

Jews by choice? Orthodox conversion, the problem of choice, and Jewish religiopolitics in the Israeli state

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Abstract

Anthropologists have long displayed interest in the tension between choice and coercion in processes of religious conversion. In this article, I draw from ethnographic work in contemporary Israel to explore the ways in which this tension animates pedagogic formations of Orthodox Jewish conversion. I argue that conversion teachers' concerns are rooted in the tension they identify between the religious ideal scripts of Jewish conversion, as an individual voluntary act, and governing religiopolitical state structures of conversion. I show how teachers insist on the image of the willing convert, while simultaneously considering, albeit with limited effect, the withered resonance that these images hold in the lived experience of their students. By contextualizing and analyzing the 'problem of choice' besetting conversion teachers, this article sheds light on some of the underlying forces that influence how non-Jews become Jews in the Jewish state.

Keywords

choice, Israel, Jews, Jews by choice, religiopolitics, religious conversion, Jewish conversion, religious coercion, voluntary conversion, nation-state

You know what? People tell me [when I complain about going through conversion, in Hebrew *giyyur*], 'No one forced you to do it.' Well, that's true and not true. No one held a gun to my head and told me if I don't do it, I will be deported. . . . But if I want to live in this country like a regular person, and not receive all those scrutinizing glances at my I.D. card, if I want to give my [yet to be born] children a better life

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than I had as a child, if I want my kids to be able to get married here, instead of going through hell in the 'amazing' rabbinate we have, if I want to let them be proper citizens, not second class citizens, as if people did you a favor and let you in, if I want to be buried like everyone else [like all other Jews], if I want all these things, I had to undergo conversion. (Mira)

Daniel, my spouse, didn't force me [to undergo conversion]. No way. I know his mom has interrogated him on the matter for a while, but he never said a word to me. He knew Orthodox conversion wouldn't be my natural choice. I respect him for that. When I finally decided, it was very much a shared decision, part of our shared choice to raise our girls Jewish. I know it was the right choice for my family because we plan to stay in Israel. (Gerta)

Mira and Gerta are two of the scores of converts I met during my ethnographic fieldwork, conducted in Orthodox conversion schools in Israel. Like other converts whom I interviewed, I met them a few months after they graduated from a conversion program, had completed all bureaucratic and ritual requirements, and were officially recognized by the state as Jews. The conversion stories I heard from them differed significantly, denoting the dissimilar legal, institutional, and biographical circumstances that had shaped their conversion processes. Whereas Mira was an Israeli citizen of Soviet origin who had immigrated to Israel with her family as a child, Gerta was a temporary resident from a Scandinavian background, who had immigrated to Israel only as a young adult, following her Israeli-Jewish spouse whom she had met in Thailand. Mira graduated from *Mali*, the formal conversion school of the Israeli state, which targeted mostly Israeli citizens with a Jewish background but who were not recognized as Jews by the state's Orthodox rabbinate. Gerta, on the other hand, graduated from *Yuvalim*, my pseudonym for a marginal and small conversion school located in a religious kibbutz, which mostly attracted people with more vulnerable immigration statuses.

Despite these and other differences, when Mira and Gerta described to me their decision to undergo conversion, they both focused on the question of choice. In particular, they assessed the degree to which their conversion resulted from their own choice, and entertained the possibility that certain external pressures might have pushed them in this direction. While binary and purist notions of autonomous individual decision vs. external enforcement frame their narratives, the excerpts above reveal a more complicated understanding of the voluntary nature of Jewish conversion in Israel.

Mira acknowledged that no one forced her to undergo conversion; yet, she alluded to the fact that the social, religiopolitical, and legal order structuring her life as a non-Jewish Israeli citizen compelled her to choose conversion. Evoking the image of a figurative gun pointed at her head, she implied that she truly had little choice or much leeway or power to choose otherwise. By speaking as a young woman imagining her future children, she further clarified the implications of choosing not to convert.

For Gerta, also a young woman and speaking from a maternal perspective, it was important to claim ownership over the decision to convert. She stressed that her spouse did not press her on the matter and portrayed an independent, or a joint, decision, based on her own willingness and made at her own pace. However, it is also clear that her confidence in ‘making the right choice’ was linked to a realistic, pragmatic interpretation of Israel’s religiopolitical dynamics. In her nuanced, implicit prose (‘we plan to stay in Israel’), she conveyed a basic sociological insight, one I often heard from other converts as well: In Israel, it is better to be a Jew.

I take Mira’s and Gerta’s words as my point of departure because they set the ethnographic problematics that engage me in this article. The voices above articulate an open secret, which the protagonists of this article – conversion teachers in Orthodox conversion schools in Israel – both recognize and struggle with. As a group, the teachers are troubled by the compromised ability of their students to exercise voluntary choice when determining whether, and under what religious framework, to undergo Jewish conversion. They assume that various macro religiopolitical pressures influence what, ideally, should be a voluntary initiative of conversion, invariably casting doubt on candidates’ ultimate religious sincerity.

In this article, I seek to contextualize and analyze the ‘problem of choice’ besetting conversion teachers. I explain the historical, religious, and political sensibilities that embed their preoccupations over the issue of converts’ choice; drawing from my ethnographic work, I also show the myriad ways in which they express and manage these preoccupations in their daily labor, in and outside the conversion class. I argue that the concerns articulated by conversion teachers are rooted in the tension they identify between the religious ideal script of Jewish conversion as an individual voluntary act, and governing religiopolitical structures of conversion in contemporary Israel. These structures include the overlapping and connected institutions of religion and the state; links between Jewish conversion and Israeli citizenship; and the Orthodox monopoly on conversion. I show how teachers romanticize and insist on images of willing Orthodox converts, while simultaneously considering – albeit with limited effect – the withered resonance of these images in the lived experience of their students.

