

Are You Our Sisters? Resistance, Belonging, and Recognition among Israeli Reform Jewish Female Converts

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Abstract: The religious conversion process is a significant expression of an individual's intention to gain a new religious identity and be included in a particular religious community. Those who wish to join the Jewish people undergo *giyur* (conversion), which includes observing rituals and religious practices. While previous research on Jewish conversions in Israel focused on the experiences of persons who converted under Orthodox auspices, this study analyzes the experiences of female immigrants from the former Soviet Union (FSU) and the Philippines who chose to convert through the Reform Movement in Israel. Based on qualitative research, we discovered that the non-Orthodox process, which is based on liberal values, not only grants converts under the aegis of Reform entry to the Jewish people, but promotes their affiliation with the Reform Movement and advances their acculturation into Jewish Israeli society. Their choice is a political decision, an act of resistance against an Orthodox Israeli religious monopoly, and an expression of spiritual motivations. The converts become social agents who strengthen the Reform Movement's socio-political position in Israel, where it struggles against discrimination. Furthermore, since most converts are women, new intersections between religion, gender, and nationality are exposed.

Keywords: Conversion, Identity, Reform Judaism, Gender, Israel, Immigrants

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Introduction

Sociology attributes a myriad of meanings to the religious conversion process, which help expose power relations in society (Rambo 1987). Some researchers associate this process with intellectual doubting and an ideological-spiritual change (Inbari 2019, 9; Barbour 1994). Others maintain that conversion stems from life circumstances, failed social interactions (Lofland 1977; Mauss 1969), and emotional distresses (Ullman 1989). In this context, William James has defined conversion as “being reborn” (James 1902). Conversion is preceded by a process of shedding former identities, known as deconversion (Barbour 1994). Individuals are in a liminal period, a phase of being betwixt and between (Turner 1974, 232). It is an incremental process, but it can also be sudden and dramatic.

While conversion to Christianity underscores the religious-phenomenological aspect of joining a congregation of believers, *giyur* (conversion to Judaism) highlights performance – obeying religious law as the key to joining the Jewish people. That is not to say that *giyur* overlooks faith or spirituality altogether, but it frames them as evidenced in religious practice (Krael-Tovi 2017, 22).

Indeed, the basic format of *giyur* is comprised of three stages: detachment from the non-Jewish identity; an interim, ‘neutral’ existence during which one is neither a non-Jew nor a Jew; and finally, the acquisition of Jewish identity by immersing in a ritual bath (*tevilah*). Yet, throughout Jewish history, there has been a dispute over the essence of the conversion process, which attests to the power it holds in the definition of the Jewish collective. Some argued that *giyur* was primarily a way of joining the Jewish religion, associated with the undertaking to observe the Torah and its commandments (*mitzvot*). Others maintained that *giyur* was a way of joining the Jewish-ethnic collective that is not conditioned upon observing Jewish law (Sagi and Zohar 1995).

Due to inherent Christian prejudices, the term ‘conversion’ fails to capture the ethno-national meanings underlying Jewish identities, and therefore the term ‘*giyur*’ is commonly used (Krael-Tovi 2017, 22). These days, *giyur* is closely tied to issues of belonging to a national collective and the nation-state. According to Goodman, the *giyur* processes in Israel demonstrate how a nation-state manages its citizens’ identity as part of its oversight mechanism (Goodman 2008, 207-208).

With the establishment of the State of Israel, the discourse and execution that

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surrounded the *giyur* process became even more controlled by law and the judiciary. Kravel-Tovi examined the execution of Orthodox *giyur* by monitoring the encounters between *giyur* agents under state auspices and female *giyur* candidates (Kravel-Tovi 2017, 17-21, 247-248). She argues that at the center of the relationship between the female candidate and the *beth din* (the rabbinical court) lies a 'wink-wink' situation, proving the fragility of the agreement between both parties. The two mutually dependent sides' execution blurs any clear boundary between honest *giyur* and fraud. The reason for this state of affairs lies in immigrants seeking to convert to obtain citizenship solely for economic reasons and not because of an affinity or a sense of belonging to the Jewish people. This situation highlights the complex ties between religious *giyur*, the nation-state and the *giyur* agents who are trapped between the conflicting requirements of their religious (keeping the halachic standards of conducting a "true" and honest *giyur*) and national-demographic duties (maintaining a Jewish demographic majority and the national security).

Unlike Orthodox *giyur*, the Reform version is founded on a liberal religious ideology that places the individual at its center, thereby enabling those who are rejected by the recognized institutional Jewish conversion process – meaning, Orthodox *giyur* – to join the Jewish people. The following quote is a free translation from Hebrew referencing the Reform Movement's vision of Jewish conversion (2023) as it appears on the movement's website:

“In accordance with the spirit of Jewish tradition, Reform *giyur* is performed by appearing before a rabbinical *beth din*, immersing in a ritual bath (*mikveh*), getting circumcised (men only), and undertaking to observe the commandments, in accordance with the pluralist view of Reform Judaism. This meaningful journey consists of learning the principles of Jewish tradition, its history and customs, and forging a meaningful personal and familial Jewish identity, as well as a commitment to all Jews [...] Reform Judaism does not seek to dictate to converts how they should behave before or after their *giyur*. A religious lifestyle, secular lifestyle, and traditional lifestyle are all legitimate, provided that the convert will undertake to forge a significant, fruitful connection with Jewish tradition and the Jewish people's culture throughout the generations. We wish to help converts find their own personal ways of practicing Judaism in their daily lives, on the holidays that are part of the Jewish calendar, and in Jewish lifecycle events.”

In this article, contrary to previous research, we do not focus on researching the

converting institute. Rather, we center on how the female converts themselves perceive the process they have undergone. We examine what motivated them to convert to Judaism, the difficulties they faced and with which they had to cope, whether and how their *giyur* contributed to their ability to establish a sense of belonging to Israeli society and the Jewish people, and the role played by their gender identity and marital/family status in the choices they made.

