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# Bureaucratic gifts:

## Religious conversion, change, and exchange in Israel

### ABSTRACT

Viewing religious conversion through the lens of exchange rather than change calls attention to the web of interactions, practices, and discourses that constitute conversion as a relational domain. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork that straddles the institutionalized interface of state-run Jewish conversion in Israel, I show how the conversion process constitutes a reciprocal transaction by which each party to the exchange—the state and its subjects—provides the other with national recognition while also receiving and thus validating its own national identity. I trace the historical and political circumstances that have entangled the Jewish state and a significant cohort of Jewish converts within this reciprocal relationship. In doing so, I identify the biopolitical, moral, and bureaucratic frameworks that bear on this institutional transaction. [*conversion, reciprocity, exchange, biopolitics, bureaucracy, ethnography of the state, Jews, Israel*]

**M**uttering to himself and avoiding eye contact, Shlomi nervously pushed against the classroom door and shook the handle.<sup>1</sup> He must have known that we could hear him. He must have sensed that we—the 22 students and one anthropologist attending his Thursday evening *giur* (Jewish conversion) class—were completely focused on him, watching as he struggled to let us out of the classroom. After a few very long minutes, he turned to us and delivered the bad news: “I think we’re stuck in here.” The verdict stirred a flurry of conversation and phone calls, filling the room with a mixture of worry and laughter. Fiona and Yulia joked about their spouses, who they thought would appreciate a free night in front of the television; Katia jested about the possibility of observing Shabbat in the classroom together. Those among us who refused the comforts of irony focused instead on how best to disassemble the door. Finally, out of desperation, someone came up with the idea of sliding a credit card between the door and the frame. Lina was quick to respond. Handing her card to Shlomi, she offered him a deal: “Here, we can trade, I’ll give you my card and you can take care of my conversion.” To the amusement of the group, Shlomi drew his fingertips together, as if holding a stamp, and declared in a sarcastically official voice: “Mazal tov. In the name of the State of Israel, I congratulate you: You are now a Jew.” When the laughter subsided, Ina who stood next to me in the back of the room, whispered into my ear, “Don’t think they’re doing us any favors,” assuming that I knew who “they” and “we” were. “We might need a stamp, but *they* need it just as much.”

Ten minutes later we were out—unstuck. As Lina and the other students exchanged congratulations with Shlomi about the classroom escape, our good-night routine was transformed into an illuminating, if brief, performance of mutual appreciation. Later that night, I wrote in my field notes, “It was one of those moments. Being stuck, getting unstuck, working interdependently, and ritualizing an exchange of cards and stamps—these tense moments seemed immediately related to being stuck behind a ‘stubborn door’; but it’s more than that. They also spoke volumes about conversion.”

## Jewish stamps in transaction

To the extent that the “stubborn door” trapped participants inside a shared space, instigated a flow of objects (real and imagined) between them, and called for a mutually constructive endeavor, the situation encapsulates the story I tell here about the mechanisms of exchange that underwrite the relationship between the Jewish state and Jewish converts.

The notion of exchange, as numerous scholars have noted, indexes different kinds of relationships in different contexts. My use of the term in this context is meant to foreground an understanding of political relationship that is organized around circumstances, practices, and discourses of giving and receiving. This relationship is defined by non-market logics of reciprocity and, yet, is far from any idealized form of pure gift relationship. It is this sense of exchange that Ina conveyed to me in the classroom scene I just described.

At the end of a long day, inside the classroom but outside the routinized pedagogical contexts that usually organize interactions between converts and conversion agents, the participants on both sides allowed themselves a rather reflexive, open conversation about what brings and holds them together. Playfully and theatrically, they acknowledged, performed, and ritualized the relationships of give-and-take through which they are mutually bound. Shlomi, the conversion teacher who parodied the voice of authority “in the name of the State of Israel,” and Lina, who jokingly asked to be compensated for her contribution in the currency of an authorized conversion, acted out the broader terms of reciprocity that underpin their institutionalized bond. Indeed, it is the very real nature of this bond that Ina (more of a participant-observer than an actor in this performance) managed to capture in her dry, laconic response. Referencing the pragmatic qualities of this mutually constitutive process (“we might need a stamp, but they need it just as much”), she helped me realize the mutually entangled relationships that are made and remade through the “stamps of Jewishness.”

To understand the nature of this entanglement, it is critical to first situate the issue of state-run Jewish conversion within the historical and political circumstances that have enmeshed both a particular cohort of Jewish converts and the Jewish state within a reciprocal relationship of exchange. Both sides of this relationship—“we” and “they,” in Ina’s taxonomy—are, as it were, “stuck” within it.

When Ina uses the term *they*, she does not just reference Shlomi and Rabbi Haim, her two Orthodox teachers in the conversion classroom, or even the various other rabbinical figures and bureaucrats she would meet over the course of her conversion process. Rather, “they” encompasses a much broader array of institutes, agents, and officials that she identifies—rightly—under the vague and

abstract rubric of the state. In fact, she refers to Israel, a Jewish state that has done much since the late 1980s to facilitate the mass immigration of *olim* (literally, ascendants; sing. *oleh*) from the former Soviet Union (FSU) under the Law of Return.

Indeed, Ina and her parents, like most if not all of Ina’s classmates in the conversion program, arrived in Israel under the Law of Return. At the time of its original enactment in 1950, this law was understood as a repatriation law that was meant to establish, in compliance with the right of blood (*jus sanguinis*), the sacred and mythical homecoming of a persecuted minority to its ancestral soil (Weiss 2001). The law’s first clause, which states that “every Jew has the right to come to this country as an *oleh*,” substantiates the idea that all Jews inherently belong to the State of Israel. Yet the first clause leaves open the question of Jewish recognition, thereby allowing each interior minister the freedom to apply his or her own definition. In the 1950s and 1960s, this ambiguous space in the Law of Return stirred several political, legislative, and judicial upheavals related to the power to define who is a Jew. These upheavals were embedded within broader negotiations over what is known as “the secular-religious status quo,” that is, the political agreement that endorses the exclusive, hegemonic authority of the Orthodox Jewish rabbinate to handle all personal matters affecting Jews (i.e., marriage, burial, and conversion).<sup>2</sup> This arrangement would provoke, over the course of Israel’s history, numerous struggles between secular and Orthodox Israeli Jews as well as between the Orthodox rabbinate and liberal Jewish denominations (mostly the Reform and Conservative movements) that have thrived in diasporic Jewish communities but have been marginalized in Israel.

