

# LIBERAL JUDAISM IN PRACTICE



## ARE YOU THINKING OF CONVERTING TO JUDAISM?

By Rabbis Andrew Goldstein, Alexandra Wright and Mark Solomon

### Introduction

There are many different reasons why people choose to convert to Judaism.

There may be Jewish ancestry in your family; perhaps one of your parents is Jewish, but you may not have been raised within any specific religious tradition. Becoming Jewish may represent an act of reconnection with the Jewish part of your heritage.

You may have a Jewish partner and be thinking about creating a Jewish family together. Or you may be looking for a faith, or a community, and are attracted to Judaism's beliefs and philosophy, its way of life and culture.

You may already have experienced a number of Jewish ceremonies and services in a Jewish home or at a synagogue, such as a Friday night meal or Passover Seder, Bar Mitzvah, Bat Mitzvah or wedding.

Whether you have been thinking about converting for some time, or whether you are just starting your investigation and journey, Liberal Judaism welcomes your interest.

### Attending services



Conversion to Judaism is arranged through a Liberal Jewish congregation with a sponsoring rabbi, usually the rabbi of the community where you are

attending services and studying.

Therefore, it is important to feel at home with the services and atmosphere of that synagogue or community and to speak to the rabbi, who will help and guide you on your journey.

Attending a number of services on Friday evening and Shabbat morning, before you make your decision to convert, is very important. They will give you some idea of what it means to be part of a community, as well as the spirituality and religious approach to be found in a Liberal Judaism synagogue.

### Meeting your sponsoring rabbi

Even if you are uncertain about converting to Judaism, it may be helpful to meet with a rabbi. Judaism accepts the truth and integrity of other religions and does not feel that it has a monopoly on truth. In that respect, Jews do not go out to seek converts, but Liberal Judaism welcomes those who are curious and feel that their spiritual home might be in a Jewish community.

If you think that you may wish to convert to Judaism, the rabbi with whom you meet will become your 'sponsoring rabbi'. The rabbi will explain the process of conversion and discuss, with you, your background and why you might wish to convert to Judaism.

If the community you are attending does not have a rabbi, or you are unsure whom to approach, please contact the Liberal Judaism office. Contact details are on the last page of this leaflet.

Your sponsoring rabbi will explain that conversion requires regular attendance at classes and at Shabbat and festival services in the synagogue: Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, Sukkot, Simchat Torah, Purim, Pesach, and Shavuot. Liberal Judaism encourages individuals converting to Judaism to have knowledge about other observances, such as Tisha B'Av, and to experience certain rituals and celebrations in the home such as the Pesach Seder (your synagogue might also hold a communal seder) and lighting candles on Shabbat and at Chanukah.

Once you have completed a couple of months in the class, your sponsoring rabbi will ask you to submit a short statement stating your reasons for wishing to convert to Judaism. This should only be done once you feel that conversion is the right pathway for you, and the statement will reflect your personal reasons for converting.

When you have written your statement, it will be sent together with a registration form to the Liberal Judaism headquarters. You will hear from the Beit Din (Rabbinic Board) administrator that you are now registered and will be informed of the fees charged for the process of conversion.

If you have any queries about this, please speak to your sponsoring rabbi or to the Beit Din administrator.

There should be regular meetings with your sponsoring rabbi so that you feel supported in your spiritual journey. If you have a Jewish partner, we recommend that they also become a member of the synagogue or community you have chosen, and attend all classes and services with you, so that this journey is undertaken together.

### Conversion classes

For all those wishing to explore Judaism, synagogues or communities generally offer regular classes.

The course usually runs for a year and its syllabus includes the festivals, lifecycle, Jewish beliefs, Jewish history and opportunities for informal discussion. It is important to read, watch films of Jewish interest and find opportunities to enrich your knowledge and experience of Judaism. Synagogues welcome all those who would like to learn more.

### Learning Hebrew



Knowledge of Hebrew is an important part of becoming Jewish. It allows you to follow the prayers and Torah reading in the service and join in with the rituals of Jewish practice.

Knowledge of Hebrew helps you to identify with the Jewish people, to follow a service in any synagogue, anywhere in the world, and to understand some of the key concepts and beliefs of Judaism.

We don't expect converts to be fluent - learning any language is a lifetime's work - but learning Hebrew will help in many ways to understand Jewish life and traditions.

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### Completing the course

Converting to Judaism, through Liberal Judaism, takes a minimum of one year and sometimes longer. During that period of conversion, it is important to demonstrate your commitment to the process by:

- 1) Attending services regularly on Shabbat mornings and Friday evenings, and attending all festival services.
- 2) Committing yourself to the classes in Judaism and Hebrew.
- 3) Reading and learning about Judaism and the Jewish people.
- 4) Starting to introduce Jewish practices into your life.

### Essays

Towards the end of the process, your sponsoring rabbi will ask you to write two essays of not more than 2,000 words each. You will have covered the material for the essays during your course.

You should discuss what is expected for these essays with your sponsoring rabbi. The essays are submitted to the Beit Din of Liberal Judaism, with whom you will have a final interview. The essay titles are:

#### 1. What being Jewish means to me

This essay should demonstrate a good working knowledge of the main teachings of Judaism and include material on the principles of Liberal Judaism and the duties of a Jew.