The Reform Movement faces institutional delegitimization, whereby its *giyur* was not recognized in Israel for the purpose of receiving citizenship until March 2021. However, the Reform movement's struggle to gain institutional recognition as a religious movement against political opposition, did not prevent female converts from choosing this form of *giyur*. We argue that by making this choice, the converts may be considered as social agents, bolstering the Reform Movement's socio-political status in Israeli society. Completing Reform *giyur* leaves them excluded and struggling to be socially, institutionally, and formally accepted by the state and the broader Israeli-Jewish public. Nevertheless, it allows the female converts to position themselves as agents of change instead of victims of an excluding mechanism (state), alienating environment (Israeli society), excluded community (Reform Jews), or limiting husband (patriarchy).

It is not merely the Reform Movement's *giyur* process that triggers public dispute and institutional objection, but the movement in general, which grapples with ongoing exclusion. Reform and Orthodox communities are not budgeted equally, Reform rabbis do not receive equal status, and some Reform communities are not entitled to a public building to serve as their house of worship (see Ben-Lulu 2017; 2021; 2022; Libel-Hass 2022). Furthermore, until recently, the Israeli Reform Movement did not receive sufficient attention from academic scholars (Libel-Hass 2018; 2022; 2022a; Libel-Hass and Ferziger 2022; see also Ben-Lulu 2017; 2021; 2022; Tabory 1983; 1991; 2004). We, therefore, maintain that this angle on the *giyur* process, offered by a movement that still suffers from discrimination and is fighting for recognition, is particularly capable of shedding light on power relations in Israeli society.

First, we will begin with a literature review of *giyur* in Israel, discussing the role it plays in immigration and naturalization processes. Next, we will explain Reform *giyur*, elaborate on the female converts' profile, and introduce the methodology and research fields. We will then divide the findings into three main themes: (a) choosing Reform *giyur* as a form of resistance to the Orthodox monopoly; (b) choosing it as a manifestation of spiritual subjectivation and community belonging; (c) and choosing it as a gender/family status marking practice. Based on the experiences of the female converts, we will gain insight into Reform *giyur*, Jewish identity politics in Israel, and contemporary intersections between gender, religion, and immigration.

Challenge, Opportunity, and Failure: Conversion as the Portal to Israeli Society

According to Israel's Law of Return, as amended in 1970, people who have at least one Jewish grandparent, as well as their spouses and minor children, are entitled to all the rights and privileges of Jewish immigrants, most importantly Israeli citizenship practically upon arrival. According to Goodman, immigrants from the FSU arrived at the *beth din* as citizens of Israel under the Law of Return, on their own accord, having consciously decided to do so as to attain Jewish religious status (Goodman 2008a, 396). The law defines converts as Jews, too, but does not make any reference to the type of conversion. Thus, conversion has become a naturalization vehicle, as well as a means for state control and oversight over the immigrant population (Goodman 2008, 208). Between 1989 and 2006, some 950,000 immigrants arrived in Israel from the former Soviet Union (FSU) – a third of whom are not halachically Jewish. Under the Law of Return, these immigrants were naturalized immediately upon their arrival. They are encouraged to convert by state leaders to improve the demographic balance between Jews and Palestinians (Goodman 2008, 216). For this very purpose, specific frameworks of Orthodox *giyur* were created under state auspices. However, since the Israeli government had placed the *giyur* process in the hands of *beth dins*, which are operated by strict Orthodox rabbis, only a small portion of immigrants in this population has undergone Orthodox *giyur* (Cohen 2005, 5).

Since the Orthodox monopoly is the official institutional authority to approve marriage, divorce, and burial, non-Jewish immigrants often face obstacles and discrimination (Rajjman and Pinsky 2011, 126). Immigrants are immediately suspected of having an interest in immigrating to Israel for socio-economic reasons and are considered a threat to Israel's Jewish character.

Recent studies view *giyur* in Israel as a process of social, cultural, and religious nationalization and naturalization (see, Skortovskya 2011, 8; Goodman 2008, 208; Kravel-Tovi 2017, 21-34; Libel-Hass 2022a). Asher Cohen has coined the term 'sociological conversion' to explain the social, incremental, and slow process by which FSU immigrants are integrated into the Israeli Jewish collective (Cohen 2005, 22, 29, 113-25). This process is divorced from any kind of *giyur*. Simply by living in Israel, immigrants from the FSU become Jewish in their feelings, self-identities, and behavior patterns. Sociological conversion turns these immigrants into 'non-Jewish Jews'. However, immigrants are commonly expected to convert to become part of the national collective. This is primarily expected of women, due to the fact that Halakhah affirms a "birth dogma" that accords Jewish status only to children born of Jewish mothers. Therefore, non-Jewish women, from the standpoint of Jewish law, can only fully belong to the Jewish people, along with their children, if they convert. Thus, female immigrants believe that *giyur* will guarantee them and their children

equal status in society.

This process is harder for labor migrants, who began to arrive in Israel in the 1990s (Sabar 2008, 38), as the *beth dins* make it even more difficult for them to convert to Judaism. This policy is aligned with the state's requirement, which is based on the concern that migrant workers would use *giyur* as means of obtaining the much-desired Israeli citizenship. Temporary residents and tourists from developing countries encounter a restricting bureaucracy and must obtain the Ministry of Interior's approval to undergo *giyur* (Hacker 2009, 188-89). Thus, as we will see below, the choice made by former migrant workers from the Philippines to undergo Reform *giyur* derives, to a large extent, from the obstacles placed in their path to institutional Jewish conversion by the rabbinate.

Reform *Giyur*: Breaking Down the Walls or Preserving the Margins?

Reform *giyur*, much like the Israeli Reform Movement, has received little academic attention. There is only one ethnographic study, that of Skortovskya, which was dedicated to examining the experiences of women who underwent Reform and Orthodox *giyur* in Israel (Skortovskya 2011). The Israeli public first heard about Reform *giyur* following the *giyur* of Dr. Helen Seidman from Kibbutz Nahal Oz in 1967 at a Reform *beth din* in Tel-Aviv. In fact, throughout the 1970s, no Reform *giyurs* took place in Israel, but in the early 1980s, the number of individuals who turned to the Reform *beth din* for *giyur* gradually grew (Mazor 2022).