The data presented here was gathered during fieldwork conducted between October 2004 and September 2007, in conversion schools, rabbinic conversion courts and the ritual bathhouses in which conversions are finalized. First, candidates receive Jewish education – in Jewish history, law, and conduct – while practicing religious observance. Then they apply to the rabbinic court, which considers and rules on their conversion applications. Finally, those admitted as Jews undertake the ritual immersion that completes the conversion process and renders them Jewish according to Jewish law. Looking into Jewish conversion from the under-explored perspective of teachers allows us to better understand these state agents, whose encounters with the converts are the most extensive and intimate. It also allows us to shed light on some of the underlying tensions that give shape to the process through which non-Jews become Jews in the Jewish state.

My interlocutors in this article taught either at Yuvalim or at Mali. While I later juxtapose these two conversion institutions more fully, I wish to note at this point that by looking ethnographically into the mundane educational dynamics of these differently positioned schools, I can trace rich but common manifestations of the ‘choice problem’ that conversion educators are obliged to negotiate.

While my multi-sited fieldwork involved formal and informal interaction with conversion candidates, rabbinic judges, and variously positioned institute administrators, this article focuses on the perspectives of conversion teachers and pedagogical officers. In particular, I draw on nine months of fieldwork at Kibbutz Yuvalim (2004–5), and ten months of fieldwork at Mali (2005–6), including participation in pedagogic workshops organized by the latter for its teachers. I also interviewed the teachers in charge of these programs as well as senior officials at Mali.

In order to explain what was at stake for my interlocutors, I will first situate my ethnographic account within the appropriate theoretical and socio-historical contexts. I will briefly outline the theoretical discussion regarding religious conversion and individual choice, paying particular attention to historic Jewish sensibilities regarding choice and the coercion of converts. After describing the religiopolitical setting of conversion in Israel, I will then demonstrate how and why conversion teachers, well aware of the insinuations of this setting, nonetheless adhere to the ideal of voluntary choice, at the same time identifying the problematics that arise from this stance. I conclude by discussing the value of considering, from an ethnographic perspective, the Jewish conversion problem as an emic, indigenous ‘problem’ of choice.

Converts by choice

Scholars of religious conversion have long addressed questions concerning the nature of ‘choice’, as exercised by converts. To begin with, the question regarding whether one ‘chooses’ or ‘is compelled’ to convert pertains to theological doctrines regarding the relationship between humans and the divine. To the extent that one might comply with predetermined godly plans of salvation, the drama of conversion is possibly not of one’s own choosing (e.g. Stromberg, 2015).

More relevant to the questions of choice lying at the heart of this article is the nature of conversion as a social and political drama (among many others, Austin-Broos, 2003; Özyürek, 2014). As such, it unfolds within relations that might narrow the range of religious choices available to individuals, harm their capacity to make considered decisions and, finally, cast doubt on their sincerity (Van Der Veer, 2006). Across varied contexts, converts are subjected to structures of unequal social power, and are embedded within situations that significantly shape and thwart their ability to make religious choices (e.g. Gross, 2012). In particular, conversion is historically associated with material incentives, political gain, ideological pressure, psychological inducements, and brutal coercion (e.g. Luria, 1996;

Menon, 2003). Keeping in mind this range of circumstances, scholars of conversion have increasingly attended to the dynamics that complicate clear-cut understandings of human volition. Tellingly, scholars who have assessed individual motivations for conversion have used a rational-*choice* theory to frame their discussion (Barro et al., 2010).¹

A comprehensive survey of the rich literature on voluntary and enforced conversions is beyond the purview of this article. However, a brief consideration of some of the instances discussed in the literature is in order. In past waves of scholarly discussion, scholars have debated the degree of volition manifested by individuals when subjected to intensive indoctrination and psychological manipulations (e.g. Dawson, 1999; Barker, 1984; Levine, 1984; Lofland, 1977). In employing terms such as ‘brainwashing’ and ‘programming’, these scholars raised the possibility that exposure to mind control techniques blunt the human capacity to make a thoughtful, valid choice.

The motivations for conversion in impoverished places, where conversion may hold considerable favorable outcomes, have also raised much interest. An illuminating case in point is David Smilde’s (2007) work on poverty-stricken Venezuelans and their ‘choice’ to embrace Evangelical Christianity, accompanied, as this conversion was, by many social and personal benefits. Conversion of colonized and modernized individuals and groups has come under particularly intensive scrutiny (Van der Veer, 1996). Under this rubric, scholars have explored the choice to join dominant religions and cultures under the extreme circumstances of political enticements. In this regard, scholars have considered the possibly compromised voluntary nature of conversion (Hefner, 1993; Viswanathan, 1998; Roberts, 2012).

Other clusters of discussion regarding converts’ choices include radical cases of both religious coercion and religious freedom. On the one hand, scholars have addressed contemporary instances of violent, forced conversion in conflict zones (for example, in Egypt, Syria and Nigeria) and reflect on their implications for international lawmaking (Lee, 2016). On the other hand, scholars have documented the realities and tropes of choice in fields of conversion in the United States – a context that epitomizes the notion of a free religious marketplace (Mullen, 2014; Slagle, 2010).

