

Conversion to Jewish Faith



MELBOURNE BETH DIN

All you need to know about the why, how, when and where of becoming a Jew.

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Introduction

In Halacha (Jewish Law – see Glossary for a brief explanation of all Hebrew terms used), the Jewish status of a newly born baby depends entirely on the status of their mother. The child of an Orthodox Jewish mother is Jewish, even if his or her father is not Jewish. The child of a non-Jewish mother is not Jewish, even if his or her father is Jewish. There is no such thing as a person who is “half Jewish”, and the status with which one is born continues throughout their lifetime. However, there is a process by which someone not born Jewish can become Jewish. It is known as Conversion.

Conversion (known in Hebrew as “geirut” or “giur”) is the process by which a person who is not born Jewish becomes Jewish. Once a person is admitted to the Jewish religion in accordance with Torah Law, he or she immediately enjoys the full benefits of Jewish status and, equally, is immediately obligated in the observance of all pertinent laws. It is forbidden to remind a convert of the fact that they were formerly a gentile.

YOU DON'T HAVE TO BE JEWISH

Judaism claims no monopoly as the only path to G-d. Indeed, the Talmud teaches that “the Righteous of all nations have a share in the World to Come,” i.e. one need not be (or become) Jewish to be considered worthy in the eyes of G-d. It follows, then, that a person from any background or ethnic group is, in principle, able to fulfil G-d’s will without the need to become Jewish. This is to be achieved through adhering to the Seven Noachide Laws (as described in, for example, *The Path of the Righteous Gentile*, by Chaim Clorefene [Feldheim Books]).

Judaism is not a proselytising faith. It does not seek converts, indeed it tries to dissuade them. Consequently, any person who wishes to become Jewish will not only have to learn about Judaism but will have to satisfy the Dayanim (judges) of this (or another) Beth Din of his or her sincere desire to join the Jewish People and be bound by its laws. Effectively, this means that you must satisfy the Beth Din that you wish to embrace Judaism because you believe in and love G-d and that you unreservedly accept Halacha and the self-discipline of the Jewish way of life.

The Conversion Process

What is the process for converting to Judaism at Melbourne Beth Din?

Since no two applicants are alike, no two conversion procedures are identical. We endeavour to treat each application according to its particular merits. However, as a general rule, the period for conversion, once the candidate has been accepted by the Beth Din, is at least two years, and often more. During this time, not only will applicant's knowledge of Jewish law be assessed, but also the implementation of these laws in their daily lives will be ascertained. (See "Your Rabbinic Mentor" below for further information regarding this.) Each applicant will progress at his or her own pace - a process monitored by the Dayanim of the Melbourne Beth Din.

Preliminary Stage – The Rabbinic Mentor

Identify a nearby orthodox synagogue, and approach its Rabbi

Each applicant is required to find an Orthodox Community Rabbi to be his or her Rabbinic Mentor for the conversion process. This person should be the rabbi of the candidate's local synagogue, but alternatives can be discussed.

The Rabbinic Mentor has three roles.

Firstly, they serve to guide the applicant in halachic matters, and all questions relating to Jewish law and observance can be addressed to this Rabbi. One of the requirements incumbent upon all Jews is *aseh lecha Rav* “make a teacher for yourself.” Forming an ongoing relationship with a particular rabbi is your first step towards becoming a Jew.

Secondly, by becoming familiar with this Rabbi, the Rabbi will be able to monitor the applicant's progress in relation to the application of the material studied and will be best able to inform the Beth Din of the applicant's communal involvement and commitment.

Finally, the applicant is required to have a letter from the Rabbinic Mentor relating to each module test with the Geirut Coordinator. The Rabbinic Mentor also monitors and signs off on the Timeline (see below).

Stage 1 – The Application Process

A: The Application Form

After attending synagogue for two or three months, you can ask your Rabbinic Mentor if it would be appropriate to contact the Beth Din. He will consider your attendance at synagogue, the type of questions you have brought to him, and the impression he has formed of your commitment to becoming a Jew. If he answers positively, ask him to formally request the Beth Din to send you the Application Form.

The application forms must be completed and sent to the Melbourne Beth Din together with a letter outlining why you wish to convert to Judaism. You should include in this letter:

- your personal background, the type of family you grew up in, what religious upbringing (if any) you had and what religious affiliations you have or had;

- your relationship status; whether you are with a girl- or boy-friend, fiancé(e), married, etc;
- what knowledge you have of Judaism; how your interest in Judaism began and grew, and
- why you want to be Jewish.

The Application Form and letter should be accompanied by the other items mentioned on the following Checklist. Once we have this information we can then proceed to arrange a time for your first meeting at the Beth Din.