In 1970, in response to one of these upheavals, the Israeli parliament modified the Law of Return in a way that both narrowed and broadened the eligibility for immigration. On the one hand, the halachic, Orthodox-endorsed matrilineal definition of a Jew was accepted. On the other hand, the category of those entitled to immigrate to Israel under the Law of Return, and thus to be granted immediate citizenship, was expanded to include those with Jewish ancestry (e.g., offspring of patrilineal Jewish ancestors) as well as the spouses of these heterogeneously connected descendants.

Only two decades later, following the demise of the Soviet Union, Israel would experience the full implications of the amendment, namely, a large and growing cohort of FSU *olim* (colloquially known as non-Jewish *olim*) who are not Jewish according to the Orthodox rabbinic establishment of the state. In particular, out of about one million FSU immigrants that have arrived in Israel since the late 1980s, more than 300,000 are non-Jews according to Jewish law (Cohen and Susser 2009). The conversion class with which this article began is typical in reflecting the profile of this particular cohort. For example, Ina’s grandfather (who never

immigrated to Israel himself) was Jewish according to halacha, and many of her classmates in the conversion class are daughters, granddaughters, or spouses of halachically Jewish individuals.

The mass arrival of non-Jewish olim under the Law of Return—probably the most emblematic Zionist law—constitutes an ironic twist of history. Whereas the 1970 amendment accords with what Rogers Brubaker (1996) has called the logic of “nationalizing nationality,” seeking to preserve the hegemony of the Jewish (or, as Ian Lustick [1999] claims, the “non-Arab”) majority in the Zionist state, in reality it enabled the arrival of immigrants that, paradoxically, both contribute to and threaten that logic. On the one hand, non-Jewish olim from the FSU do reinforce a national, Zionist logic because they add to the non-Arab population in Israel; at the same time, they problematize the Jewishness of the state by not conforming to state standards of matrilineal kinship and by creating what, from the state-endorsed Orthodox perspective, is seen as intermarriage of Jews in Israel. Given their vast numbers, these immigrants are often construed as a “demographic bomb,” an especially provocative expression in light of the ongoing Jewish–Palestinian conflict and its reverberations in anxiety-laden discourses about the “demographic problem” in Israel. Furthermore, because non-Jewish olim challenge the hegemonic terms of national classification (i.e., they are not deemed Jewish but clearly are not Arab),<sup>3</sup> they unsettle what is a constitutive aspect of Jewishness in Israel: its bureaucratic logic (Handelman 2004). They are profoundly yet incompletely integrated into the fabric of Jewish Israeli social life; for example, they tend to celebrate Jewish and national holidays and to actualize Jewish Israeli cultural scripts (Cohen 2006) but are not permitted to marry as and with Jews under the governing Orthodox rabbinical establishment. By virtue of their partial integration, they seem to disrupt what Virginia R. Domínguez (1989) analyzed as the objectification of Jewish Israeli peoplehood.

These circumstances have fostered the conditions under which conversion would become a political domain of exchange between the state and its citizens. Under these conditions, both sides have come to be stuck with each other as partners in the precarious politics of conversion. The Israeli state, facing the unintended consequences of the 1970 amendment to the Law of Return, is now stuck with a significant and growing population of non-Jewish olim citizens. This sense of “being stuck” is well captured in the words of a senior administrator in the state conversion apparatus who, during an interview, both described and prescribed the appropriate investment of the state in the conversion of non-Jewish olim from the FSU. While employing his own terminology of *we* and *they*, a mirror image of Ina’s usage, he told me, “They are already here. That’s a fact the state cannot and maybe doesn’t want to undo. Now what? What do you do with them now? The state has decided

on conversion ... That’s what we’re here for.” Taking the state’s rationale to its logical conclusion, this administrator implies that inclusion by conversion is a way out of this condition of being stuck.

From the perspective of these olim, they have come to be stuck in a rather ambivalent social space of belonging. This is a position of which they sometimes become conscious only after their immigration to Israel, when they painfully discover that the Orthodox establishment, in the name of the Jewish state, does not confer full Jewish recognition on them. Simultaneously protected and mistreated by the Israeli legal system, these immigrants have been positioned as both insiders and outsiders. In particular, despite receiving immediate citizenship as well as state financial support (intended exclusively for those inhabiting the privileged category of olim), they are neither registered as Jews in state documentation nor entitled to state-monopolized religious services. Given the Orthodox monopoly over state conversion, the state is the only agent able to “redeem” (i.e., through conversion) non-Jewish olim from their vulnerable, ambivalent position. It is the only agent that can, so to speak, stamp them with an authorized Jewish identity.<sup>4</sup>

But the redemption is not for non-Jewish olim alone. Within these preset political conditions, the flow of inscriptions, stamps, and recognitions is not unidirectional; nor is conversion a pure gift from the state. Rather, conversion constitutes an interdependent, if still hierarchical, transaction by which each side gives the other a “Jewish stamp” while validating its own. In fact, it is only by giving that each side of this interface can also receive. Through the institutionally mediated procedure of conversion, the state grants non-Jewish olim an officially sanctioned opportunity to fully belong to both the Jewish state and its dominant population; on the other side of this bureaucratic procedure, FSU converts give the state their own belonging to it. This is largely why Israel’s stakes in the conversion of this cohort of citizens are so high. This is also why Jewish converts should not be understood within this matrix merely as clients, or worthy recipients, of state-run, bureaucratic services. Rather, as national subjects, they also give something of theirs to the nation-state. Quite literally, through their willingness to go through conversion under its auspices, these citizens give the Jewish state an opportunity to reinforce the national logics that underwrite its reality and vision. By necessity, conversion also involves an acknowledgment on behalf of the convert that the Israeli state, as the self-proclaimed institutional embodiment of the Jewish people, is the ultimate arbitrator of Jewish matters. The fact that only a relatively small number of non-Jewish olim from the FSU actually go through state conversion—despite ongoing state campaigns encouraging this population to do so—highlights how significant and not taken for granted such an acknowledgment is. Simultaneously, the

accumulation of Jewish converts benefits the state in its constant, precarious battle over Jewish demography and unity. Providing converts with the recognition they seek enables Israel to reconfirm its own recognition as a Jewish state along demographic, bureaucratic, and moral lines.

To be sure, and as theorists of exchange dating back to Marcel Mauss have long understood, the reciprocity of exchange relationships like those described here hardly implies that both parties to an exchange are equal. As I demonstrate throughout the article and discuss in my conclusion, the mutual benefits that both sides gain from conversion does not erase or mitigate the hierarchical constellation within which this political relationship is given its shape. However, to the extent that the Jewishness of the state—and not only that of its subjects—is an ongoing and continuing project, the exchange of stamps is critical for the Jewish identity of both sides of this transaction.

I take as my point of departure here the extensive literature on conversion that understands it essentially as a process of change. Taking a different tack, I suggest that we understand conversion under the framework of exchange. Exchange, I argue, emphasizes the relational aspect of conversion and the political nature of this relational field; it thus offers a more productive analytical lens for the understanding of religious conversion under the purview of the state.

