Corrective conversion: unsettling citizens and the politics of inclusion in Israel

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Gauri Viswanathan's notion of religious conversion as an 'unsettling' political event has recently figured prominently in the scholarship on conversion. However, although numerous scholars have productively applied Viswanathan's understanding in their work, primarily in the context of conversion to religious minorities within the nation-state, to focus too heavily on conversion's unsettling effects risks overlooking political constellations in which it might have rather settling effects. In contrast to the scholarly focus on conversion's disruptive qualities, this article offers an ethnographic account of the 'settling' ambitions and logics that underwrite the state politics of Jewish conversion (*giur*) in contemporary Israel. By looking ethnographically into the mundane discursive, pedagogic, and bureaucratic processes through which the Jewish state converts non-Jewish immigrants from the former Soviet Union, I demonstrate how religious conversion works to restore the bureaucratic logic of Israeli nationalism, thereby reinstating unambiguous forms of Jewish belonging. Religious conversion can also be an act of taxonomic repair.

In her seminal work *Outside the fold: conversion, modernity, and belief* (1998), Gauri Viswanathan advances an understanding of religious conversion as an 'unsettling event'. Grounding this understanding in an interrelated account of colonial subjects and religious minority groups in both the British Empire and the British nation-state, Viswanathan demonstrates how religious conversion disturbs demographic ideals of the nation, desecrates bureaucratic categories, and precipitates deep political rifts within the national fold. To the extent that this framing of religious conversion as an 'unsettling event' has figured prominently in the scholarship on the subject, it is important to consider just how central the idea of disruption is to Viswanathan's own theoretical position. As she writes:

> Conversion is arguably one of the most unsettling political events in the life of a society. This is irrespective of whether conversion involves a single individual or an entire community, whether it is forced or voluntary, or whether it is the result of proselytization or inner spiritual illumination ... By undoing the concept of fixed, unalterable identities, conversion unsettles the boundaries by which selfhood, citizenship, nationhood, and community are defined, exposing these as permeable borders. The indeterminacy of conversion poses a radical threat to the trajectory of nationhood, and this is not only because it scrambles the categories of religious identification neatly kept in place by bureaucratic

logic. Conversions to a mainstream religion are as disruptive to the state as are conversions to alternative or minority religions (Viswanathan 1998: xi, 16).

Building on Viswanathan's work, the disruptive nature of religious conversion has been productively documented in various political and historical instances, primarily in the context of conversion to religious minorities within the state. In this framework, 'unsettling' has become a recurrent literary trope. This is the case, for example, in works on postcolonial, secular India, where conversion to either Islam or Christianity allegedly defies the Hindu nature of the country (Menon 2003), and 'unsettles the presumed opposition between state and civil society' (Fernandes 2011: 112). Because conversion is 'challenging and unsettling', it also 'upsets perceived balances between religious or ideological communities' (Coleman 2008: 247, 253). Likewise, conversion is depicted as an 'unsettling event' in the new Europe, where converts to Islam in Germany and Denmark, and to Christianity in Turkey, have been growingly perceived as polluting, ambiguous, and dangerous in nature. Conversion, in these contexts, has come to be understood as a 'transformation into otherness' (Gudrun-Jensen 2008: 392), or 'a new security threat' (Özyürek 2009), and has bred nationalist anxieties, discourses, and interventions. In post-Soviet spaces, the 'unsettling effects of conversion at both individual and collective levels' (Pelkmans 2009: 1) are occasioned, for example, by Christian missionary activities that trouble the assumed overlap between ethnic and religious identity (Pelkmans 2007).

The idea of conversion as an 'unsettling' event is well exemplified in each of the aforementioned studies. However, the centrality of disruption in Viswanathan's theorization of conversion and the proliferation of that idea in recent scholarship risk eliding political constellations in which conversion operates differently. If, as these studies argue, conversion to minority religions 'unsettles' the political dynamics of the modern state, does it hold that conversion *into* the religio-national fold might, contrary to Viswanathan's argument, 'settle' these dynamics? In other words, if conversion to otherness creates pockets of estrangement and suspicion within the nation, what do we make of conversion to sameness, and of the politics of belonging implicit therein? These questions invite us to turn our attention to those contexts in which conversion is part of a national politics of inclusion. In so doing, such questions complicate the framework of conversion as an 'unsettling' event, thus helping to make visible alternative politics of conversion in the nation-state.

Based on an ethnographic study of state-run Jewish conversion (*giur*) in contemporary Israel – a case study that represents 'conversion to sameness' – I will point instead to the 'settling' ambitions and logics that underwrite the state politics of religious conversion. In this case study, conversion is not the *cause* of demographic instabilities, scrambled categories, national anxieties, and other ills that feature prominently in the literature; it is the institutional state *response* to such unsettling developments. Conversion can also be an act of repair.

At the centre of the 'unsettling reality' with which the state institutions of Jewish conversion in Israel are so preoccupied, one can find immigrants (*olim*; literally 'ascendants') from the former Soviet Union (FSU) who are not deemed Jewish according to Jewish law (*halacha*) and are colloquially identified as non-Jewish *olim* (NJO). Of course, the Israeli state institutes of conversion serve a broad array of immigrant groups: Ethiopian Jews, non-Jewish *olim* from other countries, non-citizens, and non-Jewish children adopted abroad by Jewish-Israeli families. But it is the cohort of

non-Jewish FSU *olim* in particular that has precipitated the current political and bureaucratic preoccupation of the Israeli state with conversion.[1]

In what follows, I argue that by occupying ambiguous and hence unsettling spaces of national belonging within the Jewish fold, NJO from the FSU interrupt the bureaucratic logic (Handelman 2004), that is, the taxonomic order, of Israeli nationalism and Jewish identity. Against this backdrop, as I will show, the state-run Jewish conversion project – the extensive institutional field that emerged during the 1990s as a response to the unprecedented population of NJO from the FSU in Israeli society – can be understood as a settling endeavour precisely because it contests the ambiguity that these unclassifiable citizens present to the terms of national belonging. Insofar as FSU NJO have been discursively constructed in political and public spheres as 'a national problem' (Kravel-Tovi 2012*a*), one can say that the state-run conversion project, concomitantly framed as a 'national mission', is imbued with a bureaucratic desire to address this problem.