Checklist: When you send in your Application Form, remember to include:

- Certified copies of your (and your partner's) driver licence or full birth certificate.
- A colour passport photograph of yourself, (your partner and any children you may already have).
- The registration fee of \$600.00, made payable to the Melbourne Beth Din.
- If you or your partner has been divorced, a certified copy of the relevant Decree(s) Absolute and Jewish divorce; Gett certificate of your partner.
- Certified copy of your parents' marriage certificate (and your partner's parents' marriage certificate and their Ketubah).
- Certified copies of the full birth certificates of any children that you or your partner may already have.
- A National Police check on you (and your partner). Tick their box "Citing contact with children" as the reason for your check. If you already have a Police Certificate, we can accept it within 6 months of its date.

B: The Two Interviews

Once your application information has been inspected in our office, your first meeting will be arranged.

The first meeting is with a rabbi who will conduct a formal interview with you to assess your motivation and genuine desire. He will submit a written report to the Dayanim, and with their approval, this same rabbi will conduct a second interview to gain a deeper insight into these questions and whether anything has changed since the first interview. Once these two initial interviews have been successfully completed, the final step of the Application Process is a meeting with the Dayanim.

C: First Meeting with the Dayanim

The Dayanim, having read all of the written material collected so far (including your Application Form and letter and the reports of your Rabbinic Mentor and the Interviewing Rabbi), will meet with you (and your partner, if you have one). Don't worry about this meeting: although it can be daunting to sit before three rabbis, they are friendly people and will do everything they can to put you at ease. They will explain what is involved in converting to Judaism and living a Jewish life, and will want to hear more from you about your motivation. They will only arrange this meeting having been encouraged by what they have read in the written material, and so – although there is never a guarantee that they will agree to accept you onto the Conversion Program – it is more common for people to be accepted at the end of this meeting than not. The two possible outcomes are:

- a) The rabbis may advise that it is not appropriate for you to commence the Conversion Program at this time, or
- b) They will accept you onto the Program.

Assuming that you are accepted, you will return to the Office at the end of the meeting, and receive advice about selecting a teacher, and commencing lessons.

Stage 2 – The Learning Program

The Learning Program is the main part of the Conversion Process and you can expect it to take at least two years.

Once you have settled on a teacher (chosen from the list supplied to you by the Beth Din Office) in consultation with your Rabbinic Mentor, you can get down to the serious business of regular lessons, and gradually incorporating the requirements of Halacha into your daily life. The material you will be supplied with at this stage is:

- The Syllabus
- The Timeline
- The Reading List

The Syllabus comprises 8 modules which describe the material to be covered during the Learning Program. But this is not an exercise in theoretical learning, or merely the accumulation of facts. Halacha describes a lifestyle which is expressed in every part of every day. Taking all of this on is a

considerable undertaking, something that is impossible to accomplish in a short period of time. The Timeline is your guide to when in the process you should be expecting to take on various aspects of Jewish Law and practice. Even if the learning of 8 modules is accomplished quickly, there is no shortcut to incorporating Jewish practice into your daily life, and this is why we set the two year minimum period for the Learning Program. Incorporating such fundamental changes to your lifestyle just takes time!

One of the requirements of an orthodox Jew, is to continue learning throughout their life. The Reading List is an introduction to the range of excellent works now available in English, to broaden your understanding of what it means to be a Jew. Most orthodox Jews also attend *shiurim* or learning sessions once or more often every week.

Jews tend to live in close communities, centred on the local shul (synagogue). This is because Jews need to be able to walk to the shul on Shabbat (Sabbath (Friday night to Saturday night)) and consequently live around that area. If you live far from an orthodox shul, you will need to relocate as part of the conversion process.

Throughout the Learning Program, you will attend regular check-in sessions with the Dayanim at the Beth Din, usually on a Thursday afternoon. You and your partner must be able to make yourselves available for these sessions, which will take place three or four times a year, and certainly at the end of each of the 8 modules. When your teacher and you believe that you have mastered the material in one of the Modules, the teacher should submit a report to the Rabbinic Administrator for Geirut to arrange for an oral test. The Rabbinic Administrator will submit a report to the Dayanim, who will discuss it with you at the check-in session.

Your Partner

The greatest part of halacha is observed in the home. If you have a boy- or girl-friend, partner, fiancé(e) or spouse it is essential that they are involved in your conversion process. If you are now, or plan to be living together, you will both make your own contribution to creating and maintaining your Jewish home. Whether your partner is Jewish or not, they must attend the regular lessons with you, and attend with you at the regular check-in sessions at the Beth Din. If you are single when commencing the process, but form a relationship during it, the Dayanim must be informed, and your new significant other must be included. Your partner will be expected to join you

in living a life in Halacha is fully observed, including attendance at weekly shiurim, and this may involve a change in their previous level of observance.