### **Religious conversion, change, and exchange**

Across the range of analytical and disciplinary engagements with the topic of religious conversion, the idea of change remains central. From the dramatic language of “transformations,” “departures,” and “ruptures” to the softer frameworks of “reorganization” and “passages,” some conception of change underlies the variety of ways scholars write about conversion. In fact, if the “notoriously slippery concept” (Chua 2012:511) of religious conversion is sustainable at all, it is only because of its dependence on an increasingly thin notion of change assumed to organize conversion’s varied manifestations. To the extent that conversion has become an overly loose, elusive, and otherwise misleading category (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991:249–258), one evoked in relation to phenomena ranging from religious awakenings to boundary crossings between religious affiliations and experiences of repentance (Taylor 1999), it can be said to hide more than it reveals. It is not surprising, then, that the field of conversion studies has been so engaged with—indeed, at times almost haunted by—the attempt to define itself by assessing the scope, nature, or quality of changes that warrant the title of “conversion” (e.g., Rambo 1995; Travisano 1970). In many ways, the notion of change has set the terms and clusters of questions around which the scholarly discussions on conversion have evolved: Is it a “paradigmatic change” (Jones 1996), a “change of heart” (Heirich 1977), a “change of identity” (Hefner 1993), or a

“transformation in the personal relationship with the supernatural” (Lohman 2003)? Is it an internal, total, and radical change—an epiphany—as suggested by William James (1997) in his classic work on the topic? Or is it a more gradual, partial process, one fostered by social dynamics, predispositions, and contexts, as suggested by many sociologists and social psychologists who have sought to complicate James’s seminal model (e.g., Barker 1984; Lofland and Stark 1965; Rambo 2003; Snow and Machalek 1984)? Are people “really” changing or only partially and superficially doing so?

Interestingly, even historians and anthropologists—scholars who joined the conversation on conversion relatively late and introduced the most substantial and sophisticated critique of the Jamesian model—rely on the notion of change in their work. In other words, even when scholars have distanced themselves from a model that revolves around a bounded, epiphanic moment of divine grace and, instead, demonstrated how the divine, the political, the cultural, the historical, the moral, the semiotic, and the human are all intricately implicated in the construction of conversion, they still engage with the notion of change. In fact, the subfield that has come to be recognized as the anthropology of Christianity is largely defined by its intense debates over the nature of the change that is entailed in conversion.

When I first began fieldwork, I was intrigued by the scripts of change that inform contemporary conversion in Israel. These questions resonated with what I read and encountered in the field. I found change (whether of self, affiliation, family commitments, or ways of life) to be a discursive trope in doctrines and narratives of conversion in various Jewish contexts. More importantly, within the conversion schools and conversion courts I attended as a participant-observer, teachers and rabbinical judges continuously urged converts (FSU immigrants and others) to make meaningful and visible changes to their lives—to perform a legible rite of passage built on newly adopted religious and cultural markers (Krauel-Tovi 2012b). More specifically, I wanted to understand the particular contours of change expected of FSU non-Jewish olim. Given that many in this population had already identified themselves as Jews before immigrating to Israel and have, since their immigration, lived their everyday lives as Israeli Jews (Cohen 2006; Lerner 2012), I was curious about the problematics of change as both a regimenting discourse and a lived experience. How, I ultimately asked, do people become Jews when they already identify as such?

However, as fieldwork continued, I began to see the limitations of change as an organizing framework. Although the aforementioned problematics of change in the conversion of FSU non-Jewish olim clearly deserve attention, I began to realize that the analytical category of change could not, in fact, encapsulate much of what unfolded in the field. Specifically, change failed to explain what was concomitantly at stake in conversion for both FSU converts and the



state: how and why both sides entered into their institutionally mediated relationship, how they imbued it with meaning, and how they construed the kinds of things they value. Change could not, for example, provide me with tools to properly unpack the ethnographic scene of the “stubborn door”; ultimately, it could not explain the relationships that unfolded between the state and its converts. Critique of analytical plasticity aside, I increasingly got the sense that much would be left unsaid if, as an ethnographer, I continued to view conversion through the lens of change. I started to search for alternative frameworks.

To be sure, I do not mean to dismiss the framework of change altogether. In many cases, including the one under discussion here, conversion does involve ideas, ideals, and realities of change. Moreover, the recent debates in the anthropology of Christianity over the degrees of continuity and discontinuity that conversion entails only prove how much we gain when we use change as a prism through which to theorize conversion. For example, change, in this literature, is a productive framework for analyzing conversion if one wants to probe the temporal orientations, discursive schemes, and moral dilemmas that underwrite how converts to Christianity experience and speak about their conversions (Chua 2012; Engelke 2004; Keane 1995; Robbins 2007, 2010). However, I do suggest that the notion of change—if relied on too heavily—can obscure the interrelationality of intentions, objects, connections, and transactions that coalesce to constitute conversion as both a token and zone of political relationship in the context of the nation-state.

Far from semantic play, my suggestion to move from the prism of change to that of exchange invites us to look at the web of practices, discourses, and agents that partake in both shaping and negotiating the meaning of conversion as a process (whether of change or otherwise) that is often embedded in political and institutional relationships. Such a perspective is of particular importance when conversion is associated—as it oftentimes is—with the politics of the state. In arguing for such a perspective, I aim to take into fuller and more explicit consideration the many important insights already garnered in the anthropological and historical literatures on conversion. To the extent that religious conversion is indeed entrenched in political, bureaucratic, and national processes of the (colonial, postcolonial, and nation-) state (e.g., Keane 2007; Pelkmans 2009; Van Der Veer 1996), it entails dynamic relationships between the parties involved. These relationships should be both identified and theorized. What the notion of exchange brings out is the relational aspect of conversion. By referring to a “relational aspect,” I do not mean to index the processes by which converts are situated in relation to others (see Chua 2012); rather, I highlight the fact that converts and state agents of conversion might indeed constitute a “we” and a “they” and that their political entanglements with

each other matter to what conversion might be about. Furthermore, the notion of exchange allows us to consider the particular forms that reciprocity might take in shaping this relationship.

Religious conversion is probably not the first social field that comes to mind as a realm of exchange. After all, it is not a domain organized by the actual and tangible giving of things—a gift, a commodity, or money. Bodily giving (the “gifts of life” implicated in blood or organ donation), spiritual giving, charitable and philanthropic engagements, garage sales, friendship, and even fieldwork itself (Bornstein 2009; Coleman 2004; Elisha 2008; Herrmann 1997; High 2010; Mains 2013; O’Neill 2013; Reddy 2007; Simpson 2004; Weiss 2011) all seem to lend themselves much more directly and intuitively to anthropological questions about giving and gift relationships. Indeed, as Michael Harbsmeier notes (Algazi 2003:17), such lines of inquiry have been applied to the study of religious conversion only infrequently or implicitly (see also Miyazaki 2000; Viswanathan 1998:12).