Force and choice in Jewish contexts of conversion

The term ‘conversion’ is somewhat inadequate for discussions of Jewish *giyyur*, its shortcomings deriving from the expression’s inherent Christian underpinnings (see Gooren, 2014). While conversion is habitually associated with ideals of heightened religious experience, manifestations of faith and transformations of the heart, conversion to Judaism foregrounds daily praxis, religious law and the reorganization of daily life. In addition, whereas a Christian convert joins a confessional community anchored by shared religious beliefs and practices, a Jewish convert joins not only the Jewish religion, but also a group constituted by ethnonational mythologies and practices of kinship. Thus, the term ‘conversion’ does not succeed in capturing

the ethnonational meanings that constitute an inseparable part of Jewish identity, all the more so for Jewish identity in the Jewish state.

These meanings have two related implications worth mentioning in the context of the current discussion. The first is that, generally, Jewishness is considered an immutable, 'unchoosable' identity ascribed by birth, a perception well-captured in the term assigned to Jewish converts (mostly in North America): 'Jews by choice'. The second implication is that, according to Jewish law, Jews cannot simply choose to abandon their Jewishness; 'Jews who convert [to another religion] of their own volition are very bad Jews, but they remain Jews under rabbinic law', Shulamit Magnus (2010: 134) reminds us.

Questions of volition (and the lack thereof) have featured dramatically throughout Jewish history, and are a locus of rabbinic debates regarding conversion to and from Judaism. Since the Second Temple period, when Jewish communities developed conversion ceremonies (i.e. circumcision for males; a declaration of acceptance of commandments before a judicial court; and, finally, ritual immersion for both sexes: Finn, 1997), conversion to Judaism has generally been construed and constructed as an act undertaken by willing individuals. This perception marks a transition from earlier enactments of conversion, configured by the Hasmonean regime as a mass and forced incorporation of non-Jewish groups into the Jewish polity (Cohen, 1999: 136–7).

For long, brutal periods of persecution in Jewish history, it was unlikely – and sometimes, politically illegal – for non-Jews to seek Jewish conversion. When the Jewish modern experience of emancipation radically shifted the political status of Jews by facilitating their integration into the societies they lived in, a growing number of non-Jews started to seek Jewish conversion, primarily in the context of intermarriage with a Jew (Ellenson and Gordis, 2012). This context is still key to most contemporary rabbinic and public discourses on conversion to Judaism, in Israel and elsewhere. Scholars have argued that, in the last few decades, we have witnessed an unprecedented growth in the number of individuals (and sometimes groups) who have chosen to become part of the Jewish people, sometimes through formal conversion (Parfitt and Fisher, 2016). While communal activists, policy-makers, rabbis, and politicians debate the religious sincerity of some of these choices (e.g. Krael-Tovi, 2017; Seeman, 2010), their discourses adhere to the shared assumption that conversion to Judaism must emerge out of sincerely motivated individual choice.

The categories of choice and coercion have played out dramatically in histories of conversion out of Judaism. In Jewish law, Jews who are forced to 'un-Jew' themselves and join another religion against their will are designated as *anusim* (lit. those forced to do something against their will). In contradistinction, Jews who voluntarily untie themselves from Judaism inhabit a different legal category (called *mumarim*), and are considered heretics. Whereas the first group are seen as victims worthy of compassion, the second are often seen as opportunistic traitors who betrayed their fellow Jews under duress (e.g. Seeman, 2003). The term *anusim* is generic, and has been applied to several political and religious circumstances that

forced Jews to convert out of Jewish life. However, it is most famously associated with Jews during the medieval period who, during the Inquisition, were forced to convert to Catholicism, mostly but not exclusively in Spain and Portugal. Among these new Christians were the *Marranos*, who in order to save their souls converted to Catholicism but continued to practice Judaism in secret. That growing numbers of contemporary offspring of these Marranos are now seeking to convert to Judaism (see Jacobs, 2002; Parfitt and Fisher, 2016) is an ironic twist of the interplay between choice and coercion in the Jewish histories of conversion.

The religio-politics of Jewish conversion in Israel

Since Israel's establishment in 1948, the issue of conversion has been chronic and explosive, periodically erupting in legal, political and bureaucratic crises (Waxman, 2013). Although Israel is a liberal democracy, conversion is generally considered a principal matter for the state – a domain it is morally entitled to govern. Hence, state institutions such as the Knesset (parliament), the Supreme Court and the rabbinate have all addressed the issue. Debates over conversion emerge regularly in the context of broader discussions about the weak separation between religion and state in Israel, its identity as a Jewish state, and the Orthodox monopoly empowered to sustain it. Symbolically and practically, these issues underlie the loaded 'Who is a Jew?' question, consequential to the state's self-definition and to key policies in immigration, naturalization and marriage.

By the 1950s, David Ben Gurion, Israel's first Prime Minister, had already adopted the Orthodox position that Jewish law (*halakha*) must serve as the unifying normative and legal basis for determining Jewish identity in Israel (Ratzabi, 2001). In 1960, it was enshrined in Israeli law that a 'Jew' is a person born to a Jewish mother who did not belong to another religion, or a person who had converted to Judaism according to halakha.

A central domain of debate over 'Who is a Jew?' concerns the personal status of Israeli citizens. The Israeli state recognizes civil marriages contracted outside the state for the purposes of immigration and citizenship. However, as the state does not draw a clear separation between religion and state, it neither provides nor recognizes civil, non-religious channels for marriage, divorce or burial conducted within its borders. Rather, under the authority of their respective state-regulated institutions (whether Jewish, Muslim or Christian), religious communities govern these matters. One immediate repercussion of this legal arrangement is that a citizen not recognized by the state Orthodox rabbinic establishment as Jewish cannot marry another Jew and cannot be buried in a Jewish cemetery.

