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## As If It Was Ours All Along: Precarious Belonging, Jewish Habitus and the Materialisation of Conversion in Israel

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### ABSTRACT

Most scholarship on Jewish conversion in Israel emphasises the precarious entanglement between the process and the politics of the Jewish State. This article, instead, unpacks the uncertain modes of converts' belonging from an unexplored yet central angle – that of a Jewish *habitus*. I trace the challenging apprenticeship that aspiring converts undertake in developing a Jewish habitus, and the deeply ambiguous modes of belonging that such an apprenticeship shapes. By evaluating ethnographically the discourses and practices that aspiring converts are introduced to, this article detects how attempts to help them adopt the Jewish insiders' embodied dispositions and materially embedded engagements simultaneously, albeit inadvertently, mark them as profoundly outsiders. The case study of Jewish conversion in Israel offers a compelling example with which to consider the conceptual links between belonging, habitus and conversion.

**KEYWORDS** Religious conversion; Jewish conversion; habitus; belonging; material culture; Israel; Jews

Jewish conversion (*giyyur*) in Israel is associated, notoriously, with precarious politics of belonging. Contingent upon shifting and disputed institutional arrangements, conversion frequently gives rise to anxious engagements between conversion candidates and state bureaucrats, and evokes opaque and sometimes unpredictable dynamics of recognition. For non-Jews attempting either to undergo conversion in Israel or to be recognised as Jews following conversion procedures carried out in diasporic Jewish communities, the conversion controversies have a tangible impact on their inclusion in the Jewish-Israeli national fold, in particular their immigration, naturalisation, civil registration and personal statuses. Furthermore, upon the completion of the conversion process, converts often experience insecurity regarding the finality of their recognition as Jews. Indeed, over the last decade, prominent rabbinical judges retrospectively annulled the conversion of a seemingly unobservant female convert in one case, and rabbinic marriage registration officers denied converts' recognition as Jews in other cases.

This multifaceted precariousness of belonging has much to do with the fact that Israel is an ethnonational Jewish state. Although it defines itself as a secular democracy and incorporates civil law in most areas, it nonetheless maintains a weak separation between religion and state. This political structure is contestably sustained by an Orthodox monopoly, which obliges candidates to demonstrate adherence to strict Orthodox

rules of religious observance, even if their motivations for conversion lie elsewhere. Expectedly, scholars of Jewish conversion in Israel have paid close attention to these and other entanglements between the politics of the Jewish state and Jewish conversion. These studies reveal much about the instable formations of Jewish belonging at the macro level (Ellenson & Gordis 2012; Waxman 2013), as well as the implications of these formations for real people located in this distinct site of personal-political state enactment (Kravel-Tovi 2014, 2015; Neiterman & Rapoport 2009).

Central as these institutional dynamics are to the understanding of converts' unstable modes of belonging, in this article I want to call attention to an as-yet unexplored mechanism that contributes to shaping Orthodox conversion in Israel as a precarious matter. In particular, I trace the challenging apprenticeship that aspiring converts undertake in order to develop a Jewish habitus, and the deeply ambiguous modes of belonging that such an apprenticeship shapes. By evaluating ethnographically the discourses and practices that aspiring converts are introduced to, this article detects how the attempts to help them adopt Jewish embodied dispositions and materially embedded engagements simultaneously, albeit inadvertently, mark them as profoundly outsiders. The 'pedagogy of conversion' (Galonnier & de los Rios 2016) places on aspiring Jewish converts the expectation to actively immerse themselves in Jewish life, to adopt a predefined religious code of conduct, and to act in the world of Jewish objects within which this code of conduct is so intimately embedded. This pedagogy both invites and regiments converts to nurture and perform a Jewish habitus.

But far from securing such a habitus, Jewish conversion pedagogy cultivates ambivalent modes of belonging, prompting in aspiring converts the fear that they will never manage to have a 'feel for the game'; that they will fail to turn Jewish modes of being into an internalised 'second nature' (Bourdieu 1990: 56). As aspiring converts respond to the demands of Orthodox conversion, they inevitably oscillate between the possibility of inclusion and the experience of ineptness, between insiderness and outsiderhood, and ultimately, between equal and inferior participation in Jewish life. These double-edged undercurrents unfold in large part because aspiring converts are socialised into a Jewish habitus in adulthood rather than in childhood, and because the material objects, which serve to mediate significant segments of Jewish cultural and religious life, have inaccessible pasts as well as complex embodied ways of being used and experienced. Paradoxically, precisely by inviting candidates to reorganise their embodied relations to everyday Jewish social order and practice, and to do so alongside their fellow Jews, conversion agents expose corporeally and materially demarcated boundaries that place converts as, potentially, enduringly liminal Jews.