Clearly, *The Gift* (2000), Mauss’s classic treatise, is the starting point for any anthropological discussion of exchange relationships and acts of giving. The revival of the anthropology of exchange has taken issue with this canonical work on multiple and exciting theoretical fronts, and yet the basic Maussian premise, according to which the reciprocal circulation of gifts helps not only construct but also negotiate social and political relationships among individuals and groups, is still fairly widely accepted. Interestingly, whereas Mauss himself and some other anthropologists who followed him made a radical distinction between gift exchange and other forms of exchange (mostly commodity, market-based exchange), more recent scholarship has challenged this distinction, demonstrating instead how the logics and schemes of the gift relationship might also be enacted in other, more instrumental economies of exchange (e.g., Appadurai 1988; Weiner 1985).

The revival of literature on exchange includes many debates that remain outside the contours of my argument here, such as discussions of the obligatory or inalienable nature of gifts (see Carrier 1991; Graeber 2001; Gregory 1980; Parry 1986; Weiner 1985). More immediately relevant to my work are the elaborations made with regard to reciprocity. The anthropological model of the gift rests on the notion of reciprocity as a governing norm—the norm to give, receive, and reciprocate. In the case study under discussion here, reciprocity is significant not only as a norm but also, and even primarily, as given political circumstances. As I laid out in the historical background above, the mutual “stuckness” of both sides, the state and non-Jewish olim citizens, is what has shaped conversion as an inherently reciprocal project in Israel. The form that reciprocity takes here is, obviously, distinctive and so are its implications for the power relations and hierarchies between the parties involved. Indeed, reciprocity has been theorized as taking a variety of forms

(see, e.g., Marshall Sahlins's typology), some of which tend to foster symmetrical, balanced relationships between equals (e.g., birthday cards) while others tend to create, reproduce, or augment extant inequalities and hierarchies (e.g., potlatch). In the exchanges that underwrite Jewish conversion in Israel, as will become clear in this article, the mutual dependence on conversion does not entail relationships of equality between Jewish converts and the Jewish state.

Only a limited number of scholarly works have focused on institutional spheres of reciprocity. In particular, I refer here to work that calls attention to how generalized, abstract entities, such as "the nation," "the common good," or "the state" are implicated in, even constituted by, institutionally mediated arrangements of reciprocity (e.g., Reddy 2007; Shoshana 2012). Indeed, the state itself can be understood as a "gift domain" (Simpson 2004:841). Under the heading "Bringing the Gift Back In"—itself a trope that draws on another famous title, *Bringing the State Back In* (Evans et al. 1985)—Frank Adloff (2006) identifies principles of reciprocity in politicized arenas that are largely organized by the state (e.g., by the welfare state). As he writes, "Gift-giving and reciprocity accompany all social interaction, from micro-situation through to macro-phenomena; even highly institutionalized fields of social action are structured around patterns of reciprocity" (Adloff 2006:418). Such investigations of institutional state spheres not only further broaden our understandings of political and social exchanges in nonarchaic, nontribal societies but they also help us to dehomogenize and de-essentialize the Maussian model of the gift (see Algazi 2003). If, for Mauss, reciprocal exchanges shape how people connect, I draw on this line of work to show how political conditions that foster reciprocally grounded institutional processes of exchange shape the ways people and the state are connected. Hence, the metaphor of the (Jewish) "stamp"—a metaphor so emblematic of the kinds of "graphic artifacts" (Hull 2012) that mediate relations between people, state institutions, and things.

My analytical framework of exchange is grounded methodologically in an ethnographic study (2004–07) that moves across the institutionalized interface of state conversion. Paraphrasing Townsend Middleton (2011:263) in his work on the interface of "state ethnography," I consider this study as having been conducted not from one side or the other of the conversion interface but across it. In this sense, I located myself at the intersection between state agencies and converts—traversing that interface while aiming to unpack its structuring arrangements as well as its minute, mundane particularities. In particular, I attended two state-run conversion schools (the formal setting in which converts are expected to attain knowledge of Jewish life and law), rabbinical conversion courts (in which conversion petitions are evaluated by rabbinical judges), and ritual baths (in which converts immerse themselves in water during

a halachic ritual that confers a Jewish identity on them). Interviews with participants from all of the above categories as well as textual and oral materials on the topic of conversion augmented my ethnographic encounters across the state-run conversion interface.

### Biopolitical exchanges

As I analyze elsewhere (Krauel-Tovi 2012a), under the discursive rubric of a "national mission," a rubric meant to counter the "national problem" precipitated by non-Jewish olim from the FSU, the state has constructed conversion as a significant biopolitical route for the production and reproduction of the nation as Jewish. By *biopolitics*, Michel Foucault refers to the deployment of political power—"an entire series of interventions and regulatory controls" (1978:139)—that shapes the social body. Introducing the concept of biopolitics allows us to trace the national logic and regulatory powers that shape Jewish conversion in Israel as a field of demographic policy through which the nation-state attempts to "correct," homogenize, and enlarge its Jewish population. In other words, it helps us realize how the nation-state uses the conversion of individuals as a means of regulating population-related processes according to its national ideologies and anxieties. Biopolitics thus allows us to place conversion policy alongside other Zionist population policies, such as those related to reproduction and immigration. In line with this link between conversion and reproduction, the notion of biopolitics also allows us to explain the gendered orientation of the conversion project, namely, the importance ascribed by state officials to the conversion of young women at the age of fertility. The matrilineal principle that determines Jewish recognition in Israel marks (young) women as a particularly important resource in the reproduction of the Jewish population (for elaboration, see Foucault 1978).<sup>5</sup>

Building on this conceptualization of Jewish conversion as a biopolitical project, I call attention to how perceptions about the Jewish population, as well as about which subjects count as a part of that population, underwrite the terms by which the Israeli state and FSU non-Jewish olim converts have come to exchange Jewish stamps. Such an account takes us, obviously, from the Maussian realm of social exchange to that of political exchange; but, more precisely, it takes us to the realm of the biopolitical. Thus, in what follows, I refer to this relationship in terms of a "biopolitical exchange."

If, according to Foucault, biopolitics assumes a political economics in which the population is regarded as a resource and the individual as a potential productive force whose daily affairs in a variety of areas (such as health, immigration, reproduction, and lifestyle) are all potentially useful (Dreyfus and Rabinow 1982:139), then national belonging emerges in this case study as a useful factor to

be governed and mobilized. It is, in effect, through their officially authorized belonging to the Jewish population that the bodies of converts are added to the Jewish body politic, thereby augmenting the national stock.

