



**InterfaithFamily.com**

Encouraging Jewish Choices & A Welcoming Jewish Community

# A RESOURCE GUIDE TO JEWISH CONVERSION

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## **Introduction**

You love Judaism, or you love Jews, or one specific Jewish person. You are thinking about becoming a Jew. There's just one problem. It's really hard to convert to Judaism. It's not a proselytizing religion. Jews did seek converts at one time, in late antiquity, but for historical reasons (mainly because the Romans made it illegal!) Jews decided not to try to recruit converts. You never get Jews going door to door trying to get non-Jews to be Jewish.

At InterfaithFamily.com we aren't an exception to this--we're not trying to ring your virtual doorbell. Though we welcome your interest, InterfaithFamily.com is not about trying to convert people to Judaism. We don't secretly hope you'll become Jewish if you aren't--in other words, no pressure. This guide is just to answer questions people have had for us, or that we think you might have. These are our answers, based on our reading, but conversion is a very complicated topic, and we direct you to additional resources, so you can get a lot of opinions on some of the more contentious questions.

For more personal stories about why and how people decide to convert to Judaism, check our [article archive](#).

## **The Basics of Conversion to Judaism**

Judaism is the religion of the Jewish people. Conversion, in Judaism, is about becoming a Jew and joining the Jewish people. The person who converts takes on the obligation to perform God's commandments (mitzvot)--whatever that means to the community she wants to join. In some communities it means something very specific about what you eat and wear and what you do on Shabbat and in others, it means working to be a more ethical person. Either way, becoming Jewish isn't only, or even mainly, about what you believe.

In some periods of Jewish history it has been easier to become a Jew than in others. Right now is not the easiest it's ever been. Ideological differences have made the Jewish identity of converts highly politicized. In Jewish law, once a person has undergone conversion, they are Jewish, period, and it's a sin to trouble converts. Some Jews use the term Jews by choice instead of converts as a way to downplay the differences between people born Jewish and people who choose Judaism. The current divisions in the Jewish community which have groups of Jews not accepting each other's conversions are particularly distressing taking these religious imperatives into account.

The basic outline of the conversion process is:

1. The person declares his or her intention to become a Jew and to live in a Jewish way. At this stage, in order to convert, the person must prepare by studying Judaism and participating in the Jewish community. Usually, a rabbi helps the potential convert co-ordinate learning. It is a custom in some communities to turn away converts three times, but not all rabbis follow this.

Beginning to study never means you have to convert. You do not have to feel obligation to follow through if you change your mind.

2. When the guiding rabbi thinks the potential convert is ready, a rabbinical court (beit din) of three observant Jews examines the person by asking questions to ascertain their commitment to living as a Jew--according to mitzvot, in the Jewish community, as part of the Jewish people. Usually a beit din has at least one rabbi. In some communities, there is an established beit din of qualified rabbis that handles all conversions.

3. If the person is male, he undergoes [a circumcision](#). Historically, it was not common for men who were not Jews or Muslims to be circumcised. Now that the majority of adult men in the US are circumcised in infancy, some converting rabbis do another ritual on men to give a previous medical circumcision Jewish religious significance. This ritual, called hatafat dam brit or shedding of covenantal blood, involves shedding a single drop of blood from the site of the circumcision cut.

4. The person performs a ritual immersion, a tevilah, in a ritual bath called a mikveh to mark becoming a Jew.

But, as we'll explore in this guide, there is a lot of variation in this basic program, both among Jewish movements and in studying with individual rabbis.

### **Denominations and the Conversion Process**

Until recently, it was possible to say with confidence to a potential convert that she or he could choose an Orthodox rabbi as a guide to conversion and count on the rest of the Jewish world to honor the conversion. In some communities, if a Conservative or a Reform rabbi convened a beit din for a conversion, and followed Jewish law, rabbis to the right of them on the theological spectrum would sometimes accept the conversion. This is no longer true.