Undeniably, the idea that Jewish conversion reverberates with meanings that are 'settling' in nature must sound counterintuitive to anyone familiar with the politics of the field in Israel. After all, conversion is commonly understood as one of the most highly charged issues in Jewish-Israeli society. Constantly on the verge of political crisis, disputes about conversion (i.e. who is a Jew, who is a 'proper' convert, who is authorized to conduct conversions, etc.) have both constituted and reflected some of the most divisive intra-communal political disagreements in contemporary Jewish life. In particular, the monopolization of Orthodox Judaism over the state's conversion policy has always sparked intense, public disagreements between different Jewish groups: between diasporic liberal Jewish denominations, which have, overall, been marginalized in Israel, and the Orthodox rabbinical establishment, which enjoys an almost hegemonic status; between ultra-Orthodox authorities, who dictate stringent interpretations of conversion as a religious process that revolves around the full acceptance of a religious way of life, and religious-Zionist circles, who subject the halachic issue of conversion to what they see as a Zionist calling; and between political parties associated with immigrant populations, who seek to ease the conversion process required of *olim*, and ultra-Orthodox parties, who object to any religious compromise (Cohen & Susser 2000; Ellenson & Gordis 2012). A few recent examples will suffice to illustrate just how unsettling the politics of conversion can be in contemporary Israel. In a well-publicized dispute, popularly known as the 'Druckman affair' (2008), ultra-Orthodox rabbis from the (state-sponsored) Regional Rabbinical Court invalidated conversions conducted and certified by the (also state-sponsored) Special Rabbinical Courts for conversion; during the 'military conversions affair' in 2010, ultra-Orthodox authorities delegitimized conversions conducted in the army; and in the infamous 2013 elections commercial of the ultra-Orthodox Mizrahi-Sephardi party of Shas, the state-run conversion project was ridiculed and presented as a process through which deceptive and insincere converts could be quickly authorized by the state.

However, the very dominance of these ongoing, overt, and well-documented political sensibilities might cause us to overlook the formative, if more covert, settling logics that have become instrumental to the understanding of Jewish conversion in contemporary Israel. In particular, though often politically unsettling, conversion is ultimately intended to rehabilitate the bureaucratic logic of the state. In this sense, the work of converting NJO is thus often understood as a 'national mission' – one intended to bring

unsettling immigrant identities within the national fold and, in the process, rectify, if not redeem, established state taxonomies of Jewish belonging.

Non-Jewish *olim*

Over the past two decades, a substantial and growing number of NJO have arrived in Israel under the Law of Return. While the phenomenon of NJO is not new or intrinsically linked to FSU immigrants, it is within the context of this particular mass wave of immigration that the NJO category acquired an unprecedented politicized significance. Estimations of the number of FSU NJO tend to hover around the figure of 300,000 (among the roughly one million *olim* from the FSU; Cohen & Susser 2009; Fisher in press). Since the late 1990s, more than half of those who immigrate to Israel each year from the FSU under this law are in fact NJO. This figure has shaped predictions by the Israeli Central Bureau of Statistics that, in 2035, this cohort will come to comprise about half a million Israeli citizens (Fisher in press). These figures have intensified the already heated public political debates about the 1970 amendment to the Law of Return, an amendment that, as it is often fervently argued, betrays the original intention of the Israeli repatriation law and creates paradoxical demographic and social consequences for the Jewish state.

At the time of its original enactment, the Law of Return (1950) was understood as a Jewish repatriation law. In 1970, to facilitate a legislative resolution to a political crisis over the question of 'who is a Jew', the law was amended in a way that allowed the immigration not only of those deemed Jewish according to Jewish law but also of those with Jewish ancestry and the spouses of Jews. Owing to this amendment, as well as to the high rates of intermarriage among Soviet Jewry, the NJO cohort is composed of *olim* and offspring of *olim* who bear a range of family ties with people recognized by the Orthodox-governed rabbinical establishment as Jews. This group includes people born to non-Jewish mothers and Jewish fathers, a family constellation that violates the matrilineal principle of Jewish law,[2] as well as people with more remote genealogical ties to Jews, ranging from grandchildren and spouses of Jews to spouses of grandchildren of Jews. Further illustrative of the heterogeneity of this cohort is its diversified sociological profile. It includes, for example, people who have been raised and have identified as Jews, but also people who explicitly identify themselves as Christians (Raijman & Pinsky 2011); people who identify with Jewish-Israeli nationality (usually on the ring wing of the spectrum), but also people who are disconnected from Jewishness or even express anti-Semitic attitudes.

Across these important internal lines of distinction, the FSU NJO group as a whole is situated betwixt and between dual Israeli legal systems, positioned as both insiders within, and outsiders of, the Jewish-Israeli fold. On the one hand, they are fully eligible for immediate citizenship and financial support upon their arrival (rights granted solely to those who fall under the privileged category of *olim*). Like most Israeli-Jews, they are also conscripted into mandatory army service. On the other hand, these *olim* are deprived of basic civil rights as they are neither registered as Jews in the census nor entitled to state-monopolized religious services (e.g. Jewish marriage and burial). Hence, both symbolically and bureaucratically, these immigrants frustrate the social grid (Cohen & Susser 2009) that 'makes up people' (Hacking 2006) in Israel. In the ethno-national Jewish state that is Israel, these subjects are embraced as citizens by virtue of Jewish kinship but are not recognized as Jews religiously. The awkward space

that these subjects occupy between citizenship and Jewishness, insiderness and outsiderness, is the point of departure of this article.

Incomplete insiders and invisible outsiders

From the outset, the routes that NJO take into Jewish-Israeli society galvanize two incongruent but equally sacred gateways to belonging – the Law of Return and Jewish law. The simultaneous activation of these gateways splits the otherwise inseparably joined construct of Jewish identity in Israel – a construct grounded in the intertwined components of national and (Orthodox-informed) religious identification. In so doing, it has situated NJO within a puzzling space underwritten by what I call here 'incomplete inclusion', or 'incomplete insiderness'.

It is hard to overemphasize the idiosyncratic, privileged mode of inclusion that the Law of Return secures. This is particularly clear when it is compared to the other, significantly marginalized and weaker legislative arrangements that govern immigration to Israel (e.g. the Citizenship and Entry to Israel Law). The Law of Return is the only mode of belonging in Israel that is based on a sacred sense of entitlement and a mythic narrative of redemption. As the most emblematic Zionist law, the Law of Return captures the unending state project of 'ascendance' and positions the entirety of world-wide Jewry as a potential citizenry (Zreik 2008). It sanctifies ethno-national Jewish scripts of return while drawing on an inclusive rhetoric of ancestry. The 1970 amendment to the law, that is, the extension of eligibility to the third generation from a Jewish ancestor, does not rewrite these scripts but instead functions to considerably stretch their ethno-national applicability.[3] In fact, by using the same genealogical measure employed by the Nazis in the Nuremberg Laws (i.e. the ancestral link of any person to a Jewish grandparent), only this time for the purpose of redemptive ethno-national inclusion, this amendment is itself grounded in symbolic Jewish meanings.

The fact that FSU *olim* – regardless of their status in the eyes of Jewish law – have come to Israel after years in the communist-atheist regime, an environment sometimes described in public discourses as 'the anti-Jewish wilderness' where Jews became what is dramatically referred to as 'modern Marranos' (Lavie in press), only intensifies the emotional and moral inclusivity associated with the idea of return to the Jewish fold. To the extent that anti-Semitism and the Soviet political terror were blind to halachic distinctions, so is the Law of Return (and, as some argue, it should remain so), rendering them both contingent and haphazard. 'It is only arbitrary that I am Jewish, whereas the immigrant I met this morning in my office is not', admitted one interviewee, a senior official in the conversion apparatus. 'Both my grandfather and hers were forced to distance themselves from Judaism. But, by chance my grandfather married a Jewish woman, and hers did not. I could easily be in her place'. This kind of understanding is also reflected in the words of another official, who told me in an interview: 'The main thing for me is that we are dealing here with people who already made *aliyah* [i.e. emigrated] to Israel ... they were beaten because they are Jews, they were raised thinking of themselves as Jewish. We, the State of Israel, must now help them to return to us'. That Rabbi Haim Druckman, the then head of the Conversion Administration, declared during a 2006 conference on conversion that FSU *olim* are 'our brothers and sisters' – thus employing highly loaded ancestral idioms of inclusion (Herzfeld 1992) – further attests to the Zionist embrace of all NJO as 'insiders'.