Perhaps nowhere is this interplay between Jewish bodies and the Jewish body politic more tangibly on ethnographic display than at the *mikveh*, the ritual bath; it is there that, having submerged themselves in water, converts literally emerge from it (according to Jewish law) as fully embodied Jews—as an organic part of the nation. Female converts, for their part, emerge from the water as reproducers of the nation—as future Jewish mothers.

### July 2006, “A new Jewish beginning”

This morning, on a day that would turn dramatic as the first day of the Second Lebanon War, started for me like any Wednesday morning—conducting fieldwork at the mikveh. But for Sveta, it was a day of new beginnings. A “new Jewish beginning” was how Manuela, the kindhearted, middle-aged ritual bath attendant described what I should expect. It was hot and humid outside and bustling inside the modest building. A dying ventilator struggled to air out the small, crowded waiting room where about thirty adults, most of them young women, were coming and going, sweating through their new Jewish beginnings.

After a long wait, it was Sveta’s turn. A typical convert— young, female, and fluent in both Russian and Hebrew— Sveta seemed both nervous and eager. She handed her ID card and permission slip to Rabbi Samuel, one of the three rabbis who would soon oversee her ritual conduct in the mikveh.<sup>6</sup> After Sveta struggled to submerge her entire body, as required by Jewish law, and managed (albeit with her ears plugged) to recite the announcement that affirmed her acceptance of the commandments (*kabalat mitzvot*), the three rabbis responded with a somewhat routinized, emotionless “Mazal tov.” Sveta nodded politely but seemed to be absorbed in her own delight, refusing to let the intrusive audience of spectators, myself included, interrupt her celebratory moment. The three men rushed out. Manuela entered, offering Sveta a warm greeting: “This is a big day. You are one of us. You were reborn today and now you are a Jew. With God’s help, you will soon have children of your own—Jewish children. You truly belong now to the Jewish people.” “Well, thank you for letting me in,” replied Sveta with an embarrassed yet appreciative laugh, “I cherish what you’ve given me.” Later in the day, as activity at the mikveh died down and the staff gathered to clean up, I asked Rabbi Samuel about his somewhat bland response to Sveta’s conversion. He thought for a moment and then responded,

That’s a problem. We conduct so many immersions (*tvilot*) each day that sometimes I grow distant and forget how weighty my job is. But, when I think about it, I know I care. I feel fortunate that I can help converts

become a part of the Jewish people (*Am Yisrael*)—we owe them at least that. And at the same time, I get to do something for the Jewish people. The mikveh is where you really see how the national mission, as we use to say, is carried out.

The particulars of Sveta’s immersion ritual, like that of other converts, has much to tell us about gendered religious practice, bureaucratic gazes, and disciplined bodies; but more directly germane to my purpose in this article is the conclusion of the ritual itself and participants’ reflections on it.

Clearly, Manuela’s warm greetings to Sveta breathe life into what is otherwise a bureaucratized and lifeless rite of passage that unfolds under the rubric of a large-scale state project. Whereas her male colleagues seem, all too easily, to play the role of the indifferent bureaucrat, forgetting how invested they are in the national mission, Manuela manages to infuse both warmth and festivity into the bureaucratic encounter. No less important, in constituting Sveta as a future Jewish mother who will one day grant a secure Jewish identity to her children, she articulates the very logic that underpins the national mission. She not only echoes the (national and religious) hegemonic discourse of Jewish Israeli motherhood but she also positions Sveta’s yet unborn children as the ultimate recipients of what will become an intergenerational, transactive chain of Jewish recognition. One could say that within this transactive national biopolitics, the state gives Sveta the opportunity to pass on to her offspring the Jewish belonging that she herself has just received: Her children will inherit her Jewish stamp and be born as “one of us.” Sveta’s enchanted response, in itself embedded in a discourse of exchange (“I cherish what you gave me”), implies her appreciation of the possibilities that her new belonging creates for her as well as for her unborn children.

Sveta is not exceptional in articulating such an intergenerational responsibility. In interviews after the fact, several non-Jewish olim converts explained to me how their felt obligation as future mothers played a role in motivating their decision to go through the state-run conversion process. Within this narrative, they frequently linked the discourse of citizenship with that of giving, depicting themselves as givers of a secure citizenship, as those who would one day give to their children a new and unambiguous future in the state where they are born and that they will probably call home.

Even if, in these interviews, some converts voiced a sense of enchantment with what the state had given them in the conversion process, I was amazed by how disenchanting they also seemed by Israel’s reason for giving them the opportunity to convert in the first place. In particular, they conveyed their understanding that the state gives (authorized stamps of conversion) in order to receive (converts).

In the following excerpt, Ana mobilizes her sociological academic training to offer an astute account of her own understanding of these biopolitical exchanges:

My take on conversion is that it tries to increase the Jewish population. Look, the program was subsidized by the state; nothing is free, you know. The Institute clearly has a goal: for Israel to have more Jews. I once took a “society and politics” class in college, it was in sociology, and I can tell you—conversion is an artificial method used by the state to make more Jews. Muslim families are big, and you cannot force Jews to reproduce or to immigrate, so you look for other methods—you convert people.

Although of critical import, Zionist biopolitics do not play an exclusive role in these institutional exchanges and thus cannot fully explain their meaning. What do we make, for example, of Rabbi Samuel’s claim that “we (i.e., the state or its civil servants) owe them (i.e., non-Jewish olim FSU converts) at least that”? What do we make of the fact that, rather than only counting converts and forecasting demographic realities, several conversion agents I spoke with articulated a similar moral economics built on a sense of gratitude from state to converts? And why should conversion emerge as a token of indebtedness? As evidenced in the words of Rabbi Samuel, the national mission that he embodies aims at once to reproduce Jews and to give FSU immigrants the gift of Jewish belonging of which they are worthy. When he insists that beneath his reductionist posture of bureaucratic indifference lies an essence of care, his sense of purpose builds equally on biopolitical logic and moral scripts. Reflective and perceptive about his mediating role at the ritualistic juncture between converts and the state, he oscillates between his commitments to both sides—between what he does for the Jewish nation and what he owes to the convert. To the extent that both frames of reference—the biopolitical and the moral—are grounded in Zionist ideology, they are closely connected. It is to the moral layer of the national mission of conversion that I now turn.