Across all religious streams in Jewish life, the prospective Jewish convert (in Israel and elsewhere) is habitually required to attain knowledge of Judaism (i.e. Jewish law, customs, history and canonical texts); to present oneself before a Jewish religious court for approval; and to mark his or her new belonging by immersion in a ritual bath and circumcision (for men only). Because authorisation to conduct Jewish conversions in Israel has been vested by the state in the Orthodox stream, a successful conversion in this context depends on the convert's adherence to a specific Orthodox lifestyle, one which would include keeping dietary laws, observing the Sabbath, and respecting the norms of sexual modesty.

This article is grounded in three years of ethnographic study (2004–2007) of Orthodox, state-endorsed institutional settings. Specifically, it is based on multi-sited fieldwork carried out at various locations where aspiring converts and Orthodox

conversion agents encounter each other, including conversion schools, rabbinical courts and ritual baths. In this article, I will refer mainly to my fieldwork (2004–2005) at the ‘Yuvalim’ conversion school (my pseudonym for a small conversion school, located in a religious Kibbutz), and at the Rabbinical Court of Conversion.

The Yuvalim conversion programme is operated, in English, by members of the kibbutz, and runs for five months, during which conversion candidates normally study, live and work in the kibbutz. I accompanied two consecutive classes. Many of the aspiring converts I met in these two groups were relatively young (in their twenties to forties), and of either European, or South- and North-American origin. Some were in relationships with Israeli Jews. Most did not have a Jewish background; some had had a religious, usually Christian, upbringing. They had joined this particular programme, first, because they were not sufficiently fluent in Hebrew to attend one of the many Hebrew-run conversion classes; and second, because unlike most of other Orthodox conversion programmes, Yuvalim allowed the participation of non-citizens (most of the aspirant converts there held either a tourist or a temporary residency visa).

Whereas the conversion school, like Yuvalim, is where candidates are socialised into Orthodox Jewish world, the conversion rabbinic court is where candidates are supposed to demonstrate their readiness to adopt this kind of life. In these bureaucratic encounters, converts perform their intimate acquaintance with Orthodox conduct, a performance that helps the judges determine the converts’ sincerity (Krael-Tovi 2012). The presentation of a sufficiently ready Jewish habitus is integral to this performance.

In order to frame my ethnographic analysis clearly, I now present a brief review of the links I draw between religious conversion, belonging and its material manifestations, and habitus. I do not intend to focus on each concept in its own right. In any case, it would not be possible to exhaust all – or even most – of the lines of inquiry generated by these rich and contested concepts. Instead, this brief review will help flesh out the utility of thinking about the intersection between them.

### Conversion, Habitus and Material Forms of Belonging

Though frequently invoked, conversion is an analytically ambiguous category. It covers a wide variety of religious changes, often with little in common with one another. Employing the concept of ‘conversion’ in the Jewish context is far from trivial. An association with the Christian faith is attached to the term, calling into question its applicability (Gooren 2014). In addition, Jewish conversion encompasses ethnonational and orthopractical meanings not captured in the Christian equivalent. Nonetheless, in both academic and colloquial usage, one can find the term ‘Jewish conversion’, alongside the Hebrew term *giyyur*.

Across the enormous differences between contemporary Jewish conversion procedures in various religious contexts and streams, *giyyur* is enacted and construed as a rite of passage that brings about new belonging. This notion features ubiquitously in public discourses on conversion and frequently came up during my fieldwork. Ultimately, belonging is about the feeling of ‘being at home’: about being included as a welcomed participant in a collective whose organising principles are accessible (Yuval-Davis 2006). More than simply the formal regulation of membership, belonging signifies the yearning for an insider’s mode of being – an affective dimension which, as Probyn (1996) argues, is constitutive of the concept itself: *be-longing*.