Children

Where a woman has children who were born before she converted, the children must be involved in the conversion process as well. The family must ensure that in addition to the parents' complete adherence to Halacha, the raising of their children is also in accordance with Halacha.

This includes:

- Educating their children in a Jewish day school;
- Educating children at home and outside of home with the proper observance of
 - Shabbat and chaggim (festivals)
 - Wearing appropriate clothing
 - Saying brachot before and after eating
 - Kashrut

Families with such children should attend at the Beth Din at least once every two years until the youngest child has reached the age of Bar/Bat Mitzvah so that the Dayanim can follow their Jewish progress, even if this involves visits after the parent's conversion is completed.

Stage 3 – Completing the Process

Once all of the 8 modules have been successfully completed, the Dayanim will decide at the following check-in session whether it is appropriate for you to embark on the final examinations. These examinations consist of 8 separate papers which question every part of the syllabus that you have will have completed. There is no time-limit for the exams, so can take as long as you need, but you must complete them alone at the Beth Din premises without reference to notes or textbooks, except a *siddur*, which will be provided.

Upon successful completion of the final examinations, at your next check-in session the Dayanim will decide whether it is appropriate to complete the process and finalise your conversion.

If they do so decide, an appointment will be made for you attend the *mikva* for your *tevilla l'shem geirut* "immersion for purpose of conversion." If you are male, circumcision will be arranged as well.

Along with the immersion, you will also be asked to make a solemn declaration undertaking to abide by all the requirements of Jewish Law for the rest of your life. This declaration will be made both in the Beth Din, and at the *mikva*.

Once the immersion is completed, you are fully Jewish and required to adhere to all the tenets of Jewish Law. Some time later (and this is often more than a year) after living as a Jewish person, you will attend one last time at the Beth Din to receive a certificate which attests to your Jewish status. This certificate will be recognised anywhere in the world as valid evidence of your Jewish status. It is issued solely on the discretion of the Dayanim.

If it is your intention to marry, please note that a woman may not marry for 92 days following her immersion for the purpose of conversion. Please check with the Beth Din before booking any dates.

Fees

Fees are payable to the Beth Din at various points in the Conversion Process.

1. Application Fee

This fee must accompany your Application Form (see above), and is currently set at \$600. This fee is non-refundable, even if the Dayanim decide it is not appropriate for you to proceed with the Learning Program. It covers:

- the two preliminary interviews,
- one session with the Dayanim,
- all the administration for the first two years.

2. Learning Program

The fee for the Learning Program is \$1,200. This fee covers:

- monitoring and assessment during the 8 study modules by the Rabbinic Administrator for Geirut;
- Regular check-in sessions with the Dayanim at the Beth Din which will be held several times per year.

This fee becomes payable on acceptance into the Learning Program. It may be paid by instalments by agreement.

3. Completion

The Completion Fee is \$700. It is payable before the final examinations are attempted. It covers:

- up to two sessions with the Beth Din,
- examination and marking fees,
- final administrative charges, and the issue of all relevant documentation;
- mikvah fees.

4. Administration Fee

As mentioned in 1. above, the Application Fee covers all the administration for the first two years. At the beginning of every year from Year 3 onwards, a fee of \$200 is payable. This covers:

- All administration costs for that year;
- All check-in sessions with the Dayanim for that year.

No person will be permitted to attend at the mikva for immersion until all outstanding fees have been paid.

The fees above are those payable to the Beth Din. In addition, the Board of Melbourne Beth Din sets the fee payable to the teacher for each lesson. This is currently \$75 per lesson. Where both parties to a couple are not Jewish, the fee is \$100.

Questions

This Guide is intended to cover the principles which apply to the majority of Applicants. If you have questions specific to your particular situation, please ask at the Office.

Glossary

Beth Din – A panel of (usually) three highly trained and experienced rabbis who ensure that procedures required by halacha are conducted correctly. In some cases they also arbitrate disputes.

Dayan/Dayanim – A rabbi/rabbis who has achieved a higher level qualification which enables him to sit on a Beth Din.

Eid/Eidim – Witness/Witnesses. A man who is observant of Jewish law, unrelated to any of the parties involved who witnesses halachic procedures.

Halacha – Jewish law.

Shiur/Shiurim – lessons or study sessions on Jewish texts or topics. Most synagogues organise a program of shiurim throughout the week.

Shul – Synagogue

Siddur – Jewish prayer book

Talmud – 20 volume compendium of Jewish law completed around 600CE.

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