However, because these *olim* are not recognized religiously-halachically as Jews, are not registered as Jews in the census nor entitled to state-monopolized services (i.e. marriage and burial), their 'insiderness' is only partial. That is, in relationship to these key processes in which boundaries and categories of the Jewish nation-state are policed, these NJO are positioned outside of the fold.[4] The fact that the Central Bureau of Statistics, as Cohen and Susser (2009) document, has repeatedly changed the taxonomic classification of NJO in the census, and that in 2003, for example, it grouped NJO together with Jews – under the simultaneously exclusive and inclusive rubric of 'Jews and others' – attests to this classificatory paradox.

The unsettling effects of NJO are further augmented by the ways in which NJO, particularly those who are descendants of Jewish fathers, draw on non-Jewish criteria to define themselves as Jews. This definition is grounded in a Soviet logic, one that 'immigrated' with these *olim* to Israel. Coming from a regime that defined Jewish nationality as an ethnic category divorced from religious meanings, and a society that identified individuals by their fathers' family name (Kimmerling 2004), this self-identification is not surprising. The fact that some of these *olim* have already been immersed in Jewish projects before immigrating to Israel (such as Zionist summer camps and Hebrew schools), and that Jewish-Israeli agencies were involved in these projects, has only reinforced this self-identification.

In addition to these legislative inconsistencies and identificational gaps, the assimilation of NJO into and within Jewish-Israeli society is both invisible and profound, giving way, in the process, to cultural anxieties about physical illegibility and the tenuous boundaries of Jewish collectivity. Unlike other minority groups in Israeli society (from Palestinians to Ethiopian Jews and foreign workers) – whose noticeable national, religious, or racial otherness excludes them in many and interrelated ways from the Israeli mainstream – non-Jewish FSU *olim* have integrated quite smoothly. In Lustick's (1999) terms, they are deemed 'Jews' because, clearly, they are 'not-Arabs' – because the collective into which they assimilate – culturally, nationally, economically – is Jewish. Even if they are categorized as 'others' within the Israeli census, in a social sense their otherness is indiscernible: they may have a stereotypical 'Jewish look' or have a Jewish family name, and they often practise Jewish holidays.[5] They are clearly unmarked by external signs of otherness like skin colour or language that might differentiate them from other FSU *olim* as non-Jews. Instead, they blend with the various Jewish-Israeli populations (including FSU populations) and inevitably become romantically and socially involved with 'real' Jews. Indeed, 'intermarriage', usually an alarmist trope pertaining to diasporic Jewish communities, is one of the gravest anxieties that FSU immigration has sparked within Zionist and religious circles in Israel. Throughout their inevitable daily 'sociological conversion' (Cohen & Susser 2009), these immigrants embody an illegible otherness that evades the clear categories of social difference in Israeli society. Since 2002, when the nationality clause on Israeli ID cards was nullified, the non-Jewishness of these immigrants has become even less immediately exposed. Their indistinctive, invisible outsiderness complicates the everyday social engagement of Israeli Jews with the question of 'who is a Jew'. As one of the conversion teachers explained to me, in a tone that conveyed both annoyance and embarrassment:

> It's not written on their forehead, so how can one tell if someone is a Jew? Sometimes you hear a family name that sounds very Russian, very non-Jewish – but the person turns out to be Jewish; or, take 'Schwartz' – it sounds Jewish – but no. You think you know but you can't know.[6]

During my fieldwork, I became highly aware of the importance of such illegibilities as I increasingly found myself wondering whether the 'Russian' student in my anthropology class at the university or the 'Russian' cashier who smiled at me at the local supermarket was deemed Jewish or not. In the process, I recognized that – against my ideological and political inclinations – I had begun to embody the anxiety surrounding non-Jewish invisibility. By virtue of my ongoing ethnographic participation in the bureaucratic, Orthodox-governed field of conversion, as well as by being a Jewish citizen of the Jewish nation-state, I began to embody the bureaucratic logic of the state and of Jewish law.

The anxious, somewhat alarmist awareness of the NJO population's incomplete insiderness and invisible outsiderness is well manifested in their colloquial and political discursive construction as a taxonomic 'national problem'. This discursive construction does not erase the inclusive national rhetoric of 'return' that is so often associated with FSU immigration. Rather, it complicates the terms of belonging that help define and position these *olim* within Israeli society. Asher Cohen, a state-scientist (well known for his pro-state conversion positions) describes them as 'non-Jewish Jews'.[7] Already embraced to some extent by conversion agents, this oxymoronic term references an impossible identity, as if an inherent and durable liminality creates and sustains an illegible Jew. Other terms commonly employed by conversion agents to describe NJO – for example, the halachic term 'from the seed of Israel' (*Mizera Yisrael*), and the administrative category 'those who are entitled to the Law of Return' (*Zakaei hok Hasvut*) – imply a compromised belonging. In both examples, this form of belonging is rooted in a privileged Jewish ancestry. However, the paradoxical status of NJO positions these new citizens and their offspring as not quite fully within the imagined Jewish collective.

Bureaucratic logic

In order to unpack how the unsettling, incomplete insiderness and invisible outsiderness of NJO have triggered the institutionalization of *giur* as a national – and settling – mission, I draw on Don Handelman's notion of bureaucratic logic. In so doing, I also suggest that Handelman's notion offers us a productive theoretical lens with which to further understand the embeddedness of religious conversion in the politics of the state.

According to Handelman, bureaucratic logic – 'the logic of the forming of form' (2004: 19) – is a fundamental attribute of the modern state. In fact, the trait is so fundamental (to the national operation of the Israeli state in particular and to that of the modern state more generally) that its expression extends beyond bureaucratic settings themselves. To the extent that it proliferates in numerous institutional, public, and everyday spheres in which the state creates, ritualizes, and performs itself, this logic totalizes and exhausts the cosmology of the state. Bureaucratic logic is thus not just the logic of bureaucratic institutions, but also the logic of the nation-state. It shapes nationalism from within by socializing people into their national citizenship and exposing them to the classificatory schemes that lie beneath it. Structured by two intersecting axes, vertical (classificatory) and horizontal (hierarchical), bureaucratic logic generates systems of classification which thicken boundaries and reinforce order over ambiguity by imposing a stratified and monothetic world of distinctions.