### Moral debts

Beyond the abstract idea of state conversion, one can find a clearly identifiable cohort of civil servants who work and speak in its name: religious (Orthodox) Zionist Jews (see also N. 4). Far from being a mere political coincidence, the remarkable involvement of religious Zionists in crafting, governing, and operating the state project of conversion reflects a profound feature of their identity work. It is as religious Zionists who understand themselves to be the vanguard of state Zionism that conversion agents seek to share responsibility for what seems to loom large in national politics (Schwartz 2009). It is as religious Zionists that they

attempt (against ultra-Orthodox influence) to subject the halachic sensibilities of conversion to what they perceive as a national Zionist calling; and it is in this capacity that they mobilize their mythic, grand narratives about Israel as a Jewish state to locate moral agency in the state.<sup>7</sup> Ultimately, it is as a religious Zionist that Rabbi Samuel claims “we owe them at least that.”

“It is not individuals,” writes Jonathan Parry in his famous exegesis of *The Gift*, “but groups or *moral persons* who carry on exchanges. The *persons* who enter into the exchanges . . . do not act on their behalf” (1986:456). Religious Zionists act as moral persons in and for the state-run conversion project. Zionist morality is central to how they construct, if not sacralize, their endeavor as a morally justified mission and to how they imbue their mundane work with ideals of historical justice, political fairness, and moral indebtedness. Conversion agents believe that by giving to FSU converts the opportunity of full inclusion within the Jewish fold, they also give the Jewish state an occasion to cultivate its morality. Whereas in varied instances documented in the anthropological literature, giving enables one to believe he or she constitutes a better self (e.g., becoming a good, compassionate Christian, an unselfish Buddhist, or a good ethnographer; see Elisha 2008; High 2010; O’Neill 2013; Simpson 2004), in this case study, giving enables one to believe that he or she helps create a better state.

The construal of conversion as a moral act of giving is conditioned on the construal of non-Jewish olim FSU immigrants as worthy recipients. To begin with, many of these immigrants, regardless of their non-Jewish status in the eyes of Jewish law, come from families that suffered their share of persecution and victimhood under the Soviet regime. Because Jewish nationality was defined by both social and bureaucratic Soviet systems as an ethnic category based on patrilineal descent (see Kimmerling 2004), many non-Jewish olim from the FSU (particularly, the offspring of ethnic, intermarried parents) were socially and politically marked as Jews. Insofar as anti-Semitism and the Soviet political terror were blind to halachic distinctions, all those considered to be Jewish were susceptible to communist-atheist oppression; they were subject to this oppression within an environment often described in Zionist discourse as “the anti-Jewish wilderness,” where Jews experienced what is dramatically referred to by conversion agents as “the holocaust of the Soviet Union’s Jews.” From a Zionist standpoint, the correct moral conclusion is easy to draw, and it links together Jewish suffering, entitlement, and redemption while replacing past traumas and exclusions with future securities and inclusions. Within this equation, the Zionist state assumes its role as the ultimate authority for squaring the Jewish people’s debt with history.

The moral debt of conversion is itself embedded within, and augmented by, broader relationships of exchange between the state and its newcomers—those who



go on to become citizens and soldiers, join the Jewish state, and participate in all of its national and civilian duties. These schemes of reciprocity are underwritten by a nexus of republican and ethnonational discourses about citizenship (Shafir and Peled 2002:1–36). This nexus links collective responsibilities of the national citizenry with the political privileges and pragmatic resources to which they are entitled. In militarized and ethnonational Israel, this republican formula is verified at the army induction center or, more traumatically, on the battlefield and at the military cemetery. It is within these arenas that individuals are constituted as “proper citizens” and made to realize the social expectation that they give themselves to the state. That many non-Jewish olim FSU Israeli soldiers are excluded from burial in the halachically governed military cemeteries is thus, understandably, a source of constant public critique—a reminder of the imbalanced relationship between citizens as givers and the Jewish state as the ultimate recipient. Interestingly, although the national, biopolitical mission of conversion is built on the model of the young female convert, the predominantly male model of the sacrificing soldier is often mobilized by conversion agents to discursively rationalize conversion as an act of moral payment.

To the extent that non-Jewish olim demonstrably serve Zionist causes, they are perceived to be worthy of admission into the Jewish collective in Israel. Thus, they are deemed morally eligible to enjoy the material privileges of state conversion (the procedure is fully subsidized for citizens). For this reason, some conversion agents advocate that non-Jewish olim should also enjoy a more lenient halachic conversion process. In all of these senses, for state agents of conversion, giving such converts the opportunity to be fully included in the national fold is understood in terms of what Mauss referred to as the third stage of the gift relationship: the obligation to reciprocate. This moral economy also resonates with a 2012 campaign that the conversion administration launched under the slogan “reasonable conversion” (*giur bar-hasaga*). That the chosen slogan rhymes with the popular slogan of the Israeli social justice protests of summer 2011 (reasonable housing, *diur bar-hasaga*) speaks not only to the way the state has marketed conversion but also to how this field of policy, like housing policy for middle-class Israelis (Weiss 2014), entails questions about what the state is willing or expected to provide for its citizens in return for all they do on its behalf.

## Bureaucratic gifts

### November 2005, “Like a gift”

It was a late afternoon, a seemingly perfect time for a lunch break, but the three rabbinical judges decided to continue. “Let’s move on. Just one more case, and trust me,” said Rabbi Cohen to his two colleagues as he looked over the thin manila folder in front of him, “it will be an easy one.

Her name is Yulia and she’s a graduate of the same conversion class as Natalia, the nice Georgian woman whose petition we accepted earlier this morning. They are friends. I’m telling you, ten minutes and we’re out.” About fifty minutes later, Yulia was out, but the judges (and I) were still inside. As she waited outside the courtroom for the judges to make their decision, I imagined her restlessly pacing back and forth, or maybe sitting on one of the affixed plastic chairs, trying to explain to her friend what the discussion had been like. The judges, for their part, seemed weary and somewhat disturbed. Although Yulia made what was generally felt to be a good impression (she wore an appropriate outfit, gave a plausible conversion narrative, and was conversant enough with halacha) (see also Kravel-Tovi 2012b), they could not ignore what they thought was her Achilles’ heel: that she did not regularly attend synagogue services. Even worse, she did not seem bothered by it. The judges could not let it go. Finally, they decided to postpone her conversion for a few months. “What’s the rush?” one of them asked rhetorically, “It’s not as if she’s going to get married tomorrow. She’ll be upset but will pull through. Next time she’ll be more prepared for this moment.”

Yulia came back in; whether she had been pacing or sitting, as she reentered the courtroom, it was clear that she had been crying. Still quivering, but composed, she quietly listened to the judges’ decision; then, as one of the judges was elaborating on a point, Yulia cuts him off, asking in a clear, steady voice for an explanation: “But why? I don’t understand. Give me a reason. I’ve been living this way for months; it’s already part of me. It’s my dream. You don’t understand how important this is to me.”