This dependency of individuals on the Orthodox-governed rabbinate is also evident in conversion arrangements. The largest and most powerful Jewish movements in the world today, including the Orthodox, Conservative and Reform movements, uphold different criteria on what Jewish conversion necessitates, largely in terms of orientation to Jewish law and rituals. In particular, the Orthodox movement interprets the requirement placed on aspiring converts to 'accept the

commandments' as a commitment to strictly adhere to Jewish law, including observance of the Sabbath and dietary, modesty and family purity laws.

The 'Religious Community (Conversion) Ordinance' determines that only the heads of the various religious communities (i.e. Jewish, Muslim, Christian) are authorized to grant conversion certificates and determine their validity. In the Jewish context, the Orthodox monopoly has established the Chief Rabbi of Israel (an Orthodox rabbi) as the office certifying the means for Jewish conversion. The immediate effect of this institutional arrangement is that although all three major Jewish movements offer conversion programs in Israel, only Orthodox conversion enables Jewish recognition in matters of personal status and naturalization; it is the only path supported and subsidized by the state.

Given these circumstances, it would be naive to assume that the choice by potential converts of Orthodox conversion is divorced from this differential politics of recognition, or that it is necessarily grounded in desires and intentions to become religiously observant according to Orthodox interpretations. Indeed, a significant number of the aspiring converts I met during fieldwork acknowledged that they would have chosen an alternative conversion program if such a choice had granted them the same level of recognition. Likewise, as Dafna Hacker (2009) demonstrated in her study of intermarried couples in Israel, the religiopolitical legal regime in Israel pushes non-Jewish spouses of Israeli Jews to choose Orthodox conversion in compliance with the ethnonational social norms established by this regime. Due to the matrilineal principle underlying Jewish recognition by Orthodox Judaism, it is not surprising that Hacker finds this pressure to be all the greater for females, since only they automatically bequeath their status as Jews onto their children.² The realistic understanding that only Orthodox conversion could provide a fully secure route to Jewish belonging in Israel pressed Hacker's interviewees to choose this path.³

Orthodox conversion candidates in contemporary Israel fall roughly into three main groups: Ethiopian immigrants whose naturalization completion depends to a large extent upon their conversion; naturalized citizens (*olim*; lit. ascendants), mostly from the former Soviet Union, encouraged by the state to undergo conversion; and non-citizens (either holders of tourist visas or temporary residency permits), usually spouses of Jewish Israeli citizens, who often face weighty legal and bureaucratic obstacles in attempting to convert in Israel. Conversion in the last category requires the authorization of a special committee (the Committee for Exceptional Cases), which is notorious for its suspicion of applicants' religious sincerity, and for its anxiety over the possibility that unprivileged individuals (such as foreign workers and other citizens of undeveloped countries) might exploit Jewish conversion as a route to Israeli citizenship.⁴ While the conversion process of most, if not all, Ethiopian immigrants is integrated into time spent in state-sponsored absorption centers upon their arrival in Israel, the conversion of the second and third groups is undertaken only upon the voluntary, active initiative of individuals, in programs such as Mali and Yuvalim, which are the focus of this article.

Mali was established in 1999 as an attempt by the Israeli government to offer a resolution to the fiery debates flaring up between the state rabbinate and diasporic Jewish communities over its official recognition of non-Orthodox routes to conversion.⁵ Two years prior, Benjamin Netanyahu, then in his first term as Prime Minister, convened the Ne'eman Committee to address these issues and formulate a unified conversion policy. By way of compromise, the committee proposed the separation of the legal process of conversion – to remain in the hands of Orthodox rabbinic courts – from the pedagogical preparation process, which would take place at the more pluralistically-oriented Mali. Despite heated debate regarding the committee's recommendations, the Israeli government eventually adopted its basic principles and established Mali soon thereafter.

Mali targets non-Jewish naturalized citizens, mainly individuals with a background of immigration from the former Soviet Union, but also occasionally other permanent residents. The typical 'client' of Mali would have arrived in Israel under the expansive auspices of the Israeli Law of Return – a law that, since the 1970s, has granted not only Jews but also family members (up to third-generation direct descendants) of Jews eligibility for immigration and citizenship. Non-Jewish naturalized citizens and their descendants are neither recognized by the rabbinate as Jews nor registered as such in the population registry.

In fully subsidizing the program, marketing it to the Russian-speaking population, and offering classes in numerous locales with the option of learning in either Russian or Hebrew, Mali clearly actualizes the state's 'national mission' to Judaize or 'bring back' this desired population (Kravel-Tovi, 2012, 2015). The moral and ideological idea behind this scheme is that in offering non-Jewish olim accessible conversion, the state enables them to fully integrate within the Jewish-Israeli society – a collective to which they are already connected genealogically and socio-logically. Paraphrasing Ian Lustick concerning Israel's non-Arab immigration policy (Lustick, 1999), one could say that Mali targets non-Jewish – but also non-Arab – citizens.

In contrast, the conversion candidates at the religious Kibbutz Yuvalim encounter a remarkably different paradigm. To begin with, its conversion program was established in the 1980s, more than a decade before the State of Israel developed the organizational infrastructure necessary to sustain the 'national mission'. In Yuvalim's history, one can find traces of earlier concerns raised by Israeli rabbis in the 1970s, regarding intermarriage taking place in the secular kibbutz movement between Jewish Israelis and non-Jewish, non-Israeli volunteers. Yuvalim always targeted its conversion program at non-citizens, offering them the opportunity to live on its kibbutz, combining religious communal life, work, connection with a hosting family, Hebrew study, and education for a Jewish conversion taught in English.