Intimately related to how Handelman theorizes the investment of the state in taxonomically ordering society, both Zygmunt Bauman's (1991) and Michael Herzfeld's

(1992) writing on the modern state and bureaucracy, respectively, contribute to our understanding of how states fight for symbolic order. Growing out of the painful recognition that the divine order has failed, and that the human order is always contingent and vulnerable, the society that can be called 'modern', argues Bauman, has become preoccupied with the invention and maintenance of unambiguous classifications. In this vein, the 'other', the 'stranger' – the one who blurs the boundaries that create these classifications – is the real 'enemy' of the modern nation-state. Herzfeld's anthropological account of the 'Western' bureaucratic management of identities reverberates with these insights by underscoring how national bureaucracies rely on the premises and promises of classification, ratifying in their ordinary practices a ritualized consecration of state categories. Against the messiness of social life, and in resistance to the misplaced, the equivocal, and the polluted (Douglas 1966; 1986), bureaucracy claims pure categorical order.

By framing my discussion in terms of bureaucratic logic, I aim to shed light on how the state's insistence on order is played out as an organizing principle in the conversion process of FSU NJO. To the extent that bureaucratic logic is constitutive of how classificatory schemes help form the social order of the nation, it is no wonder that unclassifiable NJO pose a critical threat to this order. In this regard, theirs is not only a demographic, numerical, or quantitative threat (for this aspect, see Kravel-Tovi 2012*a*), but also a symbolic, taxonomic, and qualitative one. In the case of conversion, the bureaucratic logic of the modern nation-state intersects with the bureaucratic logic of Jewish law – especially its Orthodox manifestations, which are officially endorsed by Israel's religious bureaucracy. Hence, a doubly reinforced boundary – originating in the monothetic classification of both the Jewish nation-state and Jewish religion – underwrites the organization of conversion as an act of symbolic taxonomic repair. Furthermore, Handelman's notion of bureaucratic logic enables us to trace not only how and why non-Jewish FSU *olim* – as a distinctive cohort – have come to uniquely disrupt state order. Relatedly, it allows us to account for the increased array of interventions that the state has directed at this cohort in an effort to homogenize Israel as a Jewish state.

Anthropological scholarship focusing on the nexus between conversion and the state, particularly within its national and colonial instantiations, has long challenged the Jamesian model of conversion as religious epiphany (James 1997 [1902]) – a bounded moment of divine grace. Instead, this literature has suggestively demonstrated that the religious subjectivity of the convert should be located and understood within a complex matrix of cultural, national, and semiotic forces (Buckser & Glazier 2003; Engelke 2007; Keane 2007; Robbins 2004; Van der Veer 1996). Webb Keane (2002) shows, for example, how in Sumba, Indonesia, Protestant efforts to define the human subject as modern are both embedded in state religious policies and inscribed on state documents. Relatedly, Patricia Spyer (1996) demonstrates how religious conversion in Aru, Indonesia, is intimately associated with and represented by practices of citizenship and statistical forms of knowledge. An engagement with such issues can also be identified in contemporary ethnographic work on Jewish conversion in Israel. Acknowledging the inseparableness of religious and national aspects of Jewish life and identities in Israel, this ethnographic literature exemplifies the entanglement of Israeli national culture, Orthodox religion, and the workings of the state. Don Seeman (2009) describes, for example, how the Jewish conversion of Ethiopian Jews (framed as 'return') becomes a site of tenuous negotiation within the Israeli state and society over

questions of race, religiosity, and national belonging; others have documented the governmental and pedagogical mechanisms exercised by the state in the course of the conversion process of NJO from the FSU (Goodman 2008; Neiterman & Rapoport 2009). By focusing on bureaucratic logic, this article advances the understanding of religious conversion as a constitutive mechanism of state nationalism. The notion of bureaucratic logic foregrounds in a concise manner the isomorphic relationships of religion and ethno-nationalism that often organize religious conversion in the nation-state.

Whereas Handelman's account of bureaucratic logic is largely focused on macro-level, cosmological understandings of public events (such as commemorative national events), in my own use of Handelman's conceptual work, I take more of an interactive and micro-level approach. The ethnographic account of Jewish conversion that I provide here unpacks bureaucratic logic as it is taken up within the mundane institutionalized encounters between FSU NJO and the state agents who oversee Israel's 'national mission'. By focusing on these encounters, I pay close attention to how that logic is given shape and meaning, enacted and negotiated, collapsed, fought over, and then resolidified in the lived experiences produced throughout the conversion process. In particular, this article is grounded in three years of ethnographic fieldwork (2004-7), during which I conducted participant observation in different pedagogic and bureaucratic arenas which constitute the key centres of the state Jewish conversion process: conversion schools (where converts study Jewish life and religious law under Orthodox teachers), the rabbinical court (where conversion petitions are evaluated and authorized by rabbinical judges), and ritual baths (where immersion, again in front of rabbinical judges, completes the convert's transition into the Jewish fold). Of particular importance for me in this article are the ethnographic materials I gathered during a ten-month (September 2005-July 2006) period of field research in a conversion programme of the Institute of Jewish Studies (an institute targeted exclusively at NJO [mostly FSU] citizens), as well as during fieldwork conducted in the rabbinical conversion court. I further ground my analysis in interviews I conducted with conversion agents (i.e. senior officials, teachers, and rabbinical judges) and converts, as well as on various textual materials that reflect the public and institutional discourses on conversion.

Unsettling subjects in the conversion classroom
Israelis in the conversion class, September 2005

It's fifteen minutes before class, and the place looks empty. I re-check the piece of paper with the address I wrote down earlier; yep, this is the place. Hesitantly, I take a seat on the staircase that leads to what appears to be a long, windowless corridor. Finally, to my relief, I hear footsteps. A polite nod from a young woman talking on a cell phone, friendly eye contact from another female student. A young guy, the only male among us, asks us if we are sure about the location; I ask the others if we might have gotten the time wrong, and another woman, a bit older, who has just joined us, worries whether the session will be held at all considering how few of us have arrived. The young woman, now off her cell phone, replies self-assuredly: 'Yes. Yesterday was exactly the same. I was here for the meeting with the senior administrator of the conversion programme and most people only came right as it started, or even showed up late'. Smilingly, she added: 'You know how it is with Israelis'.[8]

And she was right – not only because ten minutes later we were indeed sitting in class with fifteen other students, listening to the teacher welcoming us to 'class number 254 of the Institute of Jewish Studies'; but also because these students were indeed 'Israelis'. Even if the conversion students were understood in class as *olim* or offspring of *olim*, as those who entered class with a family biography of immigration and hence an origin of outsiderness to Israeli society, they still participated in class as insiders to Jewish-Israeli society – politically, culturally, and socially.