Since 2002, individuals who convert through a Reform *beth din* may be registered in the state population registry as Jews (Maor and Ellenson 2022, 29). In March 2021, the Supreme Court ruled that the state must recognize non-Orthodox *giyur* performed in Israel for the purpose of obtaining citizenship under the Law of Return. However, the Orthodox rabbinical establishment does not recognize Reform *giyur*, despite the converts' eligibility for registration as Jews in the population registry. Consequently, by virtue of the rabbinical monopoly's control, converts cannot get married through the rabbinate. The Reform *giyur* process is available to Israeli citizens and permanent residents by virtue of the family reunification procedure, the Population and Immigration Authority's inter-ministerial committee resolution, as well as the parent of a soldier/elderly parent procedure – namely, by virtue of procedures that anticipate a permanent future in Israel (Maor 2022; Erez-Likhovski 2022).

In view of the Israeli Reform Movement's policy to only perform marriages between Jewish partners, the movement has sought to convert non-Jews living in Israel, particularly those who immigrated from the FSU, some of whom are only of paternal Jewish descent. Based on current data published here for the first time and obtained from the Reform Movement (based on an analysis of the years 2015–2021), an average of 218 individuals underwent Reform *giyur* annually (Beth Din 2021), and

data provided by the Conservative Movement reveals that it had converted 160 people in 2016. Thus, a total of 300–400 people are converted through non-Orthodox movements in Israel each year (Feferman 2018, 87). Most of the converts are women, and it is no coincidence, for this finding reflects the patriarchal power mechanisms – the excluding rabbinic and prompting husband, who often prevents them from undergoing Orthodox Jewish conversion (more on this below).

Half of all converts are adults, and half are minors according to *halacha* (under the age of 13 for boys and under the age of 12 for girls). Minors convert under two categories: children who convert along with their mothers, and children born by surrogacy (Ben-Lulu 2021c) or adopted by a Jewish-Israeli family (Kotler 2022). One quarter of all converts are of Jewish descent (Jewish on their father's side, these are primarily female immigrants from the FSU), and one seventh are immigrants who have been awarded a temporary resident's visa, usually after they married an Israeli citizen. Most of this population is comprised of former migrant workers from the Philippines (Beth Din 2021).

The wave of Filipina immigration has surged since the 1990s due to the Israeli policy to allow them to enter the country for the purpose of caring for the elderly, as well as those with disabilities. These women work across Israel; however, the center of their group's social life is in southern Tel-Aviv (Babis 2020, 5). In 2022, the Filipino foreign worker population consisted of 22,000 legal workers, and some 7,000 more who were illegal (Hadad 2022). Most are women aged 24 to 60, who work for varying periods of time in Israel, some for over 20 years.

Reform Jewish conversion is primarily performed in Israel in Beit Daniel – a congregation founded in Tel-Aviv in 1991, which has since become an Israeli 'Reform icon'. Beit Daniel is headed by Senior Rabbi Meir Azari alongside Associate Rabbi Galia Sadan, who is responsible for lifecycle ceremonies and *giyur*. The congregation provides religious services – lifecycle ceremonies as well as cultural and leisure-time activities – to the 300 families who are full-fledged members and thousands of residents in Central Israel (Libel-Hass 2022a; Libel-Hass and Ferziger 2022). Beit Daniel also offers several *giyur* courses on various days of the week and in three languages – Russian, English, and Hebrew – to allow a wide range of converts to attend them. In some cases, rabbis train *giyur* candidates on an individual basis (mostly in places where conversion study groups are not available). Groups designed to prepare participants for *giyur* can be found in Haifa (in both Hebrew and Russian), Nahariya, Netanya, and Beer Sheva. It is noteworthy that, following a court judgement from 2009 on the financing of *giyur* centers (HCJ 11585/05), all Reform Movement *giyur* courses in Israel are eligible for state funding. However, in effect, government-instituted criteria on number of participants allow funding for Beit Daniel courses alone (Kotler 2022).

The Converts

The converts included in the present study can be divided into two groups. The first consists of women who are in their fifties, who immigrated from the FSU at a young age, or were born in Israel to parents who immigrated from the FSU. They are full-fledged citizens who made *Aliyah* under the Law of Return and are considered of Jewish descent by the Reform Movement (their fathers or one of their grandparents is Jewish). Their socialization in Israeli society is evidenced by having been educated in the Israeli educational system and serving in the IDF (Israeli Defense Forces) or national service. They undergo a shortened conversion track that could last from several meetings with an accompanying rabbi to a three-month program (The Reform Movement 2022).

In addition to them, approximately one third of those who turn to Reform *giyur* are Filipinas who came to Israel as migrant workers; most of them married Jewish-Israeli men and obtained temporary residency. Each year, 30 couples comprised of Filipinas and Israeli men partake in Beit Daniel *giyur* courses (Wirtschafter 2014). This group of Filipina converts consists of some older women, who are in their sixties, and some mothers in their forties. They turn to conversion studies only after they are already married.

Methods and Researchers' Ethnographic Positionality

This study is based on 18 semi-structured interviews: nine of them were held with Filipina converts, and nine with converts who had immigrated from the FSU. The interviews were held in cafes and at Beit Daniel in two separate points in time: during 2010, and during 2022. Each interview lasted one hour, and included questions divided into three key aspects: attitude toward the state/establishment; overall personal *giyur* experience, with special emphasis on religious and spiritual elements; and the gender/marital status context. The names of all respondents have been changed to maintain their anonymity.

We encountered some difficulties when recruiting interviewees for the study. The Filipina converts were often disinclined to cooperate, expressing suspicion and hesitance. Some had even requested to be interviewed together with their partner, reflecting the traditional gender-based division of labor common in the Philippines. We respected their decision and realized that methodology itself, and not merely theory, develops in the field. In addition, not all interviews were held in Hebrew. Some were held in English, and others in Russian (with the help of a research assistant who was born in the FSU).