In the last year or two, we've seen more controversy over conversion among Jews than in generations. Orthodox rabbis, who were already rejecting all conversions from other denominations, have declared each other's conversions invalid or annulled. You cannot count on the stringency of a conversion process to satisfy everyone in the Jewish community.

Furthermore, while there is considerable similarity between the ways rabbis conduct conversions, each individual rabbi is free to pursue his or her own interpretation of what's required. Even within the context of a Jewish movement with set guidelines, your rabbi can make choices about the process that will make the experience very different.

One way to think about the transformative ritual of conversion is that it has to meet the standards of the community to which you belong, or would like to belong. If you are currently taking part in Jewish life, talk to the rabbi in the synagogue you go to now. If you are friends with Jews who live in other places because you know them through the internet, discuss which rabbis and Jewish movements they follow. Seek the process of conversion that will make you the Jew you want to be, with a rabbi whom you respect.

### **Acceptance of Conversions in Israel**

You want to become Jewish, and you want to be considered a Jew in the State of Israel. You want your children to be considered Jewish in Israel, too.

I have good news and bad news. The good news is, if you convert with any Reform, Conservative, Orthodox, Reconstructionist or other rabbi in the United States or Canada, you will be considered Jewish under Israel's Law of Return. A Reform convert who made aliyah in 1980 tested this in a case that went to Israel's Supreme Court. If you convert to Judaism, you can come to Israel as a Jew.

Now the bad news. Israel's religious courts, which determine who can marry in a Jewish ceremony in Israel and other matters relating to personal status, do not accept non-Orthodox conversions. Furthermore, as the influence of far-right religious elements has increased over the Israeli rabbinate, Israeli Orthodoxy has come to reject many Orthodox conversions performed abroad. Indeed, in a recent case, they threw into doubt all the Orthodox conversions performed by Israel's own (Orthodox) Conversion Authority.

While there is a list of North American religious courts the Israeli rabbinate currently accepts, there is no guarantee, in the current political climate, that all conversions will be accepted by other rabbis, especially those in Israel. Some Orthodox rabbis are currently arguing that conversions should be annulled if a rabbinical court has evidence the person was insincere, and some have broadened such evidence to include how Jews by choice behave in the present. Based on our reading of rabbinic responsa and knowledge of the Jewish community, such an approach seems to contravene Jewish law, which forbids explicitly mistreating converts and maintains that Jews by choice are obligated to Jewish law just like people born Jewish. (That is, they can't be declared no longer Jewish if they do something against Jewish law.) We just have to have some faith in human beings, that they will resolve the internal political conflicts causing this weird moment in Jewish history.

## **Reform Conversion**

If you are in an interfaith marriage and already take part in Jewish life, chances are you are in a Reform movement congregation. Reform rabbis have [Guidelines for Rabbis Working with Prospective Gerim](#) (Converts) that they adopted through their organizational body, the Central Conference of American Rabbis, in 2001. Though the CCAR document outlines a conversion process that is essentially structurally similar to an Orthodox conversion, individual rabbis interpret these guidelines in very different ways.

For example, the guideline posits that the prospective convert should learn enough Hebrew to read the prayer book and understand basic Jewish terms. Individual rabbis may not make this a hard and fast requirement. One Reform rabbi told me that he expects at least a year commitment to living in the Jewish community before conversion, while another said that he didn't think that was important.

A key issue for male converts is circumcision. Since the 1890s, Reform Judaism officially abandoned the idea of any ritual requirements for conversion. Nevertheless, Reform conversions often do include circumcision and ritual immersion rituals, even though officially the movement takes the position that these are not required. Since most men in the United States undergo non-religious infant circumcision, Orthodox and Conservative rabbis developed a ritual called hatafat dam brit, the drawing of covenantal blood, to ritualize existing circumcisions. The Reform movement does not require this ritual, though individual Reform rabbis may require it when they supervise conversions.

The fact that the Reform movement doesn't require these rituals as a movement has other implications for the potential convert. If you have a disability and cannot ritually immerse in a mikveh, a Reform rabbi may be able to help you have an alternative conversion ritual. The Reform movement does not require the presence of a rabbinical court, though most Reform conversions today do convene a court as part of the process.