Rabbi Zohar: You have to understand our side as well. We have a huge responsibility to the people of Israel (Am Yisrael) when it comes to conversion; we can’t make a mistake here. Why is it so hard for you to just come see us again in three months?

Yulia: Because I’ve been waiting so long for this day. I have so many things to say to you but you won’t understand.

Rabbi Kaufman: Why not? Try us.

Y: You won’t understand because you’ve never come to a state, to your own state, where a basic thing like “who you are” is taken from you. Don’t get me wrong, I’m not trying to be critical, and I know everything must be done in line with halachic rules. But in my own eyes I’ve always felt that I’m Jewish. Also, it’s not like this process has been easy—it took me ten months to prepare for this tribunal. For me, completing conversion is like . . . like a gift. That’s the word I was looking for. Really, that is the best way to describe it.

Agitated, and yet fluent and precise, Yulia likens her conversion to a gift. *Gift* is the word she is looking for. She is doubly precise: first, in carefully choosing her words and,

second, when she situates conversion at the core of her relationship with her state. In her view, she was already a Jew when she arrived in Israel; it was the state—the Jewish nation-state that embraced her at the age of five—that robbed her of this identity. Fifteen years later, she seeks to reclaim it through a state-run procedure that culminates in an official act of inclusion in both the Jewish nation and the Jewish state. By framing the completion of the conversion process in terms of a gift, Yulia softens what might otherwise have become an accusation about what was taken from her. Instead, the idea that a fully authorized Jewish identity is a gift foregrounds the gratitude she would feel in return. In addition, while positioning the rabbinical judges as givers, Yulia acknowledges their power to pass judgment on her petition, but she also urges them to recognize the high value that this process holds for her. As a metaphor that communicates the gains, anticipation, and appreciation she associates with conversion, the notion of the gift helps Yulia not only articulate her emotions but also strategize her performance.

Far from being a superficial strategy employed for conversion bureaucrats alone, the metaphor of the gift emerged during my fieldwork as a prism through which converts sometimes told themselves the stories of their conversions. To be sure, the notion of the gift was not quite a central trope. It was, however, an idiom through which converts acknowledged the bureaucratic services, goods, and experiences that were given to them or created for them by the state. Sometimes they cherished it (recall Sveta's answer at the mikveh: "I cherish what you gave me"), sometimes they disliked it or acknowledged its imposing nature, and sometimes they were indifferent to it. But they considered conversion to be something they received from the state.

Indeed, when exploring bureaucratic processes of conversion from this framework, one can identify many instances of giving scattered throughout the process. Materially speaking, for Israeli citizens, the service is provided for free and includes the distribution of a Bible and prayer book to each convert as well as the full subsidization of group tours and Shabbat retreats. As the rabbinical judges in court receive the convert into the national fold (in Hebrew they often say to converts, "Anachnu mekablīm otach," which means literally, "We receive you"), the convert is given a Hebrew name (usually chosen by the convert but often negotiated in court) and is urged to adopt a new Hebrew date of birth. At the mikveh, converts are sometimes given the opportunity to recite the blessing of *shechayanu*—"Who has given us life"—and are often told that, through their ritual immersion, they are given their Jewish soul. And, finally, to mark the completion of the process, converts are given certificates signed by high-level conversion officials as well as an opportunity to later receive a new ID card, one that includes the person's Hebrew birth date. When the identities of converts are validated by official conversion documents

and authorized by identification cards, the metaphor of transacted Jewish stamps takes on concrete, material form.

Because these experiences, goods, and documents objectify the qualities of a bureaucratic gift—or, even, the spirit, that is, the *hau*, of the bureaucratic state—it is not surprising that they create a range of affective responses to the state as a giver as well as a range of understandings about the gift's value. In other words, because the bureaucratic gifts of conversion are inherently linked to, and inalienable from, the "magic" of the state, they introduce the range of emotions that characterizes the relationships citizens often have with the state. For non-Jewish olim, suspicion, gratitude, a sense of awe and indebtedness, and ambivalence and resentment are some of the affective dispositions associated with these bureaucratic gifts. For example, for many, the Jewish stamp (literally, the conversion certificate) is fraught with uncertainty (Fisher in press). In keeping with a number of other ethnographic accounts of documents, which show how identifying papers do not necessarily establish a secure relationship between its holders and the state (Kelly 2006; Reeves 2013), in this case study, converts are anxious about the possibility that their certificate will grow thin and unreliable. In other words, because many of the converts are aware of the precarious macropolitics of the national mission (in particular, the volatile relationship between religious Zionist rabbis and ultra-Orthodox rabbis over the authority of state-run conversion), they fear that their Jewish stamp might lose its currency.<sup>8</sup>

Moreover, the significance assigned to the bureaucratic stamp is essentially undetermined. At times, converts express admiration for the authority of the state and, at other times, a dismissive sarcasm toward the state's reductionist, routinized procedures (an association evidenced in the ethnographic scene that opened this article). For some converts, the bureaucratic encounters resonated with what they described as the distance, coldness, and superficiality of state bureaucracy. For others, these encounters created precious celebratory moments (e.g., a ritualized testimonial of faith in court or the issuing of a new ID card) that provided them, sometimes to their surprise, with a strong recognition of themselves as Jews—a deeply inscribed stamp.

### The precarious coproduction of state and converts

Don't think they're doing us any favors. We might need a stamp, but they need it just as much.

—Ina

Keen and concise, Ina's insight captures the core argument of this article: that Jewish conversion in Israel is an interrelational, mutually constitutive project of identity

recognition and confirmation. As I have sought to demonstrate throughout, informing this transactive project are multiple entangling factors, ones that are biopolitical, moral, and bureaucratic in nature.

Ina was right. Jewish conversion in Israel is not about favors. Rather than a unilateral authorization of Jewish status and self, bestowed as a token of goodwill or trust on those who claim to embrace Judaism, Jewish conversion is a politicized exchange between two sides that both “need a stamp” from the other. The need is not necessarily equal, but it is certainly mutual. When a convert is redefined by the state as “one of us” (to recall the words of Manuela, the ritual bath attendant), the joining together of the “one” and the “us” is conducive to the constitution of both as Jewish. Ina, Sveta, Yulia, and other converts I met in the course of my fieldwork all become formally and fully Jewish through the state-run conversion process. The state, for its part, becomes more Jewish, demographically, symbolically, and morally, through the operation of this bureaucratic field.