Unlike the citizens I met in Mali's conversion class, the students I met at Yuvalim held either a tourist visa or a temporary residency permit. A few were eligible for immigration under the Law of Return, an option that only one of them selected. Most of the students hailed from European or North American

backgrounds, and were the partners (sometimes by civil marriage conducted outside of Israel) of Jewish Israeli citizens. As temporary residents, these candidates were not entitled to undergo conversion as a matter of course. Instead, their conversion required the authorization of the special committee I mentioned earlier.

At least half of the Yuvalim students I met during my fieldwork entered its conversion program before receiving the committee's permission, a situation that placed them in a particularly vulnerable position.⁶ Without this approval and eventual successful completion of the conversion process, these individuals knew that they could secure citizenship only by virtue of marriage, a route that is notoriously long and often uncertain in outcome. For the tourist visa holders, the implications of their legal marginality without the conversion certificate meant they were unable to work, to receive social security benefits, or even to legally stay in Israel.

To be sure, the lived experience of conversion students, both at Mali and Yuvalim, related unavoidably to their different positionalities in the religiopolitical regime of Jewishness in Israel. Furthermore, fundamental differences among converts in each of these schools impacted upon their social power and personal desires to become Jewish. Interestingly, and irrespective of these differences, teachers in both institutes spoke quite similarly in the language of choice, and engaged with similar dilemmas arising from its compromised nature. In what follows, I delve into this complicated dynamic.

The language of choice

It was 7:00 a.m. on the first day of class, and the classroom at Yuvalim's Jewish conversion program was nearly empty. A short corridor led from this classroom to one belonging to the Hebrew language program; morning greetings, expressed in a blend of languages and accents, drifted towards us. In the classroom with me were three young, fair-haired, light-skinned, European women. We made small talk about the variable weather, trying to break the ice while waiting for the first session to begin. Two more students joined us, nodding politely as they entered. Soon after, Hanan, an elderly kibbutz member, entered the classroom, introduced himself as the Torah teacher for the conversion program, and readily articulated what he claimed to be 'some of my most important messages to you':

We have a remarkable and rich program although a bit shortened and dense. It is dense because you are so few this time. We have small programs, here in Yuvalim and more generally. You know that only few people choose to convert. Conversion is difficult. *I* must observe all the commandments because *I* was born a Jew. *I* cannot choose, but all those who were not born as Jews are not obliged to practice. However, there are people, like you, who want to be Jewish, people who think Jewish life is true and good. There are all kinds of reasons to want to convert. You know, some religions proselytize, try to convince people to join them. Judaism is not like that at all.

Judaism is not a missionary religion. It accepts any human being as he is. The Seven Laws of Noah pertain to every person in the world. Only Jews are obliged to observe all the commandments. [Laughing] Think twice before you choose to move from the seven commandments to the whole package.

Hanan welcomed his students by portraying Jewish conversion as a voluntary entry into a highly demanding way of life, so demanding that relatively few people dared to embark upon it; his claim resonated in the nearly empty classroom. In emphasizing the binding nature of observant Jewish life, Hanan construed *giyyur* as an act involving deep responsibility, necessitating much deliberation and premeditation. It is essentially an act of choice for non-Jews, but after making this choice, it entails many inescapable obligations. In line with Jewish law, Hanan treated Jewishness as an unalterable fact, an identity independent of personal consciousness, commitment or religious choice (see Sagi and Zohar, 2007: 15). Whereas Hanan presented himself as tied to Jewish religious commitments by birth, lacking the opportunity to consider alternatives, his students were free not to commit themselves to Judaism. By juxtaposing his lack of choice with a rather simplistic vision of their freedom to make a choice, he idealized the notion of voluntary conversions. His stress on Judaism as non-missionary religion only reinforced this ideal. As Jews do not actively seek converts, so goes the logic, Jewish conversion must be solely for those who voluntarily seek it.

Most, if not all, of the conversion educators I met throughout my fieldwork exhibited similar idealized perspectives on Jewish conversion, both in class and in interviews. One Mali teacher, for example, emphasized a few times in class that minors (that is, boys and girls before their *Bar* and *Bat Mitzvah*, at ages 13 and 12 respectively) were not obliged to ‘accept the commandments’ in order to convert, because they were yet to develop satisfactory judgement regarding their future. Once, he made a link between this legal tenet of conversion and the rabbinical principle that ‘acceptance [of the commandments] must derive from the person, from his or her conscious; it cannot be enforced’. Other teachers asserted, on several occasions, that Judaism – as opposed to other religions – does not seek, let alone coerce, individuals to join.

As some scholars of Jewish studies have shown, this assertion is debatable from historical and theological perspectives (e.g. Berman, 2009: 20–24; Cohen, 1982; Parfitt and Trevisan Semi, 2002; Rosenbloom, 1978: 93–115). What is important, for my purpose as an ethnographer, is to recognize that my interlocutors regard this assertion as a means to augment the perception of voluntary conversion. It helps conversion teachers adhere to an ideal imagery of ‘Jews by choice’.

