinical Assembly in Israel at the office of the Masorti Movement: 98 Derech Hevron, P.O.B. 7559, Jerusalem 91074 ISRAEL, Tel: +972 (2) 565-8000. Fax: +972 (2) 624-6869, e-mail: masorti@masorti.org. The RA in Israel will endeavor to provide rabbinic mentors and converts with advice and guidance pertaining to their recognition as Jews by the Israeli government, as well as up-to-date information regarding marital and divorce laws for Conservative/Masorti converts living in Israel.

The RA in Israel further recommends that sponsoring rabbis also write a letter describing the relationship of the convert to the local Jewish community, the circumstances of conversion, the length of time the rabbi has known and worked with the individual, and any other pertinent information. Pursuant to the directives of the Ministry of the Interior, this letter should be attested and witnessed by a Notary Public. The Ministry of Interior also generally imposes a waiting period of some months between conversion and *aliyyah* as a means of discouraging those seeking a path to instant Israeli citizenship. *Gerim* planning to emigrate to Israel should take this waiting period into account when formulating their plans.

As a secular arm of government, the Interior Ministry concerns itself exclusively with issues of administrative protocol. Uniformity in procedure regarding the language, appearance and the official title of those whose signatures appear on conversion documents eliminate a variety of bureaucratic hurdles Jews-by-Choice would otherwise have to surmount. Conversely, experience demonstrates that documents of irregular appearance bearing the signatures of unidentified individuals often raise a red flag among officials. That the Interior Ministry maintains an up-to-date list of the RA's membership for use in authenticating the legitimacy of conversionary documents only underscores the importance of maintaining consistency in the preparation and execution of such certificates.

In the context of making *aliyyah*, conversion certificates therefore play a crucial role for the Israeli government's determination of Jewish status; in essence they are treated as legal evidence. The general benefits of meeting the criteria of Rabbinical Assembly guidelines for certification of conversion notwithstanding, there is added impetus for doing so in the case of those contemplating *aliyyah*, whether in the immediate future or at some later date.

Jews-by-Choice contemplating *aliyyah* should request the Rabbinical Assembly in writing to send the Ministry of Interior their conversion files directly. The Rabbinical Assembly will submit the documentation to the Ministry accompanied by a letter of authentication.

APPENDIX: *KABBALAT OL MITZVOT* WITHIN A CONSERVATIVE/ MASORTI CONTEXT

The acceptance of the yoke of the commandments is integral to the conversion process. In a real sense such acceptance not only serves as the means by which conversion is accomplished, but should be the ultimate *raison d'être* of *giyyur*, whatever the other ancillary motivations and considerations. Given its centrality to the process, it is not surprising that Jewish Law requires a higher standard of attestation for *kabbalat ol mitzvot* than for immersion or ritual circumcision for the purpose of conversion. Of the aforementioned only the acceptance of the yoke of the commandments must take place in the form of a declaration made in the presence of a *bet din*.²¹

The act of *kabbalat ol mitzvot* includes a formal acceptance of halakhah as an authoritative system of normative religious practice, i.e., an acknowledgment that the laws of the Torah and the rabbinic means by which those are interpreted have a valid claim on the behavior of the individual. Thus, an individual who maintains, for example, that the laws of *kashrut* have no authority where s/he is concerned most certainly has not accepted the yoke of the commandments, and should be refused conversion.²²

That an individual has yet to achieve full observance of Jewish law, however, is not tantamount to an a priori rejection of the authoritative character of halakhah. As our colleague, Jeremy Kalmanofsky, observes:

When candidates close themselves to any particular *mitzvah* – say they are uninterested in its wisdom, unwilling to try its discipline – we should reject them. The commandments have been disclosing their holiness to millions of Jews over hundreds of years. New Jews must open themselves to each practice – even the strange ones. No one fulfills every *mitzvah*. None of us fulfills even a single *mitzvah* perfectly. Sometimes we try and fail. Sometimes on ethical, communal or personal grounds, we stop trying. But as long as we live, we stand subject to these sacred obligations. Accepting Jewish religious discipline for Conservative converts means accepting that each *mitzvah* is a *mitzvah*. Under this view, selective observance would not vitiate verbal acceptance.

21 It is always preferable for a *bet din* to supervise ritual immersion and *hattafat dam b'rit* or *b'rit milah*. If these were performed in the presence of two valid witnesses, however, it is acceptable – at least after the fact. In addition the declaration of *kabbalat ol mitzvot* must take place during the day, i.e., at a time when a rabbinical court would normally convene. *Shulhan Arukh, Yoreh Deah*, 268:3 also Ta"Z *ad loc*.

22 A deliberate and explicit rejection of a particular commandment in the presence of a *bet din* is sufficient grounds for the invalidation of conversion: “עובר כוכבים שבא לקבל דברי תורה, חוץ מדבר אחד, אין מקבלין אותו.” *BT, Bekhorot* 30b. The plain meaning of the text indicates that a categorical refusal to observe any commandment is sufficient to terminate the conversion process. Nevertheless, this source does not prove that a potential *ger* must explicitly pledge to accept and demonstrate observance of all precepts prior to conversion. Not only does the foundational text on conversion in *Bavli Yevamot* 47a-b (see below) demonstrate the unlikelihood of this premise, but all the major codes of Jewish law require no more than a general acceptance of the yoke of the commandments as a prerequisite to conversion.