#### 2. An essay on one of the following:

- (a) The Jewish Lifecycle
- (b) Jewish Ethics
- (c) The Jewish Festivals
- (d) A topic of Jewish History
- (e) A topic of interest by agreement with your rabbi.

This essay should demonstrate a good working knowledge of the topic and may also include your own reflections about this topic in your life.

An oral interview can take place instead of an essay if necessary. There is no Hebrew test, but your rabbi will check the level of your Hebrew reading.

### Brit Milah (circumcision)

Circumcision is strongly recommended for male candidates. If exemption is sought, candidates are required to consult a doctor, preferably a member of the Association of Reform and Liberal Mohalim (the doctors who are qualified to perform circumcision), so that the medical facts may be fully understood.

Contemplating circumcision as an adult is not easy. Although it is generally done under a local anaesthetic and does not require an overnight stay in a hospital, we would certainly encourage you to discuss the procedure with the *mohel* and, if appropriate, with a rabbi.

The ritual of circumcision is not to do with health or hygiene, but is a religious act that marks one's entry into the covenant and Jewish People that goes all the way back to Abraham.

### The Beit Din



When your rabbi thinks you are ready, they will arrange another interview and complete the forms requesting an interview at the Beit Din.

The Beit Din is made up of three rabbis, who are members of the Rabbinic Conference of Liberal Judaism. The Beit Din meets at the headquarters of Liberal Judaism in central London.

Your partner, a friend or family member is welcome to accompany you to share this significant event. Your sponsoring rabbi will normally also be with you, but will not be on the Beit Din.

One of the three rabbis will have read your essays and all three will engage you in conversation, asking you why you wish to convert to Judaism, enquiring a little about how you celebrate Shabbat and the festivals or about your spiritual journey or other matters.

You will then be asked to leave the room while your acceptance is agreed and the certificates are signed. Then you will be invited back into the room with your friend or partner and sponsoring rabbi. If you are accepted, the chair of the Beit Din will congratulate and welcome you and all present will recite a blessing acknowledging the significance of the occasion – the *Shehecheyanu*.

### Mikveh

The *mikveh* is a pool of water which is collected naturally and is used by converts to mark the transformational moment of becoming Jewish in the eyes of the community.

Liberal Judaism encourages converts to go to the *mikveh* because, for most people, it is a moving and meaningful rite of passage that gives expression to the changes that the candidate has experienced and represents the beginning of their new life as a Jew.

### Admission Ceremony



The final step of conversion is an Admission Ceremony of welcome into your Liberal Jewish community.

The service can be found in *Siddur Lev Chadash* on page 593.

This can take place on a Friday evening or Shabbat morning during the service or at some other time. The rabbi will present you with your conversion certificate and announce your chosen Hebrew name.

### Membership

When each of these steps has been taken, you will be invited to join the synagogue as a full member of the Jewish community. Once admitted, no distinction is made between members who have gone through the conversion process and others.

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### A note about Liberal Judaism conversion certificates

Your conversion certificate is an important document, so please make a couple of copies and keep the original somewhere safe. One copy will also be kept at Liberal Judaism's head office.

If you are contemplating *aliyah* (going to make your home in Israel), it is important to be aware that although Israel accepts our conversion certificates for the purpose of *aliyah*, certain conditions are imposed on converts, for example, active association for a minimum of one year in the synagogue which you have now joined. More details can be obtained from your rabbi or the Liberal Judaism office.

Orthodox Judaism does not accept Liberal Judaism conversion certificates and you will be asked to sign a form that states your understanding of this.

Liberal Judaism conversion certificates are accepted by Reform Judaism in the UK and all Progressive Jewish congregations in other countries.

### Don't hesitate to ask

Please do ask your rabbi about concerns you may have or about any aspect of the process of conversion.

The Beit Din of Liberal Judaism is proud of the welcoming and inclusive attitude it fosters towards all those who seek to join the Jewish people in sincere faith and with commitment.

*The Jewish People: Their History and Religion* by Rabbi Dr David J Goldberg and Rabbi John D Rayner (Penguin, 1989) is also recommended.

There are many other books for background reading and novels that help you understand Jewish culture. There are a number of websites with useful information and these sources can be found on the Liberal Judaism website.

### Find out more...



If you would like to know more about Liberal Judaism and conversion, then please use the contact details below:

#### Liberal Judaism

The Montagu Centre  
21 Maple Street, London, W1T 4BE  
T: 020 7580 1663  
E: [montagu@liberaljudaism.org](mailto:montagu@liberaljudaism.org)  
W: [www.liberaljudaism.org](http://www.liberaljudaism.org)

Liberal Judaism is a member of the World Union for Progressive Judaism (WUPJ). To find out more about the WUPJ, please visit [www.wupj.org](http://www.wupj.org)

### Suggested reading



You will be expected to obtain the Liberal Judaism prayerbooks - *Siddur Lev Chadash*, *Machzor Ruach Chadashah* and *Haggadah L'dor Va'dor* - as well

as the current textbook *Liberal Judaism: A Judaism for the Twenty-First Century* by Rabbi Pete Tobias (Stephen Austin and Sons, 2007).

**"When a proselyte comes to be converted, one receives them with an open hand so as to bring them under the wings of the Divine Presence"**

**Leviticus Rabbah 2:9**

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Charity Number: 1151090