To the extent that converts join new groups and shift their communal allegiances, the concept of belonging illuminates integral aspects of the conversion experience. Scholars have demonstrated the utility of this concept for the understanding of conversion as a dynamic and politicised process: one consistently in the process of making, re-making and imagining boundaries. From this perspective, we learn, for example, how Muslim and Evangelical converts in the U.S.A are 'longing for formal training and community belonging' (Galonnier & de los Rios 2016: 77), an aspiration they hardly manage to achieve. We also learn about how Dutch and German converts to Islam handle their seemingly divergent national and religious belongings as they cross the racialised lines that lie between the 'us' (the autochthonous and white European) and the 'them' (the foreign and possibly dangerous Muslims) (Özyürek 2014; Vroon 2014). To give an example from the Israeli context, we also learn how Russian-speaking non-Jewish immigrants to Israel, who strive to shed their status as 'others' or 'incomplete insiders' (Kravel-Tovi 2015), must work through a 'belonging hierarchy' (Neiterman & Rapoport 2009) and gift-relations with the state (Kravel-Tovi 2014) on their path to inclusion.

In calling for a conceptual shift in the study of belonging, Eva Youkhana (2015) highlights the importance of material attachments and corporeal experiences in the making of social boundaries. Taking her cue from the Oxford English Dictionary definition for the word 'belonging' as a 'circumstance connected with a person or a thing', Youkhana emphasises 'the importance of things, infrastructures, artefacts, and material culture in general for the production of belonging' (2015: 11). As conversion might be framed as a kind of 'immigration' into a new group, it is interesting to note that this materially, and corporeally, informed approach to belonging is evident in studies of immigrants and their negotiations of social boundaries (e.g. Arkin 2009; Savaş 2014).

Such an emphasis on the daily corporeal, material and practice-oriented dimensions of belonging is particularly productive for the approach that I adopt here in relation to conversion. This perspective helps me to foreground the centrality of habitus in discussing the precarious modes of belonging that Orthodox Jewish conversion in Israel yields. For the purpose of this article, I have intentionally set aside theoretical considerations regarding the rather complex and loosely delineated concept of habitus, as developed by Pierre Bourdieu across his writings. Nor do I attend to the debates regarding the applicability of the concept of habitus in the study of religion and religious conversion (e.g. Belzen 1999; Mellor & Shilling 2014; Swift 2012: 270, 272). Instead, I seek to highlight certain aspects of the concept of habitus, in order to better explain how and why Jewish conversion offers aspiring converts an awkward, if not impossible, sense of belonging – of 'being at home'.

Two aspects of Bourdieu's development of the concept of habitus are of particular importance for my discussion. The first is the focus on the socially informed body (Bourdieu 1977: 124), that is, the fact that structuring and structured practices always operate directly upon and through the body. The body that Bourdieu refers to is positioned at the nexus between individuals and their biographies on the one hand, and the societies and fields to which they belong on the other. This is the site where groups (for Bourdieu, mostly social classes) inscribe their social schemas on individuals; where these groups generate deeply rooted inclinations through which individuals understand who they are and how to operate in the world in its most mundane instantiations (1998). As a matrix of such both internalised and generative schemes (Bourdieu 1977: 87), habitus provides individuals with guidelines for daily conduct and orientation – a prescriptive lens through which they can view the

world and a certain position from which they can orient their behaviour. Since social structuring happens at the most routinised levels of practice (i.e. standing, walking, speaking and thinking; Bourdieu 1990: 70), habitus provides a minute, but all-encompassing, cultural knowledge that becomes, as hinted earlier in the article, a 'second nature' (Bourdieu 1990: 56).

The second aspect I want to highlight is the biographical depth of habitus. Typically, a person acquires the appropriate dispositions and codes of conduct over the course of one's upbringing, through the accumulation of formative routinised experiences in primary arenas of socialisation. This is precisely how and why habitus achieves its unique power as a doxa – a set of deeply entrenched and tacit habits (Bourdieu 1977: 164). Bourdieu realised that habitus might be re-structured and transformed, rather than only replicated, over the course of one's life (Reay 2004: 434). However, as some scholars of religious conversion have pointed out, Bourdieu did not pay much attention to re-socialisation in later phases in life – a theoretical weakness that bears on how we can understand the lived experience of converts in adulthood (Coleman & Collins 2000; Kupari 2016: 22).

Religious conversion poses a disruption to the inertia of habitus. To the extent that adult converts have already accumulated their formative experiences elsewhere, they might feel misplaced in the religious and cultural field which they are attempting to enter. Relatedly, lacking the appropriate and intuitive knowledge that their native religious peers manifest (Belzen 1999), they are not only missing a Jewish doxa, but also display inferior religious and cultural competence. In line with these understandings, scholars have demonstrated, among other aspects, how converts negotiate conflicting habitus (Haustein 2011); how they appropriate a new moral and religious habitus by embodied and materially embedded practices (Coleman & Collins 2000; Klaver & van de Kamp 2011; Winchester 2008); and how their original embodied social filter influence their emerging religiosity (Coppins 2011; Shanneik 2011). Most of these studies employ the concept of habitus to theorise the links between religious spirituality and the body (with its senses, situatedness and materialities; see also De Witte 2011; Swift 2012). Questions of belonging appear in them only in passing. Conversely, I seek to forefront such questions.