As Hanan’s introductory words demonstrate, this imagery enters the classroom, weaving its way into interactions, and the expectations teachers have for their students. For example, take the following excerpt from a session that Zohar, a Mali program teacher, dedicated to matters of dietary law. In the midst of lecturing

on the subject, he broke from his main line to idealize the notion of ‘Jews by choice’:

A person who really wants to be integrated into the Jewish people must undergo what each Jew undergoes, and this must be done out of freedom and choice – a true intention and desire to embrace the Torah and its commandments. It is your choice to undergo conversion and accept the commandments. You need so much drive, and not to despair.

The idea of choice also informed how conversion teachers spoke about and were instructed to imagine their ideal students. In one of Mali’s pedagogic workshops for some 20 teachers, Nachshon, a senior staffer, related his encounter with a former Mali student, an FSU immigrant who decided to withdraw from the program:

I want to tell you a story about one of our students, who did not want to continue. Her teachers sent her to me so that I would convince her to stay. [She was] a very intelligent woman. I asked her, ‘Why?’ And she told me: ‘I studied. I listened. I really love the [Jewish] roots, but conversion is not for me.’ And I told her: ‘We succeeded with you. You got a thought-out decision for your life.’ Remember all of you, there is a fine line between encouraging conversion and the attempt to convince someone to convert. I would like you to give to your students the ability to choose for themselves. Let them make their own choice.

Nachshon’s framing of this case in positive terms, as an educational ideal to which teachers should aspire, surprised me. After all, Mali and other state-conversion institutions invest substantial effort in encouraging conversion among non-Jewish FSU immigrants and their descendants (Kravel-Tovi, 2012). Like all Mali teachers and staffers, Nachshon knew all too well that the majority of non-Jewish olim and their descendants choose not to undergo conversion – a choice that, when considered collectively, preoccupies policy-makers, rabbis and administrators, who fear for their informal assimilation and large-scale intermarriage with Jews. Nachshon also knew that Mali is measured by its ability to convert as many non-Jewish citizens as possible. In fact, a rise in student withdrawal rates preoccupies Mali from time to time, and has even notoriously featured in governmental and public debates.

In another Mali teachers’ workshop, one of Nachshon’s colleagues asked his audience to ‘scrutinize each time a candidate leaves the program, and see whose failure it is’: indeed ‘failure’, given that the aim of the program is to bring as many students to conversion completion as possible. And yet, Nachshon’s message makes no sense unless we consider the ideal of choice underlying conversion. Precisely because conversion is not a matter Nachshon took lightly, he asked teachers to make sure that conversion candidates reevaluate their initial choice, even if Mali and even the broader ‘national mission’ pays the price for their

changing their minds. Nachshon wanted Mali students to recognize that the alternative – not to convert – persistently exists as a valid choice, and he wanted Mali teachers to encourage a reflective and sincere process.

The problem of choice

Although conversion educators speak the idealized language of choice, they also hold a more complicated understanding of the remarkably different lived experience of their students. They are fully cognizant of their students' limited ability to maneuver the constraining religiopolitical order while 'choosing' their own path to Jewish life. This awareness poses a genuine problem for them; during my fieldwork, I often saw how they negotiated this tension among themselves and with their students. For some of them, this awareness existed, nevertheless, along with a sense, or hope, that their students still 'choose' wholeheartedly to become Jews.

David, a conversion teacher at Mali, told me:

giyyur is something very personal, determined, and meaningful, and I know the rabbis have always objected to forced conversion, but I know some of my students must feel somewhat forced. I cannot argue with their feeling. At the same time, I still think that, for some of my students, conversion does not feel like something enforced from above. Their choice definitely comes from them.

Another teacher said:

It is not easy not to be a Jew in Israel. Some *olim* already feel Jewish, but now they must undertake a religious way of life they do not necessarily want. We keep hearing it all the time; they come and tell us that they are forced to become religious Jews if they want to be Jews. I am sometimes not sure how to talk to my students about this.

Even though (or perhaps because) the tension between the religious ideal and political pressure is not resolvable, teachers reiterate the ideal as well as negotiate it intensively within everyday educational practice. Their success is limited.

On several occasions, I observed how teachers handled the 'choice problem' in class by evading direct confrontation with it. For example, when Zohar told his students, 'It is your choice to undergo conversion and accept the commandments', he narrowed the gap between these two actions, even though he knew that they were not one and the same. He knew that most, if not all, of his students were from a secular background, and were converting for the sake of full national belonging and in the context of marital relations (Kravel-Tovi, 2015), rather than necessarily to pursue a devotionist life of Orthodox religious observance. And yet, he equated the goal-oriented act of conversion with the religious requirements entailed therein. When I probed him on the matter after class, he told me, somewhat apologetically, 'Look, we all know [converts] do not choose conversion out of religious

motivations to accept the commandments. I am not a naive dreamer, but I don't want to spur debate on the matter in class. I just move forward.'

In Mali's workshops, dilemmas about student choice loomed large in teachers' discussions about the issues they encountered in their classes. In particular, teachers were often unsure of how to talk to students about the mandatory requirements of conversion and Orthodox Judaism without appearing too forceful. Their fear partially stemmed from a conflict between Mali's aspiration to a pluralistic spirit and its commitment to the national mission. By sounding imposing, they might drive students away and undermine both goals. But their preoccupation with the matter also had much to do with their idealized premises about voluntary conversion. They feared that imposing rhetoric in class would unavoidably cast conversion candidates as passive political subjects, propelled by powerful authorities rather than self-driven. Take, for example, the following exchange held at Mali during a session dedicated to the fostering of engaging pedagogies:

Shlomi (a teacher): We need to always remember the importance of choice.