These are questions that are worth asking. Since the Reform movement doesn't require these rituals and Reform rabbis have a lot of leeway making their decisions, you might anticipate a ritual that your rabbi doesn't want to do, or vice versa.

## **Introductory Reading**

Rabbi Howard Jaffe, one of the rabbis I consulted for this guide, told me that he requires a formal Introduction to Judaism course. The Reform movement provides these courses. (You may want to start with the A Taste of Judaism course, which is the introduction to the introduction.) You can find more about the Reform movement's courses, and about Reform conversion in general, on [the website of the Union for Reform Judaism](#).

Rabbi Jaffe usually asks all prospective Jews by choice to read *As a Driven Leaf* by Milton Steinberg, *Basic Judaism* by the same author, and depending upon their interest and kind of reading they enjoy, a series of other books. He likes to assign Jewish history reading, and mentions Paul Johnson's *History of the Jews*, and Leo Trepp's *History of the Jewish Experience*. He also likes Joseph Telushkin's books, including *Jewish Literacy* and *Jewish Wisdom*. This is only an introductory list and your rabbi may ask you to read different books and many more of them.

## **Orthodox Conversion**

As a general rule, conversions on the right of the Jewish spectrum are accepted by Jews on the left, and Reform, Conservative and Reconstructionist Jews have all accepted Orthodox conversions. Right now, seeking an Orthodox conversion is a tricky proposition, as political and ideological rifts between Modern Orthodox and Haredi or Ultra-Orthodox Jews grow wider. Several mainstream Orthodox rabbis have decided to stop guiding conversions because of the relatively recent possibility that the Israeli rabbinate will declare their conversions invalid. An Orthodox organization called the Rabbinical Council of America has been working in cooperation with the Israeli rabbinate to regularize conversion procedures. You can find [their statement of principles and standards online](#).

You have found an Orthodox community that feels deeply authentic and a rabbi of learning and integrity who is willing to perform a conversion. This feels like the Jewish life that is really you. What can you expect from the process of conversion? Your rabbinic authority will guide you through a process of learning about Judaism. If you don't live in the Jewish community, he may ask you to move to a place where you can walk to synagogue on Shabbat, obtain kosher food and participate in an Orthodox synagogue. The idea is to set you up for success in Jewish practice.

One issue you may encounter particular to Orthodox conversion is that your beit din will ask difficult questions about hashkafah, orientation. As a convert, you may find that you are expected to be more stringent than other people in your community. This is the current paradox of Orthodox conversion--it isn't always possible to convert to fit into your own community.

## **Introductory Reading**

I found [a reading list on Halachicconversion.org](#), and it's a lot more comprehensive than the shorter, introductory lists other movements have published to the web. Several of the books on the list must be approached with a guide or teacher. For example, you aren't going to be able to tackle *The Kitzur Shulchan Aruch* in the early phases of learning about Judaism--there is just too much assumed knowledge you'll have to pick up to be able to understand it. (With a good teacher you will be studying like a pro.)

If you are still in the process looking for a teacher, you might want to start with some of the more introductory books from this list, like:

*The Orthodox Road to Conversion by Rabbi Marc Angel (Ktav)*

*A Complete Idiot's Guide to Judaism by Rabbi Benjamin Blech*

*To Be a Jew: A Guide to Jewish Observance in Contemporary Life by Rabbi Hayim Halevy Donin*

*The Jew and His Home by Rabbi Eliyahu Kitov*

*Becoming a Jew by Rabbi Maurice Lamm*

*The Jewish Way in Love and Marriage by Rabbi Maurice Lamm*

*Jewish Conversion: Its Meaning & Laws By Rabbi Yoel Schwartz*

*Total Immersion: A Mikvah Anthology edited by Rivkah Slonim*

## **Conservative Conversion**

Until quite recently, it was the policy of the Conservative movement to encourage the non-Jewish partner in an interfaith couple to convert. This policy has been tempered by more recent discussions of being more accepting of interfaith couples as synagogue and community members. Nevertheless, the former policy is an advantage to people who are interested in conversion. Several Conservative communities have created Conversion Institutes, which provide systematic study for prospective Jews by choice and a standing rabbinical court, or *beit din*. Talk to the rabbi at your Conservative synagogue for more information about what resources are available to you.

