



Conversion

Each year the London Beth Din (Ecclesiastical Court) of the United Synagogue receives a number of applications from non-Jewish people to convert to Judaism. To all intents and purposes the London Beth Din administers the overwhelming majority of orthodox conversions in the U.K. The applicants vary greatly in their backgrounds. They include individuals who have become deeply motivated on their own accord to become Jewish, those who have developed an interest in conversion through a romantic relationship with a Jewish person, people who have a Jewish father and non-Jewish mother and some who are converted in other countries or under the auspices of another authority and are seeking to validate and regularise their Jewish status in the U.K. Some applicants already know a great deal about Judaism when they apply, while others know virtually nothing.

This document seeks to explain the parameters of conversion set by the Beth Din and the conversion process.

The London Beth Din and its Relationship With Other Batei Din

As a general rule, the Beth Din will accept the conversion of someone who underwent a bona fide conversion in their country of residence by a reputable, orthodox Beth Din. The Beth Din would expect such a person to be living a fully observant and practising Jewish life style. In the case of someone who is a citizen of, or is ordinarily resident in Great Britain, it would be expected that they would apply for a conversion in this country. In the event that they travel overseas for a conversion, this conversion will not necessarily be recognised by the London Beth Din. Furthermore, in the case of Israel, there is an agreed convention with the Rabbinic authorities in Israel, that they will not convert someone who has not resided in Israel for at least one year. In either such case, the applicant may nevertheless be eligible to apply to the Beth Din to regularise his/her status.

The London Beth Din's Attitude to Conversion

The Halachic (Jewish legal) definition of a Jew is one who is born of a Jewish mother or has converted according to the Halacha, that is to say, in a way consistent with the requirements of Jewish law. Judaism is not a proselytising religion in that it does not actively seek to convert non-Jews to the faith. Nevertheless, Judaism is accepting of any person who sincerely wishes to belong to the Jewish people. By definition, conversion entails a commitment to a fully observant and practising Jewish life style. Throughout the ages, people have converted to Judaism. Some of these converts have made a significant contribution to the Jewish people. Once a person is converted, he is considered fully Jewish in every respect. The Beth Din is invested by Jewish law with the authority and responsibility to judge objectively, the sincerity and suitability of our applicants. In doing so, its concern is not just to maintain standards of Jewish law and to be the guardian of Jewish status but to ensure that it is acting in a way that is best for the applicant. Changing one's faith, in particular when it involves taking on the stringent standards of Jewish observance, is a huge undertaking. It should not be pursued because of some idealised notion of what it means to be a Jew, as a gesture of personal sacrifice for the sake of love, or in the expectation that it will resolve a mental or emotional anguish. Indeed, there should be no ulterior motive other than the genuine desire to join the Jewish people and its destiny.

Quite apart from the fact that conversion for ulterior motives is Halachically flawed, conversion for the wrong reasons can also lead to deep personal unhappiness and inner conflict. The London Beth Din will sympathetically consider an application for conversion from any person who sincerely wishes to be a Jew or Jewess. While it does not condone inter-faith marriages for Jews, it will also consider applications from non-Jews who are in a relationship with or are civilly married to a Jewish person. However, the condition for accepting any such person for conversion, is that the Beth Din must be satisfied, that the applicant wishes to convert to Judaism for the sake of Judaism and would follow its path even if the relationship were to break down.

Required Standards of Observance



Conversion by definition involves a commitment to observe all Mitzvot. It also includes matters of Jewish belief and practice. The Beth Din expects a convert to maintain the standard of observance required by Jewish law, of every Jewish person. This includes (but is not restricted to) Shabbat (Sabbath) observance, maintaining kashrut (Jewish dietary laws) both in and outside one's home and observing the laws relating to Jewish marriage and family purity. There is an expectation that the convert will be able to read Hebrew, follow a Synagogue service, know how our festivals are celebrated and observed and be familiar with the Halachic (Jewish legal) and moral principles required to run an observant Jewish home. Similarly, it is expected that the convert will belong to a synagogue and participate in community life. Most applicants do not meet these criteria when they initially approach the Beth Din. The process of conversion is intended to give applicants an opportunity to explore Judaism in depth to the point where they (and their Jewish partners where applicable) will feel willing and comfortable, over a period of time, to adapt to an observant Jewish life style.

The Beth Din is aware, that the standards it requires for conversion create an anomaly insofar as converts are expected to be more religiously observant than the majority of the mainstream Jewish community, who tend to be more traditional than observant. While the lapse in religious standards within the wider Jewish community is a problem in its own right, affected to a large extent by the overwhelming secular society in which most Western Jews live, it cannot be a reason for lowering the universal standard expected of every Jew by the Torah (Bible) for one who wishes to enter the Jewish faith.