By employing the framework of exchange and thinking through the notion of reciprocity, this analysis of Jewish conversion in Israel has broader theoretical implications for the anthropological understanding of religious conversion under the purview of the nation-state. Specifically, the framework of reciprocal exchange invites us to think of conversion as a mechanism for the coproduction of national subjects and the nation-state. It might also invite us to think of other institutionally mediated domains in which nation-states and national subjects are coproduced by their mutual engagements in various contexts. In the Israeli context, one could think, for example, of army service or boarding schools (see Shoshana 2012) as such possible domains.

To the extent that conversion, as exchange, is inherently a category of relationship, we are invited to pay attention to the coproduced effects of this relationship or, as suggested by Mauss, to how the identities of the parties to exchange are “partly reconstituted in the process of exchange itself” (Algazi 2003:17). In addition, we should also pay attention to the subjects who are not included within the reciprocal arrangement of conversion. In the Israeli case, those who profoundly contradict the ethnonational aspirations of the state, such as Palestinians, foreign workers, or refugees, remind us of the exclusive nature of the nation-state that is reproduced through the constitution of particular kinds of converts. As is abundantly clear in Israel’s policies toward these other minority groups, the state has a range of techniques at its disposal for managing its Jewishness that can hardly be construed as reciprocal. However, to the extent that the potential Jewishness of FSU immigrants can be both a moral and demographic resource for the state, the means by which they are included in the Jewish Israeli fold takes on a reciprocal form.

Furthermore, because reciprocity is often a risky project, one that involves uncertainties, delays, and ambivalences between unequal parties (Algazi 2003), the theorization of religious conversion as exchange enables us to recognize the vulnerabilities of both entangled sides. Not unlike Laotian and Cambodian immigrants in the United States who settle debts with the dead (Langford 2009), the ethnographer who calculates how to perfectly give back to her informants (High 2010), or evangelicals who struggle to give unconditional, compassionate gifts (Elisha 2008), both sides of the Jewish Israeli conversion exchange relationship take some risks and must often confront the undetermined nature of their mutual entanglement.

The idea that Jewish conversion represents a risky exchange is not intended to obfuscate the hegemony of state-run rabbinical institutions or the serious effects of that hegemony on the lives of individuals. It is not intended to obfuscate the fact that individual converts are dramatically dependent on the conversion bureaucrats who hold the ultimate power to shape, govern, and determine their fates. Nor is it meant to erase the fact that, while, for the Israeli state, the conversion of NJO is only one among several mechanisms through which it is able to reproduce its Jewishness, for these immigrants, the state holds the exclusive power to officially constitute them as Jewish. In addition, following Barry Schwartz’s (1967) argument that the gift imposes identity on the receiver, we can understand that in accepting the “gift” of state conversion, converts comply with the terms and logics by which subjects are defined as Jews by the state. In all of these contexts, conversion augments and reproduces the deep-seated hierarchies in which this exchange is situated. However, somewhat counterintuitively, the gift of the Jewish stamp has more immediate, tangible effects for individual converts than it does for the state. Whereas each convert usually receives his or her stamp upon the completion of a set of bureaucratic commitments, in the long run, the state’s desired goals in giving stamps to converts are much harder to accomplish. After all, the accumulated achievements of these biopolitical exchanges are not guaranteed. The Jewish state encourages the conversion of non-Jewish olim and is still left with a considerable population who, by declining its invitation to officially convert, continues to threaten Israel’s Jewish collective identity. Indeed, thus far, the national mission of conversion has failed to overcome what the state understands as an urgent national problem.<sup>9</sup>

The case study under discussion here offers an ethnographic investigation of how and why the state and converts get stuck, and operate reciprocally, within a unique political moment that calls for an inclusive politics of national belonging. The institutional mechanisms of these politics operate at the borders of private and collective national identity, where clear distinctions between the political and the personal collapse but are also constantly in flux.

Identity certificates, statistical graphs, demographic realities, bureaucratic experiences, moral postures—and, most importantly, subjects and the state—are all produced through their entanglement in a single transactional chain.

## Notes

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1. I have changed all names in this article.
2. In Israel, all religious and personal matters of status are governed by the religious authorities of the recognized confessional community with which a citizen affiliates.
3. Whereas the official Israeli census employs religious categorizations (i.e., Jews, Muslims, Christians, etc.), the popular political discourse categorizes according to national boundaries (i.e., Jews and Arabs).
4. Since its inception, the Israeli state has secured the hegemony of Orthodox Judaism over the field of conversion. This embracing of Orthodox conversion has taken different institutional forms in the course of Israel's history. For example, until the 1970s and again in the 1980s, ultra-Orthodox-dominated rabbinical courts handled conversion in Israel. These courts emphasized the strict adherence of converts to a religious way of life and downplayed the national meanings of conversion. In the 1990s, as a response to the mass arrival of non-Jewish olim from the FSU and the perceived need to include them, through conversion, in the national fold, the government decided to wrest control of conversion matters from ultra-Orthodox institutions and turn control of them over to Orthodox Zionist agents. These efforts are part and parcel of an ideological shift away from ultra-Orthodox groups who resist statist, national approaches to the matters of state and religion; instead, the government politically strengthened Orthodox agents who, because of their Zionist, national ideologies, are expected to understand the exigencies of the "national mission" of conversion and hence employ comparatively liberal and welcoming approaches to converts. For elaboration on this matter, see Kravel-Tovi 2012a. Although the 1990s and 2000s witnessed a small number of rulings by the Israeli Supreme Court (as the high court of justice) in favor of the legitimization of Conservative and Reform conversions, these routes of conversion still do not lead to Jewish recognition by the Orthodox rabbinate.
5. Surveys show that 78 percent of all converts (FSU converts and others) are women and 70 percent of FSU converts are young (less than 30 years of age). See Fisher in press.

6. At the ritual bath, female converts immerse themselves in water naked in front of the female bath attendant (I never observed this part of the ritual). They then put on the "mikveh gown," which floats and is opaque in color so as to preserve both the modesty of the convert and the halachic requirement that no object should come between the body and the water. This procedure is highly criticized by feminist (both religious and secular) groups. The highly intrusive nature of conducting fieldwork in such a site was a complex issue for me as well.

7. The relationship between conversion agents and the state is beyond the scope of this article. However, in my view, religious Zionists also constitute their own reciprocal relationships of exchange with the state. Historically, they have themselves been positioned as "subcontractors" of the state, "devoted soldiers" in its national missions (most notably in Israel's occupation of Palestinian territory but also in other political, civilian, and religious domains); this position has entailed both giving to the state and a return in the form of political privileges.

8. Clear cases in point are the "Druckman affair" in 2008, in which a panel of ultra-Orthodox rabbis invalidated conversions authorized by the head of the conversion administration, and the refusal of ultra-Orthodox marriage registers in the rabbinate to recognize the conversions conducted by religious Zionist rabbis.

9. For a more thorough discussion of the low numbers of FSU conversions, see Fisher in press.

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