Cultural anthropologists contend with the issue of a researcher's positionality during fieldwork (Coffey 1999). Libel-Hass has conducted an 8-year-long field study in Beit Daniel and knew the congregants well. She began her work as a native Jewish Israeli researcher. Her desire to become acquainted with Reform Judaism was shared with the converts. Another similarity, particularly between her and the Filipina converts, was attending services with her partner. But there were also differences between them regarding their legal status in Israel, as well as their education. To contend with the power relations between Libel-Hass and the converts, the former adopted the view whereby a researcher's positioning in the field is dynamic, leading her to choose what to emphasize or downplay during the interviews (Narayan 1993).

Ben-Lulu, too, is an anthropologist who conducted field work in other Reform congregations in Tel-Aviv (2014-2017, see Ben-Lulu 2018; 2020; 2021; 2022), during which he had made several observations on the acceptance of converts into the community and held interviews with converts. He grew up in a Sephardic Jewish family that has always accepted *halacha* as authoritative and was not exposed to the Reform movement until his adolescence (Ben-Lulu 2021; 2022). Although he does not identify himself as an Israeli Reform Jewish man, he felt relatively comfortable as a participant in most communal religious practices throughout his life and felt equally comfortable participating in the communal practices during fieldwork. He sympathized with the female informants; and as a non-converted Jewish male, was always aware of similar gaps between both his Jewish and masculine identities, and the female converts, recognizing his privilege.

We believe that the differences between us have contributed to both the collection of findings and their processing, thereby creating a holistic analysis of the studied phenomenon.

Resisting the Orthodox Monopoly: Being True to Yourself

Choosing Reform *giyur* could be a derivative of an excluding reality, a decision made 'for lack of a better option.' However, it can also serve as a form of resistance to Orthodox monopoly, an attempt to challenge it from society's margins. For example, some of the FSU converts tried to undergo Orthodox *giyur* but left the process midway. Others simply avoided it in advance considering the harsh criticism they had heard about it.

Ksenia (57) immigrated to Israel in 2000. She works in marketing, is divorced, and has a grown son. Five years after immigrating to Israel, she began the Orthodox course, dropped out of it, and turned to Reform *giyur* at Beit Daniel. She recalls how the stringent observance of the *mitzvot* was an integral part of the Orthodox process, alienating her, and leading her to make the Reform choice:

”It’s really over the top, and the studies are super ultra-Orthodox, they’re always checking on you. For instance, some converts were caught on camera wearing pants. In Reform *giyur* it’s not like that at all [...] Despite finishing my studies, I wanted to keep learning, not because I was forced to, but because I was interested. I work on Fridays, and after work, I can drive to Beit Daniel.”

Another convert that encountered difficulties during the Orthodox conversion process, and therefore ended up dropping out of it, criticizing it poignantly, is Sveta (55). She is a teacher who was born in Moscow. She has been playing a musical instrument since she was a little girl, and chose Reform *giyur* when she became enamored with the musicality that she discovered in Reform Friday night services:

”I participated in a Reform Friday night service in Tel-Aviv (HaLev Congregation) and was absolutely enchanted. I realized there was a more open, musical, and egalitarian way of observing Jewish commandments, not only through those who think that their way is the only way of determining who is a Jew and who isn’t – and have the nerve to receive the government’s full support. Unlike my encounter with ultra-Orthodox rabbis, who were only trying to turn me into something I’m not, with the Reforms, everything clicked, including my ideological resistance to forceful strategies, and my great love of music. I actually remember saying: “This is home. This is me.”

The FSU converts’ criticism is directed against the state as well as the Orthodox establishment, the latter of which is perceived by them as an extension of the former. A recurring theme in their interviews is the gap between their perception of themselves as Jews, and the state and society that do not recognize them as such. Unlike Kravel-Tovi’s interviewees, who grappled with obeying the Orthodox

rabbis' dictated demands under state auspices, the interviewees in the present study refused to comply with these expectations, and simply dropped out of the course. By doing so, they had effectively forgone their right to the Orthodox 'stamp of approval' over their Jewish status, remaining true to themselves.

In contrast to the FSU converts, the option of undergoing Orthodox *giyur* was hardly ever available to the Filipina immigrants. Some of the Filipinas spoke about experiences of alienation and discrimination when meeting Orthodox Jews. Elizabeth (53), a housekeeper and mother of a teenage daughter, is married to a husband who defines himself as traditional. She chose not to begin an Orthodox *giyur* process in advance, despite her friends' attempts to convince her otherwise, and chose to undergo Reform *giyur* instead:

"The Orthodox Jews I met labeled me a cleaning lady and called me a "goya" (gentile woman), but at Beit Daniel I felt at home. I felt I was being accepted [...] People are happy to be there. The community members don't care that I'm Filipina, it's a very nice feeling. I like the equality between men and women [...] I like the fact that you're not forced to observe the *mitzvot*, you're free to choose which *mitzvot* to perform."

Similar motifs to the ones that emerge from Elizabeth's story can be found in Angelina's (60), a Filipina whose adult son lives in the Philippines. She came to Israel in 2000 as a caregiver, and told us that, early on, she worked for a religious family for three years. She currently lives in Central Israel and married an Israeli in 2003. Initially, she turned to Orthodox *giyur* because it was the only Judaism she knew but she experienced discrimination. Furthermore, being exposed to Reform Judaism had allowed her to develop a liberal Jewish view. Nevertheless, she did not consider herself a 'Reform Jew':

"Before I underwent Reform *giyur*, I attended an Orthodox synagogue together with my husband. They looked at me like I was a stranger. Although I already knew how to read the Torah, because each time I go to synagogue, my brother-in-law gives me the Torah so that I would follow the Torah reading. I was uncomfortable there. Also, I thought, why can't we pray together? As if women are only second choice. But if you want to pray, then you're on the side. With the Reform Jews I felt different."