Michael (the Mali staffer leading the session): Right. A teacher can easily create an intimidating ambience in class simply by how he presents things. It is a matter of semantics. Never say 'forbidden'. Use other, softer words.

Uri (another teacher) [interrupting]: But what if I need to say 'forbidden' because something is indeed forbidden according to Jewish law?

Michael: That is okay, but don't use 'forbidden' about other stuff.

Yaron (another teacher): A student asked me the other day if she is obliged to go to synagogue during Sabbath and high holidays. I told her that I *recommend, suggest* that she do so.

Michael [in a commending tone]: I like this language of advice, of choice.

Uri [unconvinced]: But she *is required to*. If you want to undergo conversion, these things are a must! There is no way around it.

Michael [discomfited with the direction the conversation has taken, concludes the conversation]: The question is whether a person will go to synagogue because I *forced* him or out of *his choice*.

Jewish choices on hold

A final example revealing the problem of choice comes from Yuvalim, from an exceptionally daring and blunt exchange held between the conversion students and one of the teachers. Two weeks into the program, the students posed to Harvey, the Jewish law teacher, a challenging question: What do you teachers and conversion representatives really expect us to become?

During the lunch break that preceded the class, the four female students shared their anxieties over the vague expectations placed on them in terms of gendered codes of modesty. While their two female conversion teachers and other female

kibbutz members wore loose trousers and did not necessarily cover their hair, they had heard rumors that in the rabbinic court, they would be expected to abide by a stricter code, including wearing dresses or skirts and, for married women, covering their hair. In the midst of the intense conversation, Carolina, a conversion candidate from Germany, complained:

What so bothers me here is that God gave me a brain to think with and free choice to act as I intend, but in the most meaningful process I have ever been through, I am not allowed to exercise all that God gave me. Even if we have a better sense of what they expect from us, do you really think we can allow ourselves to say ‘no’? I don’t think so.

The others nodded in dejected agreement. After some more deliberation on the matter, they decided to approach Harvey, their favorite teacher, reasonably expecting an honest and straightforward answer.

Harvey told them upfront the unspoken truths that most teachers privately acknowledge, but do not dare express openly to their students. He first addressed their immediate concern about modest dress, confirming that they were expected to adhere to the more stringent code, even if their teachers themselves do not exemplify it. He explained that Orthodox life in a religious kibbutz represents a relatively liberal and feminist orientation, while the judge sitting in the rabbinic court represents a more traditional and conservative sector of Orthodoxy. Extending this logic, he then explained that as converts, their role was to satisfy the rabbinic authorities, which would require them to put on hold their true and autonomous choice, at least provisionally. Marco, the only male student, was clearly affronted by this position. In an agitated voice, he interrupted Harvey: ‘Why do *we* have to put our choices on hold? Why can Michal be whatever she wants [knowing that I am a secular Jew], and you yourself tell us every once in a while about your choices [within Orthodox life], but we cannot?’ Harvey, apparently anticipating this question, readily replied: ‘You, like us, will also be able to choose one day. Only as Jews will you be free to make the kinds of choices that Jews make.’

As can be seen from both the lunch and class conversations, this group of converts felt affronted by an assault on their personal choice. They spoke as modern, liberal subjects, whose basic right, or duty, to choose their own way had been taken from them. Indeed, as many cultural scholars have showed, the idea and rhetoric of choice pervade multiple contexts, in which selves come to know, create and govern themselves (for a succinct review see Lahad, 2013)

When the class ended, I leafed through my field notes, going back to the program’s first class. There, I noted Hanan’s words (used to open a previous section of this article). He had presented a narrative that contrasted with Harvey’s with regard to the choices available for converts. Whereas Harvey put his students on hold, asking them to exercise patience until they were able to regain control over their life trajectories, Hanan urged them to exercise their power to choose

now, before they made an unbreakable commitment. And whereas Harvey acknowledged that Jews were free to make their own choices, Hanan presented himself as though he had no choice but to observe the commandments. While seemingly contradictory, the positions espoused by both teachers were correct. Hanan framed converts' choices as an unproblematized ideal, whereas Harvey bluntly strategized that his students put their 'Jewish choices on hold'. Looking at the faces of Marco, Carolina, and the other three candidates, I had no doubt which truth they better appreciated.

Jews by choice

On the several occasions when I have had the opportunity to present my ethnographic findings in academic settings, the audiences repeatedly pushed me to think about my fieldwork in terms of the state's 'religious coercion'. In fact, they often framed their questions as relevant to the 'agency' possessed by the converts (not a surprising framework, given its centrality in social scientific discourses), asking me to assess 'how much agency converts possess' and whether converts 'really choose' conversion. These questions undoubtedly derived from politicized discourse – shared by many of my academic interlocutors, most of whom are secular liberal Jewish Israelis – regarding 'religious coercion' as practiced by state rabbinic institutions. Assuming an imbalance between a powerful Orthodox conversion system and powerless conversion candidates, my audiences often evoked binary schemes of social power in order to understand a convert's supposed ability to choose.

However, my principal interest was not to assess whether converts 'really choose' conversion. What captured my attention in the field was the fact that, like my scholarly audiences, my ethnographic interlocutors voiced concern about converts' choices. In the classroom, in pedagogic workshops and in interviews with me, conversion teachers dedicated time and energy to discuss, in their own words, matters pertinent to choice. I found the teachers' concern for their candidates intricate and complex, laden with incongruities and practical dilemmas. This drew me even further into wanting to understand how and why the problem of conversion is often framed by the language of choice. The teachers' disquiet was undoubtedly entrenched within the same macro politics of religion and conversion that had from the outset prompted curiosity in my academic audiences.