The Conservative movement is a halachic movement, like traditional or Orthodox Judaism--it follows Jewish legal precedent set in the Talmud and rabbinic codes. It is also a reform movement—one that takes a reformist position toward Jewish law. To remain cohesive as a movement, a Committee on Law and Standards makes decisions on Jewish law that define which positions are acceptable for Conservative rabbis. Within these positions, Conservative rabbis make their own decisions. This bears on conversions. It means that like rabbis in other movements, individual Conservative rabbis performing conversions have latitude on certain decisions.

Conservative conversions must have circumcision or *hatafat dam brit* (the shedding of a drop of covenantal blood) and ritual immersion in a *mikveh*. You will find differences between Conservative rabbis on other issues, like who can serve on the rabbinical court for the conversion, and what kinds of questions the court will ask before approving the conversion.

### **Introductory Reading**

The Conservative movement rabbinical organization has [an introductory reading list](#) for people interested in conversion on the Rabbinical Assembly website. I see that the titles include some that are also on the Orthodox list and at least one that is published by the Reform movement press. You should consider only the beginning, since there are additional texts you'll read as part of an introductory course at a conversion institute or with an individual rabbi.

*The Book of Jewish Belief*, by Louis Jacobs (Behrman House, 1984).

*The Book of Jewish Practice*, by Louis Jacobs (Behrman House, 1987).

*Embracing Judaism*, by Simcha Kling, revised by Carl M. Perkins (Rabbinical Assembly, 1999).

*Choosing Judaism*, by Lydia Kukoff (UAHC Press, 1981).

*Becoming a Jew*, by Maurice Lamm (Jonathan David, 1991).

*Your People, My People: Finding Acceptance and Fulfillment as a Jew by Choice*, by Lena Romanoff with Lisa Hostein (Jewish Publication Society, 1990).

### **Reconstructionist Conversion**

In general, Reconstructionists follow Jewish laws and customs, but they do not believe they are obligated to do so. The famous quote from Reconstructionism's founder Mordecai Kaplan is "The past has a vote, not a veto." Conversion with a Reconstructionist rabbi is shaped by this attitude. Rituals like the convening of a rabbinical court or beit din, hatafat dam brit (the taking of covenantal blood) and ritual immersion are expected. For more information, consult the Reconstructionist's new [Guidelines on Giyyur](#), which were created in March 2009.

Like other rabbis, Reconstructionist rabbis have latitude in interpretation of Jewish law in relation to conversion. Because the Reconstructionist movement is small, the standard Reconstructionist introduction to Judaism class for potential converts, called "Jewish Alive and American," isn't available in every city. A local Reconstructionist rabbi may send you to take a Reform, Conservative, Orthodox or academic introduction to Judaism class instead, as part of your process of study.

## **Conversion in Interfaith Relationships and Families**

### **You want to be Jewish but your non-Jewish partner does not**

The Reform movement does allow married people, whose non-Jewish spouses do not want to become Jewish, to convert. This is an issue you should discuss with your potential supervising rabbi.

It is very unlikely that you will be able to find an Orthodox rabbi to work with you on conversion if your spouse is not Jewish and is not planning to convert.

There is a Conservative movement responsa that allows Conservative rabbis to convert people who are married to non-Jews who are not going to convert. It was adopted as a minority opinion. This gives Conservative rabbis the option of converting individuals with non-Jewish partners. You may not be able to find a Conservative rabbi who will convert you if you are married to someone who does not want to become Jewish. You should ask this question in the first meeting with your rabbi. If you are attending a conversion class through the Conservative movement in a city where there is a sitting beit din, it's good to ask what the policy of the beit din is on this issue.