Both the FSU and Filipina converts failed in their attempt to complete Orthodox *giyur*, refrained from it, and developed a critical attitude toward it. They often encountered suspicion on the part of the Orthodox *giyur* body with regards to the integrity of their motives and refused to accept the demand to drastically change their way of life. They had experienced the gap between their legal immigration under the Law of Return or the work visa that they had been granted, and the discrimination they confronted when dealing with the rabbinical establishment. All of the above structured their choice to turn to Reform *giyur* as means of expressing defiance against Orthodoxy, and not to necessarily adopt a Reform Jewish identity, even if they did identify with various liberal values associated with Reform Judaism, such as gender equality.

Feeling Closer to the Community and to God

Community religious frameworks play a crucial role in immigrant integration as they serve as a bridge between one's country of origin and the society to which one has immigrated. An immigration process is known for its ability to encourage religious-spiritual enhancement, as well as processes of converting to other religions (Chen 2005; Lerner 2019). Very often, the immigration experience is associated with a sense of alienation, strangeness, and loneliness, which is why immigrants turn to religious communities, enhancing their own religious feelings.

For the FSU converts who immigrated late in life and have no relatives in Israel, choosing to undergo Reform *giyur* and participate in Beit Daniel activities played a key role in establishing their sense of belonging to Israeli society. Yet most do not remain regular congregants, because of the community's geographic distance from their homes. Ksenia (50), who underwent conversion at Beit Daniel in 2008-2009, describes the community as a safe space for her:

”I really like Beit Daniel, even though I don't attend it regularly, because I don't live in Tel-Aviv. But when I do go there, I meet people who understand that what's important is the belief a person has inside, and their desire to pray [...] I'm alone in this country, at Beit Daniel I feel like the people are my family. They say that all Jews should be together, I feel like, at Beit Daniel, we're all together, I don't feel that they hate me as a Russian.”

Ksenia has a Jewish father, is separated, has one son, and works in marketing. She is part of the generation of women who immigrated relatively late in life, in

their thirties. She bases her sense of belonging to Israeli society and the Reform community on the positive feelings she has when visiting Beit Daniel, and her warm welcome there, regardless of how infrequently she attends services.

Angelina told us that, over the years, she partook in Jewish practices that were conducted by the family in whose home she had worked. Her connection to Judaism was built over time, and her choice to undergo Reform *giyur* – a process she completed in 2019 – was a manifestation of the spiritual affinity beating within her:

”I observed all the *mitzvot* before I converted; I already knew the basics. I fast on *Yom Kippur* [...] and celebrate Passover... all I needed was a final stamp. To make it official. The only thing I was looking for was a community, I wanted to feel a part of it. I also enjoy being in it together with my husband. It’s fun to pray together, not separately. Now it’s official. Now [...] I have a community that strengthens these feelings. I shared the fact that I read the *Torah* in a Reform synogogue at work and got good responses from some [coworkers].”

Angelina described her pursuit of a community in which to express her connection to Judaism, a search that ended when she found Beit Daniel. In this Reform congregation that sanctifies gender equality she felt an alignment between her desire to belong to a community, and the values in which she believed. Moreover, it seems that Reform conversion transforms the informal, sociological *giyur* into an official religiously sanctioned one. This linked her to other converts, helping to establish her sense of belonging to the community, and Israeli society in general.

Russian-speakers who came to Israel later in life turn to Reform *giyur* following spiritual awakening. Having spent years dedicating themselves to economic and social integration in Israel, they now have the time to put their interest in spirituality into practice. A quote in this vein was provided by Helena (49), an accountant originally from Ukraine, who has one son and is married for the second time. Her father was Jewish, whereas her mother had no religion:

”People are at an age where they’ve succeeded professionally, and are looking for something spiritual because it’s trendy, just like everyone wants to study *kabbalah*. Many [women] seek their identity, particularly immigrants from Russia, it completes the picture.”

Turning to Reform *giyur* is an example of this trend, since, among her middle-class peers, shifting one's focus to religious identity and spirituality has become a popular practice (Kaplan and Werczberger 2017). In the same context, Rabbi Kotler, who is responsible for FSU immigrants' *giyur* in the Reform Movement, explains. "People making their first steps in Israel are busy with other things: making a living, housing, children... They have time for spiritual searching, for *giyur*, when other things are behind them" (Kotler 2010). Both his and Helena's quotes highlight the fact that, for women, this only becomes an option once they have been relieved of the burden of raising their children. Now they have some time to invest in themselves.

Furthermore, contemporary spirituality approaches also help promote a perception of "consumption of the self" (Rindfleish 2005), and individualization enhancement at the expense of being a devoted member of the community. *Giyur* becomes an additional avenue by which to implement this affiliation. Skortovskya found that FSU immigrants chose Reform *giyur* because it offers a combination of spiritual learning and intellectual studies (Skortovskya 2011, 34-40). The following quote by Ksenia reflects such a choice. She claims that choosing *giyur* was a way of reconnecting to herself midway through life:

"I underwent *giyur* for the soul, I only did it for myself [...], so that I would be whole with myself. *Giyur* doesn't only give you knowledge, it allows you to develop, know more, and familiarize yourself. *Giyur* is working on your soul, what you think and feel you bring to light with others around you."

Ksenia was driven to convert by her search for spirituality, as shown by her implied focus on the self. She perceives the Reform *giyur* process not only as one of acquiring knowledge of Jewish history, but as a spiritual-communal one, whereby participants share their feelings about Judaism and about themselves. In this context, she described her *tevila* ritual, which concluded her *giyur* process, as a therapeutic moment:

"After the exam [at the Reform *beth din*] we drove to the beach, my hands were shaking, I felt that it was cleansing me, that I was with God, I felt my life was starting anew, now I'm real, there is nothing left of Russia, I'm new."

Following Julia Lerner, who outlined the therapeutic characteristics of contemporary spirituality among FSU immigrants (Lerner 2019, 74-91),

Ksenia's description highlights her satisfaction, and the embodiment of faith upon completing the process of acquiring a new identity. Her *giyur* and the ritual immersion at sea were, to her, a rebirth that enabled her to reestablish her Jewishness. From her perspective the immersion did not feel like a practice of oppression or obligation, but a moment of empowerment, a performance of Jewish affiliation (Crasnow 2017). Indeed, the Halakhah asserts that a *ger/ giyoret* is "Ka-tinok/et she-nolad/she-noledet," like a "newborn babe." Having converted, she changed her name in the Ministry of Interior back to the Jewish name she was given at birth, Leah, of which she had previously been ashamed. Thus, she found closure.

