On Orthodox Conversion in the Twenty-First Century

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I began my Orthodox conversion process when I was 21 years old. I was a junior at New York University studying Jewish Studies and History and had just returned to Manhattan after a transformative semester abroad in Tel Aviv. But my journey with Judaism doesn't begin there; it begins with my parents.

My parents, Mike and Tisha Thornhill, grew up, met, and were married in southern Oklahoma. Having grown up in the Bible belt, it's no surprise that they were very active in their church, leading the youth group while my father was studying to be a minister and getting his master's degree. Their church sent them to Israel on a 10-day trip in the late 1980s, during the First Intifada, to learn about Jesus and Christianity's roots in the Holy Land. They discovered an authentic tradition, something they felt they'd been missing, in the places where the so-called "Old Testament" tales took place. They felt resentment toward the people and the movement that raised them to believe in Jesus, himself a Jew, without attributing any of his practice or their own to its Jewish roots. They were taken by the beauty of the land, fascinated by the people they encountered, and couldn't wait to learn more.

Upon returning to Oklahoma, they left their church and my dad left his seminary. A year later, I was born. A year after that, my sister, Hannah, joined us, and we moved to Austin, Texas. My parents searched for conversion resources and only found a small Chabad that was not interested in helping them. But that didn't stop my parents. They did their own learning and connected with like-minded folks in the area, people who felt like they connected more with Judaism than any other religious or spiritual tradition. They raised my siblings and me celebrating Jewish traditions and holidays, and we visited the Reform temple some years on Yom Kippur. I even missed school for haggim.

For as long as I can remember, I've always felt a strong connection to Israel and begged my dad to take me with him when he took his second trip there in 1995. He didn't, but he brought me back a painting, which hung on a wall in my bedroom until I moved to New York in 2007. I didn't connect to Jewish life on campus at NYU for the first couple of years but not for lack of trying. I did attend one event at the Bronfman Center, the Hillel on campus and my current employer, during Welcome Week of my freshmen year but was discouraged and didn't return for another two years. I looked for a community and found it in the dance team at NYU. Growing up, I was a classically trained dancer, and while I decided not to pursue dance as a career, I missed it a lot, so auditioning for the dance team seemed like a good substitute. I made wonderful friends while pursuing my passion for dance. Yet, I still felt like something was missing. Midway through my sophomore year, I applied to transfer to the University of Texas thinking that being close to my family again would help. But as the Yiddish saying goes, "man plans and God laughs," and about that time, NYU announced that it was opening its campus in Tel Aviv the following autumn. They were offering travel stipends and scholarships to incentivize applicants. Since I had always wanted to go, I figured now was my chance. After submitting my application, it was as if the choice was made for me. I was supposed to go there.

I arrived in Tel Aviv at the end of August 2009 and instantly bonded with a Syrian Jew from Brooklyn who is still my best friend. In the days that followed, I learned a lot about the complexities of Israeli society, made valuable friendships that I still cherish and enjoy today, and began my love affair with Tel Aviv. I felt at home in a way that I never had in New York, and I couldn't quite explain why. I knew that my affinity for Am Israel wasn't a phase or simply a fascination. I belonged in Israel, and I was welcomed as such by every Israeli I came in contact with, no questions asked. I knew I had to convert in order to officially be able to participate fully in Jewish life in America and Israel, and while I didn't know what that would take, I knew I was ready for it.

When I arrived back in New York, I made the decision to begin a conversion process. I was fortunate that one of my friends from NYU Tel Aviv was in the middle of an Orthodox conversion process through the Rabbinical Council of America. She connected me to Rabbi Dan Smokler, the then Senior Jewish Educator at the Bronfman Center for Jewish Student Life at NYU. He graciously met me for coffee and outlined what the steps of the process would be and what my options were. He then connected me to Rabbi Yehuda Sarna, the then University Chaplain and Orthodox rabbi at the Bronfman Center (now my boss and the Executive Director there) who talked me through it further and suggested I read Rabbi Marc Angel's book, Choosing to be Jewish: The Orthodox Road to Conversion. I decided to begin a process with the RCA, and shortly after that, I met with Rabbi Romm, the head of the Bet Din of New York. He recommended a couple more books to me, and I began my formal learning at the Bronfman Center.