Conversion Process

While there is some flexibility in the conversion process depending on specific circumstances it would generally take the following form:

1. Prior to making a formal application for conversion, it would normally be expected that the potential convert would discuss his/her desire to convert with a local orthodox Rabbi, with a view to learning about the conversion process and what it entails. After meeting the Rabbi, the applicant should ask the Rabbi to write a letter of recommendation which should be sent to the Beth Din together with the potential convert's initial letter which is referred to in the next paragraph.
2. A potential convert should initiate the formal process of conversion by writing a letter to the Beth Din describing their background and family and explaining why they have an interest in converting to Judaism. They should set out in the letter, any experience that they have had hitherto, of Jewish practice and custom. If the applicant is civilly married to a Jewish person or even if he/she is in a relationship with a Jewish person, it is important to mention this in the initial letter.
3. The Beth Din will make an initial assessment of the candidate's suitability for conversion, based on the contents of the letter. If it is apparent that the applicant (and partner where applicable) have not yet discussed their situation with a Rabbi, the Beth Din may refer them to a Rabbi who is familiar with the conversion process and with whom the applicant can have an informal discussion.
4. Where it is apparent from the letter of application and any supporting documentation, that the criteria for conversion applications can be met, the Beth Din will ordinarily send the applicant a formal application form for completion and on receipt of the completed form, the Beth Din will normally invite the applicant (and partner where applicable) to an interview.

Should the interviewing Dayan/Dayanim determine on the basis of the interview, that the applicant should be allowed to proceed with the conversion process, the Beth Din will usually suggest a reading list and syllabus to enable the applicant to learn more about the Jewish faith and will advise the candidate how he or she can become more involved in Jewish communal life. The applicant will also be invited, after suitable reflection, to seek a further interview should they still wish to proceed.

5. At the second meeting (and in certain limited circumstances, even at the first meeting) the Beth Din will ordinarily recommend that the applicant should begin a course of study with a private teacher drawn from the Beth Din's pool of experienced teachers. In a case where the applicant is involved with a Jewish party, it is the Jewish party who will initially be given a tutor and the



opportunity to demonstrate their commitment to orthodox religious practice. The appointed teachers are the same gender as the applicant and will be asked to follow the Beth Din's conversion syllabus.

6. Once tuition has commenced, the Beth Din will meet with the applicant (and partner where applicable) at regular intervals (usually six monthly) in order to review their progress. Prior to any meeting with the Beth Din, the Beth Din will require the tutor to provide a progress report.

7. The Beth Din will expect the applicant to be living in a community that has a viable and vibrant orthodox Jewish infrastructure (including access to Jewish learning) where orthodox Jewish practice can be observed at first hand. This is usually a pre-condition to proceeding with a conversion application.

8. At some stage in the process, the Beth Din will require the convert to live with a Jewish family (approved by the Beth Din) normally for a period of at least six months. This will enable the convert to experience practical Judaism from within a Jewish home.

9. The process is irrevocably completed with a convert immersing themselves in a mikvah (ritual bath) and in the case of a man (prior to that) undergoing circumcision.

Terminating the Conversion Process

Having started the conversion process, a convert is not obliged to complete it and can end the process at any time. By the same token, the Beth Din may at any time, withdraw the applicant from the conversion process, should it take the view that the conversion would not be viable.

The Key Criteria For Conversion

The Beth Din looks for four criteria to be in place before they will finalise the conversion:-

1. Knowledge of Jewish laws and customs relating to daily life and festivals.
2. Consistent, practical observance of Jewish law and principles in daily life.
3. Direct, lived experience of Jewish community.
4. An inward readiness to take on responsibilities of being a Jew or Jewess.

The last of these is the most difficult for the Beth Din to assess as it is a matter of the heart. While the first three criteria provide some evidence of the fourth, it is nevertheless not possible to know with certainty. The Beth Din will not finalise a conversion until it is reasonably satisfied that the candidate has in his or her heart of hearts resolved to commit to an orthodox Jewish life.

Time

Most conversions are completed within two or three years. However, each case is unique and the particular circumstances of each case are taken into account by the Beth Din.

Cost

The cost of the Beth Din's time in dealing with conversions is heavily subsidised by the United Synagogue. Conversion candidates are asked to pay a nominal administration fee of £50 when the form for admission to the Jewish faith is completed by them (see **paragraph 4** of "Conversion Process") and a further £120 at a later stage. The candidates will generally have to pay for their private tutelage but this is an arrangement reached between the teacher and the student. Likewise, if a candidate stays with a family, there will be a board and lodging fee but again this will be by private arrangement.

The Conversion department is open Tuesday afternoon and all day Wednesday.

For more information please contact:

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Published on United Synagogue (<https://www.theus.org.uk>)

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