The spiritual motive was also apparent in the quotes provided by Elizabeth about the positive implications of Reform *giyur*, which contributed to a stronger feeling of belief for her. She underscored her spiritual motivation to turn to *giyur*, as well as her overall experience of it when describing the feeling she had at the end of the conversion acceptance ceremony, which includes a canopy (*chuppah*), held above the converts:

"Faith-wise it helps me a lot... I become closer to God. Today, I am more secure because I have my identity, I have the direction, I know what I want, I know what to believe, so I know which way I am going [...] It comes in a package deal, spiritual, everything. So, when I did my *giyur*, I know I did exactly the right thing, and everything follows. During the ceremony I felt like I'm marrying God (laughs)... and I chose myself a name, Haya. I like it because it means life. No matter what, life is an important thing. Whatever it is, I am going to choose Haya."

After her acceptance ceremony as a convert, Elizabeth felt a special spiritual experience manifest in her statement whereby she felt like she was marrying God. Her growing faith in God and acceptance into the community were also spiritually reflected by the name she chose for herself, which means alive. Her decision demonstrates tradition's role in an individual's worldview, how tradition constructs an individual's behavior and her attitudes toward naming practices (Suter 2004). Even after the *giyur* course had ended, Elizabeth continued to attend services at Beit Daniel. Throughout her interview, she stated that, alongside her stronger belief, she also felt like she belonged to a congregation, which strengthened her ties to Israeli-Jewish society as well.

Elizabeth's *giyur* also had ongoing practical implications at home: she learned

the meaning of practices such as candle-lighting and passed this knowledge on to her daughter. She explained that, throughout the course, emphasis was placed on encouraging participants to learn about the practices, take on whatever suited them, experience and feel the practices, and that is what she did at home.

To conclude, Russian-speakers turned to *giyur* for spiritual reasons after having been integrated into Israel from a social and occupational perspective. The Filipina converts spoke explicitly of growing faith in God following their *giyur*. They were proud of the choice they had made and justified it to their acquaintances. In addition, unlike the FSU converts, the Filipinas became congregants who regularly attended services. Although *giyur* did not alter the life circumstances which all converts face, it attests to their active pursuit of a change in lifestyle.

Gendered Pressure: Motherhood and Relationships as Incentives and Disincentives

Another reason for turning to Reform *giyur*, shared by both FSU immigrants and Filipinas, is concern over their children's Jewish identity and status since, by undergoing *giyur* themselves, they can also have their underaged children registered as Jews in the population registry. Helena decided to convert when she realized that, in the future, her son may attribute importance to the existence of a document attesting to his Jewishness. She chose to convert before he turned 13, because he would then be entitled to direct *giyur*. Instead of having to take the conversion course, he would only be required to undergo ritual immersion with his mother, and get circumcised, if he had not been circumcised earlier.

”I want my son to be defined a Jew, so he'll have no issues when he's older. Now he doesn't know that he's not Jewish, at this age, he doesn't understand what Judaism is. He knows that I go to *giyur* classes, and he started asking questions. We run a Jewish home, celebrate holidays and go to Beit Daniel on Friday night.”

Thinking of their children as motivation for turning to Reform *giyur* also emerged from interviews with Filipina converts. Elizabeth told us about greater society's excluding attitude toward her daughter due to her ethnicity. When she discovered that her peers had labeled her daughter a foreigner, she felt the urgency to find a solution for this situation that would lead to recognition of her daughter's Jewish identity:

”I realized that her friends were teasing her in school. They called her 'Philippines' and I didn't like it. So, I said that I have to do something for me and for her, because I don't want her to grow up like me. She is always telling me that she is more Jew than a Filipina [...] and then I talked to her, and she agreed that I will [go through *giyur*], because I told her that we will be together in this. And then the first time I came to Beit Daniel I felt accepted.”

Aside from the matter of converting the children, which motivated converts to begin the *giyur* process, there is another important actor who is both present and absent in this decision: the convert's partner. His role is that of a double agent, for while in some cases partners prevented converts from undergoing Orthodox *giyur*, thanks to the converts, the partners also found themselves partaking in the (Reform *giyur*) process, or even reconnecting to Judaism. Ksenia recalled her former partner's refusal to be circumcised, which denied her the possibility of undergoing Orthodox *giyur*:

”I was studying for Orthodox *giyur*, I was at the rabbinical *beth din*, I had passed a test and received my diploma. Because my husband refused to get circumcised, they wouldn't give me [a *giyur* completion certificate]. He couldn't understand my desire to convert, and we divorced. Our son also got into a religious school, it was important to me, because a child should know about the religion [...] We observed the *mitzvot* at home. My husband wasn't comfortable with it at all, he said he didn't want a Jew at home, and had he known that Judaism and *giyur* were important to me, he wouldn't've married me [...] So, we separated.”

While Kravel-Tovi underscored the rabbinical-institutional patriarchy as an inhibiting factor (Kravel-Tovi 2017, 17-22), we found that the obstacle can be in the home, namely the husband himself. The presence of their husbands primarily emerged among the Filipina converts' interviews more than in the FSU converts'. Often, the husband is a factor preventing Orthodox *giyur*, thereby delaying the possibility of converting by several years. However, when the wife expresses her desire to undergo Reform *giyur*, he can be a supportive factor to some extent, for instance, by helping her learn Hebrew, and teaching her how to pray. Some husbands show initiative and regularly help their wives, while others provide

limited support, like Angelina's husband. In this context, she spoke about her inability to undergo Orthodox *giyur* due to her husband:

"Before Reform *giyur*, I tried Orthodox *giyur*. But we didn't go through with it because they wanted my husband to write a letter of request to the Chief Rabbi, and my husband didn't want to, so we stopped. Or maybe because I wasn't a resident yet [...] By the time my ID was blue [full-fledged citizenship], I was no longer interested. A few years had passed [until the Reform *giyur*]. It wasn't my husband who told me to convert. My husband's mentality is "do as you please, I'm not going to convince you."