Because I was a Jewish Studies major, Hebrew language courses were a requirement for my degree. Additionally, my time spent in Israel exposed me to Israeli and Jewish culture in a deep way. I enrolled in a class at the Bronfman Center and began learning one-on-one with an Orthodox Jewish student who not only taught me tefillah and berakhot but also took me with her to countless Shabbat meals and accompanied me to davening. The Orthodox community at NYU welcomed me with open arms. I could understand Hebrew (a little) and read (pretty well), which helped me keep up with services and gave me a lot of confidence. That summer, I returned to Israel to volunteer, intern, and take ulpan at Tel Aviv University. I lived in Tel Aviv with three of my friends from study abroad and journeyed nearly every Shabbat to Har Nof to spend Shabbat with an Orthodox family from America who treated me like one of their own family members.

I returned to campus for my senior year and applied to participate in two more formal classes, one with Chabad and one through the Bronfman Center, in addition to my undergraduate work in Jewish Studies. I also continued my one-on-one learning with an educator and peer of Rabbi Sarna's who was working at the Bronfman Center at the time. We focused primarily on hilkhot shabbat and kashruth. He not only ensured that I had a firm grasp on halakhic concepts but he checked in with me and made sure that I was doing okay as a human being. Throughout my entire process I felt supported by educators and peers and by Rabbi Romm. I met with him once every four to five months and even spent a Shabbat evening with him and his family.

I engaged in formal Jewish education as well as informal and immersive experiences. Dr. Michelle Sarna welcomed me into her home every week not only as a babysitter but also to help her with weekly Shabbat prep on Fridays. I learned how to take hallah, recite berakhot over food with her then-toddlers, and was able to practice my learned knowledge of bishul b'shabbat and kashruth. Rabbi Dan and Dr. Erin Smokler invited me into their home for Shabbat and holiday celebrations, and I learned the holiness of hospitality and hakhnasat orhim, welcoming guests. I participated in Jewish service trips with the Joint and the American Jewish World Service, traveled to Israel, spent hours learning on the phone with a remote hevruta, kept kosher, kept Shabbat, built up a hevre who are still my good friends today. I graduated, moved to the Upper West Side, and took a job at an Orthodox Day School.

Finally, days before Rosh haShanah in 2011, I dunked in the mikveh. I was told on a Friday that my mikveh would be on the following Sunday. My mom bought a ticket immediately and flew up so that she could be there. My friend and then-roommate had her mikveh the same day and our families and close friends celebrated with us afterward at a kosher restaurant on the Upper West Side. Rabbi Dan was at the mikveh, too, and helped make us feel safe and cared for. While I had hoped for the mikveh to be a meaningful, spiritual experience, I remember thinking how much I couldn't wait to get out of the water and just be accepted as a Jew already. Shortly thereafter, I began working at the Bronfman Center and am now the assistant director there. I have mentored and learned from hundreds of Jewish college students, nearly completed an MA in Jewish Education, started a young adult Jewish learning circle, and founded the Orthodox Converts Network.

My story isn't unique. Many people decide to convert to Judaism and increasingly, young women are choosing to do so through Orthodox Batei Din. In October of last year, I was about to celebrate Sukkot in Florence, Italy when I learned about Barry Freundel's despicable behavior. I struggled internally with the desire to just be a Jew, not drawing attention to the fact that I converted, and the feeling of responsibility that I had toward people like me, born with a yiddishe neshama but not coming from a Jewish womb. I knew I had to do something. I'm not capable of easing the pain of Freundel's victims or anyone who has been harmed in this process. But I have an obligation to use my knowledge of what the process should and shouldn't look like and to help others find their way along this journey.

Lack of clarity and exclusion of female leaders from the process led me to create the Orthodox Converts Network in December 2014. Through the network, we

hope to make the process more accessible, transparent, and meaningful by:

1) Providing and publicizing resources
2) Mentoring conversion candidates
3) Working with communal leaders and existing infrastructure to create change and improve the process
4) Meeting regularly to activate a previously unheard but critically important voice
5) Empowering female Orthodox leadership to take on a more significant role in the process

Since our initial meeting in December, we've also activated a Facebook page, begun work on a website, and I've connected several people who feel stuck in their process to individuals who can help them through it. I've created a suggested curriculum using the RCA's book list and based on my own process and learnings, and I continue to learn with conversion candidates. I work to welcome them into communities that are open to those going through the process and make them feel as comfortable as possible. I hope to take it even further by launching materials and programs that can be utilized in Day Schools and communities to educate young people and community members about conversion and de-stigmatize the process. I spoke on a panel with Rabbi Riskin, the chief rabbi of Efrat, and Rabbi Angel, founder and director of the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals, and was so encouraged by their passion for the issue and sense of urgency around improving things for and protecting conversion candidates. That we have leaders like this in our corner is a huge win.