The politics of inclusion that unfolded between these 'Israeli' converts and their teachers were directly related to the complexity entailed in their unique social position – as 'Israelis' who are not yet Jewish according to Jewish law. The incomplete insiderness and the invisible outsiderness that these students embodied foregrounded an unsettling classroom dynamic between them and their two teachers – one marked by confusion, awkwardness, and embarrassment on both sides. Certainly, the fact that both teachers were Orthodox Jews who supported, and worked for, the isomorphism of Orthodox Judaism and Jewish ethno-nationality also played a central role within such dynamics. Metonymically illustrating the larger taxonomic 'national problem' that catalysed the establishment of the 'national mission' in the first place, the unsettling dynamics served to imbue the pedagogical space with a tangible sense of national purpose. As if serving as an ongoing reminder of what the battle against ambivalence is all about, the uncomfortable social dynamic that at times emerged in the conversion class came to highlight the nature of conversion as an act of repair. Although, in class, teachers hardly mentioned the 'national problem' (indeed, the very ideological framework that mobilized them, as religious Zionists, to work for the 'national mission' of conversion), and were careful not to refer to their students as those who embody or trigger such grave national concerns (i.e. as 'polluting' or 'contaminating' citizens), the taxonomic problem became highly present and even inescapable in certain classroom circumstances.

To be sure, such an unsettling dynamic was not new to many converts in class. As some of them expressed during interviews, their ongoing, everyday integration into Jewish-Israeli society involved equally unsettling experiences. In fact, these experiences played a role in leading them to the conversion class. Some were frustrated with the apologetic, confusing, and uneasy romantic encounters they had with Israeli-Jews, even secular ones; others were exhausted by the ensuing need to downplay or hide their (*halachik*) non-Jewish status in a variety of social circles; and some were confused by how their friends (both native Israelis and *olim*) accepted them for who they were while, within the larger institutional domains that mediated their lives in Israel, they felt discriminated against (e.g. in state offices, in workplaces, and even in the Israeli Defence Forces). What conversion offered them was the promise of corrective inclusion.

The fact that these citizens pursue corrective inclusion through conversion should not be taken for granted. Indeed, surveys show that only a minority (7 per cent) of the population of non-Jewish FSU *olim* undergoes state-run conversion – a number that might be explained, at least partially, by how their 'sociological conversion', that is, their mundane assimilation into Jewish-Israeli society, provides NJO with a relatively satisfactory form of belonging.[9] Older *olim* above the age of fertility, for example, are not as dependent upon conversion as younger NJO might be; non-Jewish women who are spouses of Jewish husbands, to take another example, prefer to integrate into Israeli society by adopting gendered roles associated with 'good' Israeli citizenship (e.g. through experiences connected to the military service of their children and

grandchildren or via local culinary customs and specific holiday foods; see Prashizky & Remennick 2012). It is usually the young, female citizen, a child of a Jewish father, who seeks conversion in order to integrate fully within Jewish-Israeli society and ratify her already-established self-identification as a Jew.[10] The composition of the conversion class in which I conducted fieldwork largely resonated with this sociological profile.

Within the classroom, the categorical representation of the converts as 'insiders' was strongly reinforced. To begin with, most students were daughters of ethnically mixed families; habitually they referred to themselves as 'half-Jews'. A few others were grand-daughters of Jews, or spouses of Jews. To the best of my knowledge, not a single student had, or at least revealed having, any previous non-Jewish religious affiliation. Many of the students immigrated to Israel in their early childhood (largely from the FSU but also from other places as well), and had since actualized major (typically middle-class, both secular and traditional) Jewish-Israeli cultural scripts: public education, army service, the 'big' after-service backpacking trip abroad, and higher education. The class sessions were held in Hebrew, and the students, usually in their mid-to-late twenties, spoke fluent, youthful, and colloquial Israeli Hebrew (sometimes with a slight trace of an accent). They were also competent readers. A number of converts had Israeli names, further designating the classroom space as a Jewish-Israeli one. Only during breaks could one occasionally hear Russian. Possibly spoken to indulge themselves in the intimate space created by their native language, or perhaps to foster a safe space immune from both the pedagogic and ethnographic gazes directed on them, students sometimes switched during break to (what was, self-critically, described to me as) their 'broken Russian' – 'the Russian that we hardly use'.[11]

Whereas the formal course syllabus focused on *halacha*, traditional customs and Jewish history, within the classroom itself, a good deal of class time was dedicated to more spontaneous and experience-based discussions concerning Israeli society and politics. Within these ongoing conversations, converts interacted with their religious teachers from the standpoint of secular Israeli Jews, a dynamic that exemplified popular Israeli scripts of secular-religious dialogue. The conversation engaged both sides as opinionated and recognizably positioned interlocutors who knew how to speak from within Israeli identity politics (utilizing such common categories as 'settlers', 'Russians', or even '*frechot*' and '*arsim*' [terms for stereotypically lower-class, Mizrahi Israeli youth and young adults]). Topics were debated fervently and passionately among speakers who were deeply invested in the place they already call home. When converts spoke about 'Arabs', Jewish archaeological excavations, or the Israeli occupation, to mention only a few of the discussed topics, they spoke from a (rather right-wing) national Jewish position; paraphrasing Handelman (2004: 42), one could say that converts were clearly 'national in [their] citizenship'. When they spoke about traditional Jewish experiences (i.e. holidays), they brought their early memories of Jewish taste, rhythm, and melody to class.[12]

In conjunction with these inclusive dynamics, the awareness that the conversion students were none the less non-Jewish according to Jewish law continually emerged in class. It was during these moments that the incomplete insiderness and the invisible outsiderness of the students were clearly, and uncomfortably, on display.

A Shabbat goy in the conversion class, October 2005
It is a few weeks into the conversion programme. Late in the afternoon, in between the Jewish New Year (Rosh Hashanah) and the Jewish Day of Repentance (Yom Kippur),

the discussion in the conversion class jumps quickly between topics. Rabbi Shlomo,[13] the teacher, hopes to hear from students about their recent holiday experiences; the converts, on the other hand, are eager to learn what is practically expected of them during the upcoming holiday. Finally, Rabbi Shlomo gives up, and attends instead to the volley of questions about the Jewish Day of Repentance. Olga raises her hand: 'Can we use the elevator on Yom Kippur?'

> *Rabbi Shlomo*: No, the same rule that applies for Shabbat applies here as well.
> *Olga*: What if I need to get to the 9th floor?
> *Rabbi Shlomo [smiling]*: What do you do every Shabbat?
> *Olga [blushing]*: Well, can I at least ask someone else to press the button for me?
> *Rabbi Shlomo [in a shocked voice]*: From a Jew? Absolutely not!

When class ends, I offer Rabbi Shlomo a ride home. In the car, he expresses the discomfort he felt about his talk with Olga:

> I was so embarrassed when Olga asked whether she can have someone push the elevator button for her. Seriously, what was I supposed to tell her? That she herself is a non-Jew and so she can be a Shabbat *goy* for someone else who needs to use the elevator?[14] It was so awkward and confusing for me. You know, when I look at the students, I can't tell from their faces that they're gentiles – they seem like nice Jewish Israelis, like you, for example. What can I tell you? This whole issue is so odd.