Reconstructionist rabbis discussed this question as part of their recent guidelines on conversion. They are advised to check the potential convert's home situation to ensure that their partner, even if he or she doesn't want to become Jewish, will be supportive.

### **You have one Jewish parent**

Since 1983, the Reform movement has accepted as Jewish any biological child of a Jewish parent of either sex who is raised Jewish. The Reconstructionist movement has had the same policy since 1968. If a child of an intermarriage is not raised as a Jew, both Reform and Reconstructionist rabbis will consider that child to be a non-Jew, and will require a formal conversion to Judaism. Some non-Orthodox rabbis call this ceremony an affirmation ceremony.

Adopted children without Jewish ancestry will also be required to convert in all movements. Parents may convert their children in infancy.

If your mother was Jewish and your father was not, and you were raised in another religion, an Orthodox or Conservative rabbi will consider you Jewish. There is a Jewish legal category of a "child who is held against his or her will among the gentiles," which is the category for someone who is Jewish who is raised in another faith. You can consider yourself a ba'al tshuvah, a returning Jew. If you were fully committed to another religion, you can choose to have a ritual of readmission involving immersion in a ritual bath. It's a good question for a rabbinical advisor.

If your father was Jewish and you were raised in an observant Jewish home, you are not Jewish to an Orthodox or Conservative rabbi. It is not uncommon for this to happen and an Orthodox or Conservative rabbi who does outreach to other Jews may have considered ways to work with people in this circumstance. You may be seeking conversion to be accepted as a Jew in a family or social circle in which this is important.

At present, Israel's Law of Return applies to children of Jewish fathers, under a 1970 amendment to the law that covers children and grandchildren of Jews and their spouses. You can potentially make aliyah under the Law of Return and not be considered Jewish by the Israeli Rabbinate when you get there. As we write this, Israel is debating changes to the law.

One issue that is troubling for children of interfaith marriage is their Hebrew names. In most synagogues, people who are being honored with an opportunity to bless the Torah reading are called up by their Hebrew names, So-and-So daughter of or son of So-and-So. Maimonides began the custom of honoring converts by considering them the children of Abraham and Sarah. This is an issue for converts in general, but in particular children of Jewish fathers may want to have them acknowledged. This may be something to discuss with your rabbi.

When you convert, your parents are still your parents and you are obligated to keep the commandment of honoring them. When they die, Jewish law requires you to mourn them with Jewish rituals. Your family is still your family. Jewish conversion is like an adoption--but it's an open adoption.

### **You are in an interfaith relationship or marriage**

The Reform and Reconstructionist movements do not object to people in interfaith relationships converting before marriage. Many Reform and Reconstructionist rabbis will perform interfaith marriage ceremonies and do not require the non-Jewish partner to rush through a conversion in order to marry.

It is a common experience in interfaith families who are active in the Reform movement for non-Jewish spouses to choose to convert many years after they get married. We have many articles about this on InterfaithFamily.com--a good book about this experience is *The New Jew* by Sally Srok Friedes.

The Conservative movement until very recently had a policy of explicitly inviting the non-Jewish partners in interfaith relationships to convert. It should not present any special challenge to you to convert before or during marriage in the Conservative movement.

If you want to convert with an Orthodox rabbi and you are also planning to get married, you should be aware that there are Talmudic texts prohibiting a rabbi from performing a conversion for someone in order to allow them to get married. Presumably the rabbis of the Talmud were worried that someone would be coerced into conversion, which would invalidate the conversion, or wouldn't be sincere in wanting to be Jewish.

Many people who want to become Jews also date Jews because that's who can understand what they find important. Your decision to convert may have been concurrent with, but not precisely caused by, falling in love with an observant Jew. If the real reason you're seeking conversion is what you believe and how you want to live your life, that's what you need to emphasize. Even understanding this, some Orthodox rabbis may be stringent in their interpretation and not agree to help you with conversion if they find out there is someone you want to marry.

If you are already married to a Jewish person, some Orthodox rabbis will require you to separate from your partner for a period while you are studying for conversion. Once you have converted, you will need to have a Jewish wedding ceremony.