In the last 150 years, however, a number of prominent ultra-Orthodox authorities have made the novel claim that *kabbalat ol mitzvot* is synonymous with complete observance – indeed, some have gone so far as to opine that the failure to maintain such observance is sufficient to render an individual's conversion null and void, even after the fact. See Rabbi Moshe Feinstein, *Igrot Moshe, Yoreh Deah*, vol. I, responsum 124. For a fuller treatment of the ultra-Orthodox view, its origins, and the ramifications for conversion in the modern State of Israel, see Rabbi David Golinkin, “A Responsum Regarding the Annulment of Conversions,” *Schechter Institute of Jewish Studies*, vol. 2, no. 9 (June 2008).

Even harboring reservations about observance at the moment of conversion is not necessarily defective. For we demand that converts sincerely declare before the *bet din* their religious attachment to Judaism – its deeds and teachings – and their aspirations to grow in holiness.²³

The process of rabbinic sponsorship must incorporate significant discussion about the concept of *kabbalat ol mitzvot* and its impact on the day-to-day life of the conversion candidate. Should the rabbi encounter a categorical rejection of specific *mitzvot* (“I will never observe” as opposed “I’m not yet ready to observe”), or a general denial of halakhic authority, it would be wise to defer convening the *bet din* pending further discussion with the candidate.²⁴ In the final analysis we must applaud the integrity of those who cannot in good conscience accept the yoke of the commandments. Without such acceptance, however, halakhic conversion remains impossibility.²⁵

To be truly meaningful, however, *kabbalat ol mitzvot* requires more than a declarative statement in the presence of a *bet din*. The person who acknowledges the authority of Torah in the abstract, while deferring the observance of the most basic *mitzvot* to some indeterminate future, has said little of significance. The emptiness of such tokenism is self-evident; the real question, then, is what constitutes credible evidence of *kabbalat ol mitzvot*. Does rabbinic literature offer any guidance regarding the observance of specific *mitzvot* as pre-requisites to conversion?

The classic description of conversionary protocol as it applies to the teaching and acceptance of *mitzvot* is found in the Babylonian Talmud:

If at the present time a person wishes to convert, he is addressed as follows: What reason have you for wishing to become a proselyte; do you not know that Israel at the present time is oppressed, despised, harassed, and overcome by afflictions? If he replies: “I know and am unworthy,”

23 Jeremy Kalmanofsky, “Spiritual Citizenship: Reflections on *Hilkhot Giyyur*,” *Conservative Judaism* Vol. LX, nos. 1-2 (Fall/Winter 2007-08), p. 36. One finds a similar approach among Sephardic *poskim* and moderate Orthodox rabbis as well. Writing a half century ago, Rabbi Moshe Ha-Kohen of Djerba opined: “*Kabbalat ol ha-mitzvot* does not mean that he is required to accept all the *mitzvot* to observe them [italics added], but to accept all the *mitzvot* of the Torah and, if he transgresses, to accept upon himself the punishments he deserves. Therefore, we do not care if at the hour that he accepts the *mitzvot* he has decided to transgress a specific commandment and [as a consequence] receive the punishment.” V’heshiv Moshe on *Yoreh Deah* 268, no. 50. Rabbi Ben Zion Meir Ouziel, the first Sephardic Chief Rabbi of the State of Israel, reached the same conclusion in his *Piskei Uziel*: “It is clear [from *Bavli, Yevamot* 47a – see below] that we do not demand of him to observe [all of] the *mitzvot*, and it is also unnecessary that the Bet Din know that he will observe them, for if not, no converts will be accepted in Israel, for who will guarantee that this gentile will be loyal to all the *mitzvot* in the Torah.” *Piskei Ouziel*, no. 65, p. 385.

Speaking from a centrist Orthodox perspective in North America, Rabbi Maurice Lamm further notes, “One may choose to observe or not to observe, but one may not decide what Jewish law demands to be observed. Therefore, if a convert candidate – before becoming a Jew – rejects the practice of a specific *mitzvah* as fundamentally not valid and therefore not to be observed, rather than because he simply does not have the capacity to keep it now, he disqualifies himself as a credible candidate for conversion.” See Lamm, *Becoming a Jew* (New York: Jonathan David Publishers, 1991), p. 211.

24 An individual ambivalent about *kabbalat ol mitzvot* can and should delay the conversion . . . even with one foot poised to enter the *mikveh*. See *Shulhan Arukh, Yoreh Deah*, 268:1.