A Jewish mourner in the conversion class, January 2006

Three months later, I join the students and Rabbi Shlomo in Arad (a southern town) for Shabbat. On Shabbat during the early afternoon, just before the service, I see Rama and Rabbi Shlomo rushing towards me from across the hotel lobby. They seem worried: 'I'm glad we found you', Rabbi Shlomo says. He goes on to explain that Sveta had just been notified about the sudden death of her father: 'She's devastated', Rabbi Shlomo tells me, 'would you be willing to drive her to the Rabin Medical Center?' Twenty minutes later, my family and I (as if, by virtue of being secular Jews, serving in the capacity of Shabbat *goys*) pack ourselves into the car with Sveta, heading north in heartbreaking silence. Two days later, I, together with other members of the conversion class, meet Sveta during the seven-day period of formal Jewish mourning (*Shivah*). In their modest apartment – located on the fourth floor, with no elevator – Sveta and her non-Jewish mother practise Jewish rituals of mourning, and remember Boris, a father and a spouse who was also the only halachic Jew in their family. The photos on the wall convey what remains a source of pride for Sveta: that she is her father's daughter. Unlike many other halachic rituals performed by converts during the ten-month period of the conversion programme, Sveta did not observe these rituals in order to advance her training in a religious, halachically informed Jewish way of life, as her teachers urged her to do. As someone who was raised Jewish and immigrated to Israel early in her adolescence, it was simply how she knew to mourn. And unlike those situations in which she and her classmates clarified their halachic obligations and permissions – as non-Jews – to conduct Jewish practices during the conversion process, on this occasion nobody questioned whether Sveta was indeed 'allowed' or 'obliged' to mourn her Jewish father according to Jewish law. But later that evening, once again in the car with Rabbi Sholmo, he repeated roughly what he had told me three months earlier: 'What can I tell you? This whole issue is so odd'.

The odd experiences described here epitomize in the most concrete way what, in an abstract fashion, we might describe as the collapse of Israel's Jewish bureaucratic logic. These encounters involve an Orthodox teacher who expresses distress about the lack of clearly perceivable markers of non-Jewishness on his students' faces. This is a teacher who, paradoxically enough, often seems taken by surprise when he confronts the non-Jewish identity of his 'Israeli' conversion students, but, at the same time, thinks of them more as Shabbat *goyim* than as non-observant Jews. These encounters also feature Olga, who confronts this same oddness as she learns that she cannot ask her neighbours (who are, probably, non-observant Jews) to push the elevator button (although they would not care about violating Shabbat anyway); and Sveta, who, regardless of her still uncompleted conversion process, mourns her beloved father in a Jewish manner – passing, puzzlingly, as a 'real' Jew.

Within a conversion process that is characterized by adherence to a strict Orthodox religious framework, it should come as no surprise that the bureaucratic logic of Jewish law itself – the detailed, monothetic, and hierarchical catalogue of people, obligations, and prohibitions – created moments during class in which students stood out as non-Jews. 'Am I allowed to open a bottle of wine while I am being hosted by a Jewish family on Friday night?', asked Shiri with great concern; 'Am I allowed to pass the Kiddush cup to my Jewish friend?', queried Ana aloud on another occasion. Knowledgeable in Jewish law, the Orthodox teachers, Rabbi Shlomo and Dvir, knew how to handle the questions. And yet, these very questions seemed almost to startle them. It was as if they were so misled by the ethno-national sameness of their students that they were surprised by the religious otherness that would suddenly pop up. Whereas the politicized differences that teachers and students usually enacted in class were linked to secular-religious schisms within Israeli society more generally, these kinds of questions redrew the contours of conversation, reorganizing the position of the speakers as 'Jews' and 'non-Jews'. Such was the case, for example, when during the later stages of the programme, Dvir instructed the students to rehearse a few Jewish blessings in preparation for a mid-term interview with the rabbinical court representative. While practising the morning blessings, including 'Blessed are you, O Lord our God, Ruler of the Universe, who did not make me a *goy*', Ora, one of the students, who was called to read the text, responded, 'Well ... but he did; God did make me a *goy*'. The class couldn't hold back its laughter, enjoying the comic interlude, while Dvir, the teacher, couldn't help but blush in embarrassment. A few weeks later I mentioned the incident to Dvir. Blushing once again, he sighed and confessed: 'Ugh, that was so awkward for me. The problem is that you don't think of them as gentiles. You are not even close to thinking in this way. You think of them as one of us'.

By concomitantly foregrounding the identity of NJO as both insiders in citizenship and outsiders in religion, this double-edged classroom dynamic pedagogically illustrates – and possibly radicalizes – just how unsettling the taxonomic problem can be for everyone involved in this encounter. In so doing, it also foreshadows an institutional context in which these converts would soon find themselves: the state-run rabbinical court, where the state aims to rehabilitate bureaucratic logic by producing and certifying legible and bounded Jewish identities.

Settling narratives of conversion in the rabbinical court

Insofar as the ambiguous forms of belonging of FSU converts pose a distinct challenge for how they interact with their Orthodox teachers in the conversion classroom, they

also uniquely affect how converts interact with court bureaucrats. Above all, these forms of belonging frame the performance of the convert's conversion narratives in the rabbinical court according to a particular autobiographical model. Paying attention to the ways in which conversion is narrated allows us better to understand the institutional mechanisms that shape the national mission as a political endeavour of corrective conversion.

While many of the converts whom I met during my fieldwork (not all of whom were of an FSU background) were preoccupied with how to formulate and perform a 'proper' conversion story for court bureaucrats (Kravel-Tovi 2012b), the sensibilities that emerged for the cohort of NJO FSU converts were somewhat unique. Because they were already 'insiders' to Jewish-Israeli society in substantial ways, it was often unclear to them how to describe their conversion *into* the Jewish fold. Equally, because FSU converts, like other Jewish Israelis, were exposed to discursive and cultural scripts of religious transformation available to non-observant Jews (colloquially known as '*Hazara Bitshuva*' [repentance]), they were unsure whether they were expected to embrace such scripts. The confusion between conversion and repentance reveals that, once again, internal and external boundaries were hazy.

What these FSU NJO learned as they were socialized into their roles as converts was that, in the encounters with rabbinical court representatives, they were expected to perform their adherence not only to a halachic way of life, but also to a certain biographical model of conversion – one that was distinctively rooted in their ambiguous position as incomplete, misplaced citizens of the Jewish nation. In general, they were expected to both articulate and embody a teleological conversion narrative in which they journey – with the help of the state – from categorical incongruity and the experience of a lack of belonging to categorical clarity and a sense of wholeness as 'proper' Jews in their homeland. In other words, they were expected, and given the opportunity, to settle the bureaucratic logic of the state by performing a biographical conversion narrative that departs from an acknowledged 'problem' and ascends towards repair. Tellingly, this narrative script did not inform or frame the biographical performances of other cohorts of converts (particularly, immigrants from Ethiopia and non-citizens) whose appearance before the rabbinical court I observed during my fieldwork.