This example reveals the husband's uncooperativeness with the Orthodox establishment's requirements. Although, in this case, this partner realized his wife wished to convert, and had even partaken in the "sociological conversion" she had undergone, since he and his family would sometimes join his wife for services at Orthodox synagogues. After she expressed her desire to convert, her husband's support of Angelina found expression in his limited participation in the course as well. She further noted that he would accompany her to services at Beit Daniel, supporting her with his presence alongside her at the services. He did not attend the Reform synagogue with her for ideological or faith-related motivations, but as a manifestation of his commitment to their relationship. However, thanks to Angelina, her husband, who had had a traditional Yemenite upbringing, was once again going to services. Thus, she had become an agency reconnecting her husband to his religious identity.

It is noteworthy that, among interfaith couples living in the reality of a Jewish state, gendered pressure to convert is exerted over women (Hacker 2009, 178-80). In Angelina's case, the two-decade gap between her and her partner, as well as his status as an Israeli citizen, compared to her, who has had a temporary status for many years, have led them to model their relationship after traditional gender relations. Nevertheless, even when interfaith couples conduct themselves according to traditional gender roles, it is the woman who ultimately seeks out the Reform *giyur* option. The interviewees claimed that, although they felt peer-pressured into converting, it was for a wide range of reasons associated with life in Jewish-Israeli society, and not necessarily due to the pressure exerted by their husbands.

Like Angelina, in Elizabeth's case, it was not her husband who urged her to convert. She inquired about the nature of Reform *giyur* and only then shared her

feelings with her husband, who was more absent than present throughout her journey to acquire a new identity:

”I had this idea because some of my friends already did it in Beit Daniel. They tried to encourage me. And then I talked to my husband, and he told me there’s no problem at all. You can try if you feel like. So that’s what I did.”

Independent behavior that is founded on choice between available *giyur* alternatives is characteristic of most Filipina converts, probably since they are usually older than the FSU converts. Their partners help wherever necessary and leave most of the *giyur* work up to their wives. In Elizabeth’s and other Filipinas’ cases, their actions run contrary to the traditional gender role division practiced in the Philippines (Parrenas 2007, 37-9). They have spent many years in Israel and are therefore exposed to a more equal division of labor between genders, which they have internalized and implement by assuming responsibility for their *giyur* processes. Moreover, studies on gender, immigration, and religion underscore that, for the most part, women who convert following immigration face patriarchal responses from either the religion to which they convert or their religion of origin (following immigration, behavior that aligns with traditional gender roles is enhanced, see Chen 2005).

To conclude, the converts’ partners are absent or present actors that make it harder or easier for the process to be a success. Converts have spoken about the converting institution’s expectation of a certain degree of partner presence in the course. Among the converts, some appreciate their partners’ encouragement and support. Among the FSU converts, husbands were mentioned as those who prevented them from undergoing Orthodox *giyur*, whereas, in the context of Reform *giyur*, their involvement was not mentioned at all, or else they had attended the minimal number of sessions required of them. In contrast, the Filipina converts’ husbands were mentioned far more, even if they only attended several of the *giyur* course sessions, and only occasionally joined their wives for services (if they continued to regularly attend Beit Daniel). Thus, some gender and cultural differences seem to have emerged between the two groups of converts.

Throughout and following the conversion process, the husband’s role may change if the couple decides to partake in community activities regularly. Many of the converts choose Reform *giyur* willingly, not because their husbands demand it. The small number of women who did explicitly mention choosing this form of conversion because of their partners can be explained by the unequal

power relations between a citizen husband and naturalizing wife. Moreover, husbands who served as the cause for their Filipina wives' request to undergo Reform *giyur* were those who had been brought up religiously and, following their participation in the *giyur* courses alongside their wives, had profoundly reconnected to Judaism. In contrast, among the Russian-speaking converts, no similar cases had been found of husbands who were *giyur* catalysts. On the contrary, husbands made it harder for their wives to convert, or failed to play any significant role in the process.

Discussion

Genesis (24: 60) mentions, "And they blessed Rebekah, and said unto her, Thou art our sister, be thou the mother of thousands of millions, and let thy seed possess the gate of those which hate them". With this particular blessing "You are Our Sisters", women who convert within the Reform Jewish Movement are honored during the exciting ceremony welcoming immigrants. Yet, what lies behind this poignant blessing? What experiences, motivations, and reasons have led to this significant moment?

This study explored the experiences and interpretations of female converts from two target populations – FSU and Filipina immigrants – who had undergone Reform *giyur*. These converts grapple with experiences of alienation and exclusion in Israeli society and encounter bureaucratic difficulties when attempting to have their identities recognized. During their interviews, these women bravely revealed their motivations to undergo Reform *giyur*, noting the challenges they had to address along the way, as well as the way their *giyur* had shaped their Jewish identity and sense of belonging to the national collective.

The first reason for deciding to undergo Reform *giyur* was founded on resentment toward the Orthodox rabbinical monopoly, thereby choosing the non-Orthodox track as means of opposing Orthodoxy. The women perceived the Orthodox *giyur* that some of them had undergone, almost fully or partially, or from which they had refrained in advance, as too strict due to the fundamental change in lifestyle it required of them. The Russian-speakers felt the demand to change their lifestyle was religious trespassing into the private spheres of their lives, whereas the Filipina converts described experiencing alienation and foreignness in Orthodox spaces.