This article is the result of these earlier conversations and observations. Its title is intended as a double or even triple entendre. Perhaps most obviously, it emphasizes choice, both as a central organizing principle and as a fomenter of educational dilemmas for conversion teachers. It reflects my focus on the ways in which notions of choice animate pedagogic formations of Jewish conversion in Israel. It also makes use of the phrase 'Jews by choice', an epithet appended to converts whose experience of conversion is the subject of the article. The phrase further alludes to the biblical notion of the Israelites as the 'chosen people'. Shaye Cohen (1999),

a historian of ancient Judaism, foregrounds the notion of choice in his account of early rabbinic formations of conversion to Jewish life:

God chose the Israelites to be his people and the Israelites chose God to be their Lord. Such a conception provides an ideological basis for conversion, because the link between God and his people is not ‘natural’ but ‘covenantal’ and would seem to allow others to choose God to be their lord. (pp. 130–1)

Whereas the biblical myths of chosenness reinforce the idea that the Israelites chose and were chosen by God, contemporary understandings of Jewish identity contains kinship-related, essentialized, and even racial overtones (e.g. Cadge and Davidman, 2006; Glenn and Sokoloff, 2010).⁷ Within this logic, contemporary discourses on conversion, mostly among American Jewry, celebrate the idea that non-Jews ‘choose’ the untrivial path to Jewish life (Homolka et al., 1997; Weiss and Silverman, 2000). Take, for example, the ubiquity of the trope of choice in the following editorial piece, published in an American-Jewish newspaper. Under the title ‘Jews by Choice’, the piece describes a meeting held between an American-Jewish rabbi and a group of converts:

The stories around the table were moving. For those of us born Jewish, it might be hard to imagine not being Jewish. It might be impossible to really know if we were to choose, how we would choose. And yet, for the individuals around the table, Judaism was their choice. And each had a deeply moving reason for making that difficult choice. (Jacobs, 2011: 20)

It is not surprising that this trope flourishes in the American religious landscape, where religious choice, including the experience of Jews, is so fundamental to the American experience (Sarna, 2005). By importing the appellation ‘Jews by Choice’ to the remarkably different political context of attaining a new Jewish identity in the Jewish state, I invite an ironic defamiliarization.

In exploring how my interlocutors in conversion schools understood and struggled with the choice of their students, I demonstrate the value of looking into this concept ethnographically, from emic perspectives. Jewish religious conversion in Israel is a productive site for such a grounded exploration of choice precisely because it lies at the intersection of macro-level state arrangements and deeply individual identity passages. By looking ethnographically into how conversion teachers, as key mediators of conversion, give sense and meaning to the choice of their politically-embedded students, we can gain insight into the ways they negotiate the conflicting forces underwriting their labor. When these teachers struggle with how to take into account their students’ compromised ability to ideally exercise their choice, they unavoidably struggle with an incongruity between religious scripts and the state’s conversion policies and practices.

Teachers’ preoccupation with this incongruity complicates common Israeli discourses concerning ‘religious coercion’. In their work with conversion candidates,

these teachers serve as a proxy for the Jewish state, and work to secure its Jewish – that is, both ethnonational and Orthodox – character. At the same time, as educators, they face the weight of their students’ vulnerability as non-Jewish social actors. Their professional and religious integrity does not allow them to simply surrender their religious scripts. Instead, they work through the idea that converts must constitute themselves as Jews by choice.

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Notes

1. Scholars have often framed their discussion in terms of choice, but, invariably, they have also employed the interrelated concepts of agency, autonomy, intentionality, and activity. Either way, these scholarly discussions of choice build, even if only implicitly, on key Western bifurcations: autonomy versus authority, agency versus structure, and activity versus passivity. Relatedly, the very engagement with questions of choice cannot be separated from liberal conceptions of personhood regarding autonomous individuals, capable of (if not ‘enforced to’) making their own choices. Indeed, from liberal standpoints, even religious persuasion is condemned or is in need of justification (Thiessen, 2011).
2. For more on the gendered aspects of conversion, see Kravel-Tovi (2014, 2017).
3. Within Israel’s contested politics of religion and state, even the seemingly secured Orthodox conversion route has come to possess its own contingencies. For example, in 2008, in what came to be known as the ‘Druckman affair’, a panel of ultra-Orthodox rabbis invalidated conversions authorized by the head of the state conversion apparatus; in subsequent years, marriage registers at the rabbinate refused to recognize state-certified converts (whom, they suspected, lacked religious sincerity), thereby not allowing them to get married as Jews.
4. For data on conversion statistics, see Kaplan and Seri-Levi (2013).
5. Over the years, Israel has witnessed a growing demand for recognition of alternative forms of Jewish conversion. At the present time, any person who undergoes (or even only ritually finalizes) non-Orthodox conversion in any Jewish community outside of Israel can become a Jewish Israeli citizen via the Law of Return. However, a person who undergoes non-Orthodox conversion in Israel cannot be recognized as a Jew. For non-Jews who already hold Israeli citizenship, a non-Orthodox conversion is invalid for the purpose of changing one’s ethno-legal status.
6. The vulnerability of conversion candidates ultimately projected onto Yuvalim’s program itself; it closed down a few months after I finished my fieldwork.

7. At the same time, because of the voluntary nature of Jewish identity and Jewish community outside of Israel, every Jew can be deemed a 'Jew by choice' simply because he or she chooses whether to live Jewishly or not (e.g. Kravel-Tovi, 2016; Elazar, 1995).

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