Obviously, the idea of conversion as an act of repair preserved the control of the rabbinical establishment over the gatekeeping process; it allowed that establishment to maintain the political authority to resist the powerful sociological conversion that FSU converts experience, and to insist on defining and defending the gates of inclusion based on their interpretation of Jewish law. More importantly, however, as a means of repair, conversion allows the Orthodox gatekeepers of the nation-state to rehabilitate the authority of taxonomic order itself. The conversion of NJO from the FSU is thus imbued with national meanings of completion rather than with religious meanings of transformation. Religiosity in itself, within this scheme, is construed not as a motivating factor for the convert but rather as an indispensable (hopefully, in the eyes of bureaucrats, attainable and even rewarding) missing component of Jewish conversion necessary for full inclusion in the Jewish state. In this context, the national mission is inscribed daily onto the nationally framed autobiographical scripts that FSU converts, collaboratively with state-bureaucrats (Kravel-Tovi 2012b), formulate.[15]

In most of the court cases of NJO conversion that I observed, this narrative scheme was embraced with relatively minor negotiations over particular details. It was typically

evidenced in the personal, biographical letters that converts were asked to submit to the rabbinical court, usually when court representatives interviewed converts in the early stages of the process. The letters, which were sometimes read aloud (both in these interviews and later in the rabbinical court), often described the pains of incomplete belonging experienced by the converts: the stories of family immigration (often with tinges of Zionist ideology), the efforts to assimilate and fully embrace Israel, and the understanding that state-run Orthodox conversion is the only valid route to achieve belonging fully. In addition, the narrative of repair was exemplified in how the converts would respond to a common question raised by both court representatives and rabbinical judges: 'Why do you want to convert?' The following quotes clearly demonstrate this narrative line: as Yulia replied, 'Even though I am a citizen and I seemingly have it all, I feel somehow deficient, like I'm lacking something'; Ana: 'When I arrived in Israel, I thought I was Jewish, but then I realized it doesn't work that way. Israel is my place and without conversion I won't be whole'; Lydia: 'I didn't really understand why I wasn't Jewish. How could I be Jewish in my behaviour but not according to *halacha*? I felt like I needed to come full circle with the issue'. In response, the pleased court representative or rabbinical judge would often nod and, smiling to the convert, offer a supportive remark like 'That's what we're here for'.

But converts did not always provide the court bureaucrats with the kind of narrative material they desired. The following exchange, though rare, illustrates how the conversion procedure can break down when the convert does not adhere to the narrative framework of corrective conversion.

Rabbi Binyamin [a court representative]: Why do you want to convert?
Roni: For me, it is not really a conversion, it is more ... as far as I am concerned, I am Jewish.
Rabbi Binyamin: But you are not.
Roni: My father is Jewish. For me, conversion is more of a formal thing, to follow the rules of the rabbinate.
Rabbi Binyamin [in a protesting voice]: Of the rabbinate?
Roni [moving uncomfortably in her chair]: Of tradition.
Rabbi Binyamin [crying out]: Of tradition?
Roni: Well ... of religion.
Rabbi Binyamin: You need to understand. It comes from the Bible. It is not something made up by rabbis with short or long beards. These rules come from God.
Roni: I know it comes from God, but the rabbis continued God.
Rabbi Binyamin [seeming at this stage desperate and impatient, tries a new strategy]: So why do you want to convert if you are already a Jew?
Roni [appearing to think the matter over, delays her response]: For me, my identity is not complete until it's written on my ID card that I am a Jew.
Rabbi Binyamin [concludes teasingly]: So, basically, you're just after the registration.
Roni [also exhausted and confused]: Not only that. Judaism makes me a better person. It gives you moral rules to live by. It fits me.
Rabbi Binyamin [glancing at his cellphone and realizing how late it has become, relieves himself and Roni of their impossible conversation]: Keep working and thinking things over.

The fact that in her self-representation Roni did not acknowledge her problematic incomplete insiderness caught the attention of Rabbi Binyamin. Not only did Roni deny the authority of God, the rabbis, and tradition essentially to determine for her who she is (a claim that I usually heard only in personal and confidential conversations I had with converts), but she also breached the bureaucratic premises of conversion. Relating to the bureaucratic procedure in instrumental terms, she did not leave much

room for the elevation of bureaucratic logic as a redemptive taxonomic order. Once she realized her mistake, she turned to the seemingly safe anchor of conversion as a pathway to a religiously meaningful life, overlooking once again the narrative of national repair.

Conclusion: conversion, inclusion, correction

'Belonging', argues Nira Yuval-Davis (2006), proves to be a thick analytical concept. Richer in meaning than 'citizenship' or 'membership', it allows for a multifaceted examination of the institutional, affective, and symbolic processes that partake in situating individuals or groups in relationship to broader communities of identity – especially the modern state. By unpacking Jewish conversion in Israel in terms of national belonging, or, more precisely, of inclusion, this article allows us better to understand how the nation-state deploys religious conversion as a political tool of belonging.

In particular, the case under examination here teaches us that conversion may constitute a corrective mechanism to troubling social dynamics in which the institutional, affective, and symbolic contours of belonging have been both fractured and scrambled. To the extent that non-Jewish FSU *olim* have divorced the religious-halachic from the ethno-national aspects of the 'Jewish' category of identity in Israel, they have violated, even polluted, this category from within; reconnecting these aspects through an act of conversion rescues the state's bureaucratic logic, thereby providing the national collective with its categorical shape. Unlike the Jewish-Palestinian conflict, which continuously sparks existential insecurities and 'emergencies' (Zreik 2008) from outside the national fold, NJO create these sensibilities from within; while the former 'thickens' and 'recharges' the boundary of the collective (Gurevitch 2007: 186), lending itself easily to the solidification of bureaucratic logic (Handelman 2004), the latter introduces heightened anxieties precisely because it fractures this boundary and exposes its internal fissures.

Whereas the notion of 'the politics of belonging' is usually associated with exclusionary and xenophobic struggles with newcomers – or, as John Crowley puts it (1999: 30), the 'dirty work of boundary maintenance' – the politics of belonging that were explored here in the Jewish-Israeli conversion field are situated within a complicated dynamic of inclusion, one that brings to the fore what might be described as 'the dirty work of boundary correction'. Because the state-run Jewish conversion project in Israel targets those who have already crossed the symbolic boundaries of the nation, the 'dirty work' of their inclusion into the fold is grounded in an insistence on taxonomic order. And because non-Jewish FSU *olim* have been construed as both assimilable and desired subjects of the nation, their ambiguous, displaced forms of belonging can be resolved only by an act of inclusion. The ethnographic account upon which this analysis is based offers us a nuanced understanding of the discursive, pedagogic, and bureaucratic practices that constitute conversion and its politics of inclusion as a process of repair.

Considering religious conversion as a corrective mechanism allows us not only to demonstrate, once again, the intimate nature of the connection between the politics of the nation-state and religious conversion, but also to situate conversion in relation to the internal paradoxes of the nation-state. In particular, such a perspective has much to tell us about the ways in which the state is invested in attempts to overcome these paradoxes as well as about the extent to which such attempts might be, in the end, limited in their settling effects. In the Israeli case study, to the extent that only a

minority of the population of non-Jewish FSU *olim* actually converts, Jewish conversion in Israel fails to realize its corrective aspirations against the paradoxical ills of the Law of Return. The settling effects of conversion thus remain confined within the field of the bureaucratic process itself: confined within the state's pedagogic enactment of incomplete belonging as a problematic social fact, within the redemptive completion it offers throughout the bureaucratic process, and within its efforts to reinforce the constitutive role of the taxonomic order. Outside of this bureaucratic field, where many NJO keep immigrating to Israel from the FSU under the Law of Return, and undergo mundane processes of sociological conversion, the national fold remains uncorrected, contaminated by – but not always alerted to – the incomplete insiders and invisible outsiders that live within it. The failed attempt of the state to police society and discipline its boundaries only highlights the corrective, settling nature of religious conversion as a mechanism that operates daily to re-authorize and re-inscribe the taxonomic passions of the state.