25 The Committee on Jewish Law and Standards has examined the issue whether or not a conversion obtained through deception may be annulled. Rabbi Steven Saltzman’s *teshuvah* concludes, “Where it can be clearly demonstrated that the proselyte acted dishonestly, withholding information vital to our ability to make a coherent decision, then the conversion may be considered null and void.” The responsum was adopted by a vote of 11-8 with no abstentions. See also the concurring opinion of Rabbi Avram Reisner and the dissenting addenda of Rabbi Morris Shapiro. *Proceedings of the Committee on Jewish Law and Standards*, 1986-1990, pp. 185-200, 547-554.

he is accepted forthwith, and is instructed in some of the minor and some of the major commandments. He is informed of the sin of neglecting the commandment of *leket*, *shikh'ha*, and *ma'aser oni*.

He is also told of the punishment for the transgression of the commandments. Furthermore, he is addressed as follows: Be it known to you that before you came [to convert] if you had eaten *helev*, you would not have been punished with excision from the Jewish People; if you had profaned Shabbat, you would not have been punished by stoning. But now were you to eat *helev* you would be punished with excision; were you to profane Shabbat you would be punished with stoning. And as he is informed of the punishment for the transgression of the commandments, so he is informed of the reward granted for their fulfillment... He is not, however, to be persuaded or dissuaded too much...²⁶

Several important points emerge from a consideration of this source. They include:

- 1) The gemara does not insist on full observance of *mitzvot* prior to conversion. Indeed the choice of the term *kabbalat ol mitzvot* instead of *shemirat mitzvot* supports this contention. The sages understood the growth of religious commitment to be an ongoing endeavor. This awareness finds beautiful expression in the Talmudic story of the dramatically different attitudes taken by Hillel and Shammai to those who came to convert with ulterior motives.²⁷ Indeed, the very wording of the passage from Yevamot, “some of the major and some of the minor commandments” highlights precisely this point. An important difference exists between Franz Rosenzweig’s sincere “not yet” and the individual whose own words and deeds reveal that the conversion process marks the end of Jewish growth.

Consequently, perhaps the single most important criterion for a rabbinic sponsor to employ in evaluating a candidate’s readiness is whether or not the individual is likely to continue to grow in observance and commitment *after* conversion – a determination that obviously will depend in large measure on the quantitative and qualitative changes in behavior that have already taken place during the pre-conversionary period itself. An honest and open conversation between sponsoring rabbi and candidate about specific plans for continued post-conversionary religious growth should also play an integral role in the evaluation process.

- 2) A perusal of the halakhic literature yields no “top ten” list of specific *mitzvot* reflective of genuine *kabbalat ol mitzvot*. Other than the acceptance of Jewish law as a normative and binding system of authority over the individual, halakhah is silent on the matter of specific observances. That a strong correlation exists between degree of commitment and the declaration of such is self-evident; nevertheless it is impossible to define how much observance constitutes a minimal threshold of *kabbalat ol mitzvot*.

26 BT, Yevamot 47a.

27 BT, Shabbat 31a.

- 3) While not determinative from a halakhic standpoint, the specific mention in the gemara of various forms of *tzedakah*, *helev* and Shabbat point, at least symbolically, to the integral character of acts of *hesed*, *kashrut* and Sabbath observance to any meaningful definition of *kabbalat ol mitzvot*.²⁸ The specific relevance of precepts affecting daily life lies in their power to form and shape Jewish identity. In particular, given Conservative/Masorti Judaism's insistence that *kashrut*, Shabbat and ethical behavior constitute normative aspects of Jewish practice, a conversion that did not require some substantive (even if less than complete) commitment to these practices would be largely devoid of meaning.

CONCLUSION

To be considered a valid conversion, *kabbalat ol mitzvot* requires a formal declarative statement in the presence of a bet din. The statement of *kabbalat ol mitzvot* published in *Moreh Derekh* (pp. J14-16) furnishes an appropriate declaration of such, as it stipulates "commitment to the God of Israel, the Torah of Israel, and the people of Israel," and further requires the individual to pledge "to live the Jewish way of holiness by accepting the *mitzvot* of Judaism now and always, here and wherever I may be."

In addition, the *Moreh Derekh* document calls upon the individual to declare specifically that, "I have determined to the best of my ability, to make the following Jewish observances an integral part of both my life and that of my family." The ensuing list includes Jewish education for all children, observance of Shabbat and holidays, incorporation of *kashrut* into one's life, affiliation with a synagogue and attendance at services, regular prayer, *gemilut hasadim*, the study of Torah, and identifying with the Jewish community and the State of Israel. As a list of basic practices necessary for meaningful religious expression without being exhaustive, this document clearly reflects both the legal and spiritual intention of *kabbalat ol mitzvot*. Accordingly, members of the Rabbinical Assembly are encouraged to use the declaration found in *Moreh Derekh* as a basis for the profession of *kabbalat ol mitzvot* by *gerim* at the time of their conversion.

²⁸ *Helev*, of course, is a precept related to sacrifice, rather than *kashrut*. On the other hand, the prohibition of its consumption is a dietary observance. There are, moreover, myriad associations between altar and dining table in both halakhah and *aggadah*.