## **Other Issues for Potential Converts**

### **I am in a same-sex relationship or identify as transgendered**

There are no particular obstacles for you in converting through the Reform movement. It's worthwhile to ask individual rabbis how they feel about this question before you commit to studying with them, and be up-front, since you're going to be working with them for at least a year and want to be comfortable.

The Reconstructionist movement has a long track record of acceptance of GLBT people and rabbis from its ranks would be extremely unlikely to reject you as a potential convert on that basis.

While some Jews who are raised Orthodox or attend Orthodox synagogues are GLBT and in same-sex relationships, seeking conversion through an Orthodox rabbi when you are GLBT may be very difficult. No matter what human sympathy the rabbi has for you, a person converting under Orthodox auspices has to commit to following all commandments in a most traditional sense, including ones about sexuality that restrict proper sexual expression to heterosexual marriage.

The Conservative movement has moved slowly to accept gay men and lesbians as full members of the community. A recent (2006) Conservative rabbinic responsum established the Jewish legal imperative to normalize the status of Jews in same-sex relationships. What does that mean for a GLBT person who wants to become Jewish--will your local Conservative rabbi guide you through this process? There will be some variation among individuals on this issue and it's worth discussing with your rabbi.

### **I live in a small town and there aren't many Jews who live near me, yet I am drawn to Judaism. How do I become a Jew?**

This is a question that troubles me, because I can see how difficult it is for people to have Jewish lives in isolation. Two Reform rabbis gave me radically different responses to this question. One said that as long as there are some Jews in close enough proximity with whom to be in community, even if it means less frequent participation than you would like, that ought to be fine. If you live too far away from the Jewish community to be able to do that, it may be important for you to relocate.

The other Reform rabbi took a different position. He said that many people who are born Jewish have meaningful Jewish spiritual lives in places and at times where they are relatively isolated from other Jews. He has worked with potential converts who live in small towns and other places without many Jews. He doesn't think of conversion to Judaism as joining the Jewish people, but as gaining spiritual meaning from Judaism the religion.

One of the Jews by choice who wrote about her conversion experience for InterfaithFamily.com described conversion as feeling "more honest." She felt like a Jew and finally she took the ritual steps to become one. This is another, valid model for thinking about becoming Jewish, and may be a reason why you want to convert even though you can't afford to move to an area with a larger Jewish community.

An Orthodox conversion authority will almost certainly ask you to move to a community where you can live near a synagogue, easily purchase kosher meat and participate in Orthodox Jewish life. If you can't do that yet, it's still possible to study with an online teacher or study partner, to order kosher meat via the internet or eat vegetarian, and to commute to spend holidays overnight in the nearest Jewish community. It's worth trying these things so that you'll know that the financial and personal sacrifices attendant on this kind of conversion are for you.

### **I have a mental illness and I see some websites say that rabbis will not convert people who are not "stable." Will I be rejected?**

The issue here is that you are capable of making a decision and of knowing what it means to be Jewish. If you think your mental illness may interfere with your ability to do that, you need to discuss it with your rabbi.

In general this requirement for conversion should not translate into a wholesale rejection of everyone who has ever had a mental illness diagnosis--it's there to ensure that people are making their own choices.

### **I have a physical disability/am Deaf**

Some Orthodox rabbis will not convert Deaf people, because the Talmud ruled that people who were unable to communicate could not be obligated to Jewish law. Most Orthodox rabbis and Conservative rabbis hold that the ability to sign, read and write is sufficient for taking on mitzvot. Since Deaf Jews have had bar mitzvah ceremonies, Deaf people who were not born Jewish should, by the same logic, be eligible for conversion. The biggest issue is going to be finding a supervising rabbi who has experience with communicating with the Deaf.

The Reconstructionist and Reform movements does not reject candidates for conversion because of Deafness or disability. The Reform movement as a whole does not require ritual immersion, so if you aren't able to safely immerse because of a disability, you should be able to convert with a Reform rabbi.

You should ask your individual rabbi how she or he deals with accommodation.