In the introduction to this article I raised questions about the possibility that conversion *into* the religio-national fold might, contrary to Viswanathan's argument, 'settle' these dynamics. The Israeli case study under discussion here – a case of conversion into a religion of a majority group to whom the Jewish state is said to 'belong' – points to just such a process. Outside the particular case study of Jewish conversion in Israel, this article can teach us that whether religious conversion 'settles' or 'unsettles' is not in itself necessarily the outcome of religious conversion *per se*. Instead, it shows us how conversion might be better considered in relation to the socio-cultural and taxonomic matrices that shape the local meanings assigned to conversion as a rite that dis-members and reassembles the national fold.

NOTES

[1] Out of about 75,000 people who were converted by Israeli Orthodox institutions in the last two decades, only around 23,000 are FSU converts. This group is significantly outnumbered by Ethiopian converts, who constitute approximately 50 per cent of the sum total of converts in Israel. For a more detailed account of annual conversion numbers, see Fisher (in press).

[2] Interestingly, these people, who are not recognized by the Orthodox rabbinical establishment in Israel, will be conferred Jewish recognition by the Reform Jewish community in North America – a movement that in 1983 determined that the children of mixed-married couples are Jewish, regardless of whether the mother or father is Jewish.

[3] Ian Lustick (1999) argues that this amendment does not only reinforce the idea that Israel is a Jewish state but also renders it a 'non-Arab state'.

[4] In 2010 a civil union law ('*brit zugiut*') came into effect that allowed registration of couples in which neither individual is Jewish according to Jewish religious law, and the two are deemed to have 'no other religion'. This double-edged law, which both facilitates non-Orthodox alternatives for the management of basic civil rights and preserves the exclusion of those not deemed Jewish according to Jewish law, was only minimally used by NJO.

[5] The idea of a 'Jewish look' is a construction informed by non-Jewish European anti-Semitic discourses (i.e. regarding the distinct Jewish nose or feet; see Gilman 1991). In my usage of the term here, I draw on ethnographic materials, in particular on how both converts and conversion agents at times referred to bodily markers stereotypically associated with Jews.

[6] It is interesting to note that whereas in the Jewish-Israeli context such heightened anxieties over invisible identities are what the conversion project seeks to correct, in the case study of conversion in 'the new Europe',

as it is described by Özyürek (2009), such invisibilities and anxieties are in fact the result of conversion. As Özyürek writes about Germany: 'One newspaper article after another asserted that converts are very dangerous because no one can tell who they are by their name, they can easily hide in society, and they have German passports' (2009: 98). This mirror image of the emotional economy of conversion has much to tell us about the significant difference between a conversion to minority religions as opposed to a conversion into the religio-national majority – a distinction that is integral to my argument in this article.

[7] With a very different meaning assigned to it, 'non-Jewish Jews', in Gauri Viswanathan's account of religious minorities in Britain (1998: 5-6), is a category that refers to enfranchised Jews who could be Jewish in blood and appearance, but English enough in their taste, opinions, morals, and intellect. In yet another historical context, Isaac Deutscher's concept of the 'non-Jewish Jew' (1981 [1958]) has been used as a badge of identity that refers to leftist, secular, and humanist Jewish intellectuals (from Baruch Spinoza, through Sigmund Freud, to himself) who revolutionized modern thought by going beyond what was understood to be 'proper' (i.e. religiously informed) Jewish life.

[8] In colloquial Israeli Hebrew, the seemingly inclusive category of 'Israelis' is in fact an exclusive term that refers only to Israeli Jews.

[9] For a more thorough discussion of the low numbers of FSU conversions, see Fisher (in press) and Waxman (2013).

[10] Surveys show that 78 per cent of all converts are women, while 70 per cent of FSU converts are young (less than 30 years of age). Given the matrilineal principle of Jewish identity in Israel and the implications of conversion for future life processes and generations, these data are not surprising (see Fisher in press).

[11] I do not have the linguistic ability to judge whether the converts' Russian was indeed 'broken' or not. However, because Russian-speaking communities in Israel have been quite successful in establishing Russian-language institutions (from kindergartens to newspapers), I interpret the converts' remark as another indication of their inclination for self-understanding and self-presentation in terms of 'Israeliness'. This interpretation is in line with the fact that many converts in this conversion class indeed reported having mostly native Israeli friends.

[12] This internal Jewish-Israeli dynamic became even more apparent to me as I compared it to the markedly different classroom dynamic of the other conversion programme in which I conducted fieldwork: a marginalized programme that targeted non-citizens (mostly foreign spouses of Israeli Jews). The dynamic of the programme, which was held in English, took the shape of an ongoing conversation between Jewish-Israeli teachers and non-Jewish non-Israelis, who were clearly positioned as outsiders to Israeli society.

[13] All names are pseudonyms.

[14] A Shabbat *goy* is a non-Jew who performs certain types of work on Shabbat that a Jew is prohibited from performing under Jewish law. A Jew cannot explicitly ask a non-Jew to perform such work for him or implicitly encourage the non-Jew to conduct it.

[15] Outside the framework of this article, it still worth mentioning that even when FSU converts (like other cohorts of converts in Israel) finish the Orthodox conversion process and attain a 'complete' and certified Jewish identity, their belonging might still suffer from inherent shortcomings and vulnerabilities. For example, as some converts noted, some religious communities do not allow their members to marry converts.

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La correction par la conversion : dérangement et politique d'inclusion en Israël

Résumé

Les études récentes sur la conversion religieuse font la part belle à la notion d'événement politique « dérangeant » qu'y voit Gauri Viswanathan. Bien que de nombreux chercheurs aient repris à leur compte cette compréhension de la question avec des résultats féconds, notamment dans le contexte de la conversion à des religions minoritaires au sein de l'État-nation, le risque d'une focalisation trop forte sur les effets bouleversants de la conversion est de manquer les situations politiques dans lesquelles elle a plutôt un effet « stabilisant ». En lieu d'une approche par les qualités disruptives de la conversion, cet article propose un récit ethnographique des ambitions « stabilisantes » et de la logique qui sous-tend la politique d'État de conversion au judaïsme (*giur*) de nos jours en Israël. Par une analyse ethnographique des processus discursifs, pédagogiques et bureaucratiques séculiers par lesquels l'État hébreu convertit les immigrants non juifs venus de l'ex-Union Soviétique, l'auteure montre comment la conversion religieuse contribue à restaurer la logique bureaucratique du nationalisme israélien, rétablissant ainsi des formes sans ambiguïté d'appartenance au judaïsme. La conversion religieuse peut ainsi être aussi un acte de réparation taxonomique.

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