Another reason reflected spiritual affiliations and a desire to belong to a community. The converts expressed their interest in feeling a sense of belonging to the Jewish-Israeli collective; acting on their Jewish faith in a manner that suits their values and lifestyles as part of a community to which they strove to

belong, and in which they wanted to mark their lifecycle ceremonies, thereby connecting to themselves and to God. For example, some of them reported that the *tevila* performed toward the end of their *giyur* process was a form of rebirth, constituting a classic manifestation of conversion and acceptance of a new identity. The excitement that surrounded the immersion, as well as the conversion acceptance ceremony in the Reform community, and, at times, also changing one's name from a non-Hebrew name to a Jewish one, indicate a growing engagement in spirituality among women who immigrated to a foreign country. Thus, while *giyur* may only be a mere practice performed in the community that marks one's joining it, it may also be an individual journey that encompasses self-realization, as well as acting upon one's beliefs.

The final reason was associated with the cross between their status as partners/mothers and their non-Jewish identity. Often, one of these statuses, or both, became a catalyst for the *giyur* process, while also acting as an inhibiting and erasing factor reflecting experiences of the preference of "the good of the other at the expense of the self" – to allow their children to be accepted by society,³ or pleasing their husbands. Thus, the power of the patriarchy and family may also be a restrictive structure instead of a liberating one that acknowledges these women's agency. Hence, this study joins feminist research on the ambivalent role played by family in post-modernity.

At the end of the process, some did not define their current Jewish identity as Reform, while others were proud to have undergone Reform *giyur*, and even defend their choice to their acquaintances. Nevertheless, converts from both groups of origin recognized the principles of Reform Judaism during their *giyur* process, and valued some of them, such as gender equality. Yet, only a small number of the converts continued to attend Beit Daniel on a regular basis once they had completed their *giyur*, becoming regular members of the community. Among the Russian-speaking converts, upon completing their *giyur*, most of them stopped attending Beit Daniel services regularly because their homes were too distant. Against this backdrop, the small number of couples consisting of an Israeli husband and Filipina wife, who regularly participate in Beit Daniel activities, is also striking in view of the men's return to Judaism following their involvement in their wives' *giyur* processes. Thus, the present study supports previous ones that have concluded that immigrant women serve as agents of change and important acclimatization in society,⁴ and that *giyur* has a direct

³ Another ritual that also demonstrates the children's mediation of their religious identity, is Bat Mitzvah ceremonies (coming of age rituals for girls). However, this practice – which is performing by reading directly from the Torah scroll (Aliya la'Torah) – is considered less of a consensus in Israeli society. See: Ben-Lulu, 2020.

⁴ Only groups of migrant workers that contained women became organized, particularly for the

link to perceiving an individual as a full-fledged citizen.

In addition, it is possible that the interviewees also have a criticism of the Reform conversion and that they were afraid to voice it to us in light of the fact they were grateful to the Reform movement, which enabled them to convert and support their ongoing struggle to be accepted in the Israeli society. Reflection and criticism are privileges that not everybody is entitled to. Hence, it is not surprising, that by the end of the conversion process many converts choose not to continue frequenting the congregation. This trend strengthens and confirms current writing in the sociology of contemporary religion, which perceives communities as providers of religious services and identity needs (Ammerman and Farnsley 1997; Libel-Hass 2018; Libel-Hass and Ferziger 2022).

All these reasons position convert women as active agents seeking to assume responsibility for and control over their lives in view of an excluding bureaucratic system. Furthermore, turning to Reform *giyur* attests to the converts' desire to belong primarily to the Israeli collective, and not necessarily to the Jewish People as a whole, in its broadest sense.

Moreover, the Reform conversion is a case study that sheds new light on Israel as a democracy; both in terms of its attitude to minority groups and their civil rights and in terms of preserving the concept of what the Jewish people are through the recognition/non-recognition of Reform Judaism. This process demonstrates and affirms Shafir and Peled's conclusion that argued that ethnic democracy could recognize certain group rights of minority groups (Shafir and Peled 1998).

In the absence of institutional/political recognition of the Reform Movement by society and the establishment, the converts (albeit not necessarily deliberately) position themselves by the very choice they make as political actresses who bolster the movement's socio-political status. Although the Reform *giyur* process does not eliminate the experiences of alienation and exclusion that the converts still face, their choice to convert does allow them to view themselves not as victims of the system, but as agents of change, who have the power to resist (on the level of society's power relations), or the power to renew and redefine (their partners' old ties to tradition or their children's identities). Reform *giyur* is a practice of resistance to and non-acceptance of a religiously and culturally discriminatory reality. Nevertheless, it may also be seen as a practice that could ratify the power of religion as a system of control and supervision in Israeli society – the gate through which it can be entered.

purpose of setting up various community organizations and frameworks. For example, the Filipinas in Israel set up small organizations based on family and friendship ties, such as prayer groups. Filipino migrant workers also founded larger organizations that focused on leisure and welfare activities, see: Sabar 2008, 43.

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Еинат Либел-Хас и Елазар Бен-Лулу

Јесте ли ви наше сестре? Отпор, припадање и признавање Реформске јеврејске женске конверзије

Сажетак: Верска конверзија је процес који означава индивидуалну интенцију за новим верским идентитетом у циљу прикључивања одређеној верској заједници. Они који желе да постану део јеврејског народа путем конверзије (*giyur*), и тај процес укључује учествовање у ритуалима и верским праксама. За разлику од претходних истраживања конверзије у јудаизам која се често фокусирају на искуство конверзије у складу са ортодоксним правилима, овај рад се фокусира на искуство имигранткиња из земаља бившег Совјетског савеза и Филипина које су прихватиле јудаизам кроз Реформни покрет у Израелу. На основу квалитативног истраживања открили смо да овај не-ортодоксни процес, који се заснива на либералним вредностима, не само да омогућава конверзију под правилима реформског јудаизма, већ и промовише афилијацију чланова са Реформним покретом и поспешује њихову интеграцију у јеврејско друштво. Њихов избор је политичка одлука, као акт отпора ортодоксном монополу, али и показивање духовних мотивација. Конвертити постају друштвени агенти који јачају друштвено-политичку позицију Реформног покрета у Израелу, који се бори против дискриминације. Поред тога, како је фокус рада на женама, овај рад даје нове увиде у однос између религије, рода и националности. **Кључне речи:** конверзија, идентитет, Реформни јудаизам, род, Израел, имигранти