In late October, the RCA formed a GPS Review Committee,[1] which conducted surveys and later convened focus groups to assess their Geirus Policies and Standards (GPS) procedure. Since then, much has happened in the Orthodox world: alternative Batei Din have been formed in Israel,[2] rabbis associated with the International Rabbinic Fellowship (IRF) are performing conversions, Yeshivat Maharat has ordained three classes of women,[3] and the RCA report[4] has been publicized.

The data from the report is fascinating, although not surprising to those of us intimately connected with the process. I want to highlight a few points, all taken from page 7 the report: [5]

? 78% of conversion participants in the RCA-Beth Din of America network are women.
? 45% of the sample entered the conversion process between the ages of 20 and

29 and 27% were 30–39. These two age groups encompass 70% of all conversion candidates.
? Most survey participants (80%) cited “spiritual-intellectual search” as the factor that prompted their interest in conversion.
? 45% of all respondents said they have “Jewish ancestry.”

Seventy-Eight percent of conversion participants in the RCA-Beth Din of America network are women, and most of these women are under 40 when they begin the process. I want us to sit with that for a moment. Conversion in the Orthodox community in America is a women’s issue. Yet we continue to uphold a system that not only prevents women from playing a leadership role but also allows for an unhealthy power dynamic between middle-aged men, seen as the gatekeepers of our tradition, and most often, young women in a state of increased vulnerability. The GPS Review Committee, in their recommendations to the RCA, “encourage[s] Sponsoring Rabbis to facilitate relationships between female conversion candidates and female teachers, mentors, or scholars to assist them in the conversion process in the hope that such relationships will assist the conversion candidate to face the many challenges faced by observant Jewish women.” [6] While it goes on to address the power dynamic by making important recommendations that will help conversion candidates feel affirmed in their experience and perhaps more comfortable, none of these recommendations explicitly call for women to be included beyond certain “rare” conversations around “issues of a personal nature.”[7] I would argue that including learned, observant, female women in the learning process is a wonderful start. I would like us to take it a step further and insist that female conversion candidates need a yoetzet halakha or other pious, female community leader to

? be present for all meetings with the Bet Din,
? be included in all decisions and discussions as they relate to the candidate,
? be the only person (aside from the mikveh attendant) anywhere near the mikveh at the time of immersion, and
? continue as a spiritual guide for the candidate post-immersion.

There are hundreds of knowledgeable women in our communities who must be given the
opportunity to take on a leadership role within this process, both within the RCA and outside of it.

Conversion is also very clearly an issue facing emerging adults. What happens during emerging adulthood? We begin making important life decisions, decisions that will indeed have a huge impact on the direction we take our adult existence:

career, higher education, and perhaps most importantly, marriage. Converts have told me that the time it takes to convert (sometimes the unreasonable length and sometimes the uncertainty of the timeline) make forming relationships, romantic or otherwise, nearly impossible. We must enable conversion candidates to go through the process within a reasonable period of time so that they may be fully integrated into our communities and begin making lives and families of their own. There are many challenges Jews by choice face socially; we must educate our communities about conversion so that integration into communities is seamless. And we must do our part by destigmatizing conversion and encouraging our youth to date and marry those who have chosen to join us.

Along these lines, we know that Jews do not live in a bubble and as a result, may end up dating outside of the Jewish community. When this happens, rather than cutting these people out, we should work with them to determine the best method by which their significant other can join the Jewish people. It is important to note, however, that the majority of conversion candidates through the RCA do not cite marriage or relationship with a Jew as their main reason for choosing to convert to Judaism through an Orthodox Bet Din. This is a common misconception in the Orthodox community and one that I want to fight to change. Conversion candidates undergo tremendous scrutiny throughout the process. I can cite from my own experience and from others that we feel our integrity is called into question by many strangers for the most ambiguous reasons. We do not need community members to enforce what they believe are proper ways to treat a convert or conversion candidate by treating us with skepticism, questioning our reasons for converting, and wondering if we will continue to be Jewish or observant beyond our immersion in the mikveh. First, it’s none of their business. Second, after immersion, converts are to be treated like any other Jew with the exception of their ability to marry a kohen. We have a long way to go in educating communities around the halakha of conversion. In the meantime, we should all do our best to welcome people into our communities with kindness and openness as a rule. After all, Pirkei Avot tells us to judge others favorably,[8] which can be interpreted as giving others the benefit of the doubt.

While “conversion for marriage” is not the main reason RCA conversion candidates choose to convert, I think it’s important to celebrate those who do convert to Judaism so that they may enjoy a halakhically Jewish life with their Jewish spouse. It is halakhically acceptable to convert to Judaism if you are in a relationship with a Jew. It is a practice in many communities to discourage this and frown upon it. Knowing many people who deal with this, I feel comfortable saying that they do not “convert for marriage” only. They have found meaning

enough in the Jewish tradition that they want to make it a central part of their lives, with their Jewish spouse. It is not black and white. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks reminds us often that Jews are a tiny people by quoting Milton Himmelfarb, “The number of Jews in the world is smaller than a small statistical error in the Chinese census.”[9] It is not in our interest to alienate members of our community. Rather than shunning those who “convert for marriage,” we must guide them through the conversion process and celebrate their desire to join the Jewish people.

The GPS Review Committee’s report highlights several areas that require examination by the RCA and makes suggestions for improvement in these areas. I feel that most of the suggested changes are very much in line with feedback I have heard from Jews by choice and conversion candidates. In my conversations with conversion candidates and based on my own experience, people simply want to be treated with dignity and respect.

They want the expectations to be clearly outlined for them. They want to know about how long the process will take and exactly what they should learn and with what frequency. They want to be able to trust that the leaders who are guiding them through the process and the members of the Bet Din will have their best interest in mind and treat the process with a certain level of seriousness and reverence. I remember feeling so many different things during my process. I remember just starting out and wondering, “Who do I learn with? And what do I learn?” And when I immersed myself in studying Hebrew, tefillah, Jewish history, kashruth, Shabbat, I remember thinking “Okay, so when do I know it’s enough to go to the mikveh?” I remember feeling like I had no control; that the most important decision of my life was in the hands of three men who didn’t know me at all, and all I had was 45 minutes to convince them that I was ready to be a Jew. That I was 21 and like all of my Modern Orthodox friends on the Upper West Side, I really wanted to start dating, hosting meals on Shabbat, putting roots down in a community, and to just be treated like everyone else.

I am encouraged by the GPS Review Committee’s recommendations and hopeful that the RCA will be receptive. I am thrilled that rabbis like Rabbi Angel, Rabbi Riskin, Rabbi David Stav, and Rabbi Nahum Rabinovitch are working hard to improve the Orthodox conversion process; and I am the first to say there are wonderful aspects to the process, too. I also believe that it will only improve if converts and conversion candidates are consulted and helping to lead this charge. I appreciate the allies and friends that I and the OCN have made along the way: We need you. And we need also to know that our testimony is being taken seriously. It is in our interest to make the Orthodox conversion process

better and more user-friendly. That does not mean compromising on halakhic observance and standards nor does it mean compromising justice and morality. The Rambam, at the same time that he admits that converts are a challenge for the Jewish people, acknowledges that conversion will happen and so we must both be careful not to be too stringent and to love the convert. Conversion has always been a part of the Jewish communal landscape. We must, as our ancestors did, accept this and celebrate it. After all, we believe that Judaism is a compelling way to live one's life—why should we be skeptical or discouraging of someone who wants to take that on?

I've learned so much not only from my own conversion process but from the women and men I've met through the Orthodox Converts Network and in my own learning with conversion candidates. Many are greeted with openness and encouragement and therefore thrive in the process and fit seamlessly into a community once they complete it. Others find it less welcoming and unclear and describe the process as painful and unnecessarily difficult. The way that each person experiences conversion is and should continue to be different. But that does not mean that each process should be different. At the most basic level, each process should be straightforward, accessible, encouraging, affirming, meaningful, and positively life-changing. Every conversion candidate should engage with rabbis, teachers, mentors, and community members who help facilitate that type of experience. And after immersion, all Jews by choice should find a community they genuinely feel they can call home.

[1] http://www.rabbis.org/news/article.cfm?id=105810
[2] http://www.timesofisrael.com/defying-rabbinate-rabbis-set-up-alternative-jewish-conversion-court/
[3] http://www.yeshivatmaharat.org/about-our-scholars/
[4] http://rcarabbis.org/pdf/GPSFINALREPORT_FINAL_June28.pdf
[5] Ibid.
[6] Ibid., p. 18.
[7] Ibid., p. 18.
[8] Pirkei Avot 1:6.
[9] http://www.rabbisacks.org/emor-5774-afraid-greatness/