Obviously, my account focuses ethnographically on a specific context of religious conversion, with its distinctive implications for the formation of habitus. In particular, I bear in mind the fact that Orthodox religious life is intrinsically rooted in Jewish law and routinised practice in numerous domestic and public spheres. I also take into account the fact that, as a Jewish state, Israel fosters a rich civil religion, including a Jewish calendar and a Jewish material culture that saturates the public sphere. This all-encompassing set of structuring practices is both cultural and religion, with a sometimes blurred boundary between these two seemingly separated realms (see also Özyürek 2014: 4). However, the theoretical implications of this particularly situated ethnographic account – regarding conversion as a belated socialisation or 'immigration' into a new habitus, materiality and belonging – have a broader resonance in other contexts of conversion. To the degree that conversion entails the habituation to a new habitus – a process that both projects and constitutes the demarcation of social boundaries – the case study of Jewish conversion in Israel presents a compelling example with which to think through the conceptual links between belonging, habitus and conversion.

## As if It Was Ours All Along

It was lunchtime, and we – Marry, Heike, Fred, Elica and myself – headed together to the Yuvalim dining hall, grateful for the late-morning springtime sun. Elica, an Austrian woman married (in a civil marriage) to an Israeli Jew, was very upset and needed to air her frustration. She related how the day before, she and Yaron (her spouse) spent a ridiculous amount of time waiting for ‘a rabbi in Jerusalem’, only to discover that her conversion file had been misplaced and that she now needed, two weeks into the conversion programme, to resubmit her petition. Like some of her classmates, Elica held a temporary resident visa; under this legal rubric, she was not entitled to start a conversion programme until formally permitted to do so by the Committee for Exceptional Cases. Elica’s interlocutors sympathised with her. Marry shared her own ‘still ongoing issue’, as she described it, with the Rabbinat.

Fred, a convert from Germany, who had listened quietly until this point, changed the subject. ‘I also want to tell you about an issue I’m having, but not with the rabbis – with the *mezuzah*’ (a parchment scroll mounted on the doorpost, designating the home as Jewish). His classmates and I looked at him, somewhat bemused. He told us that every time he entered a room with an affixed *mezuzah* to its doorpost and sent his hand to kiss it – as Rivka, the conversion teacher, had instructed her students to become accustomed to doing – he felt like he is deceiving God, fellow Jews and himself. ‘I’m not 100% sure that we are even allowed to do all this stuff as non-Jews’, he explained. He then proceeded to tell us about a conversation he had had with Rivka the other day. During the course of the conversation, Rivka reassured him that aspiring converts can and should practice many religious deeds, since they were now practicing how to be Observant Jews. But this answer did not satisfy him, because he knew that there were some practices they were not allowed to carry out until they had been formally admitted to the fold. In this spirit, Rivka suggested that if he wanted, he could buy his own *mezuzah* (I assume she meant both the scroll and the *mezuzah* case), since he would soon be able to hang it in his own apartment after concluding his conversion. ‘Rivka told me I’m welcome to already purchase it, but that it is up to me.’

On entering the dining hall, I followed Elica and Fred as they went to the sinks to perform the ritual of washing their hands before the meal (as observant Jews do before eating bread). I watched as they conducted the ritual: filling the plastic two-handled *Natla* cup, pouring water twice on each hand, drying them with a paper towel, and muttering quietly, somewhat hesitantly, the benediction. A few minutes later, as we sat with the others in one of the dining room’s long tables, Elica continued the conversation Fred had started. She recalled how, at the first Sabbath dinner she had shared with her traditionally oriented in-laws, a few years ago (a while before she decided to undergo conversion), she had been impressed with both the idea of ritual handwashing and her in-laws’ decorated silver *Natla*. However, she added with some embarrassment, she did not quite know what to do with it when it was her turn. ‘I assume *now* you’re an expert’, Heike responded, in a somewhat barbed tone. Elica, possibly resisting the temptation to sting back, replied straightforwardly:

To be honest? I’m unsure that I will ever master these rituals or be able to be natural with the silver cup, my new skirts, or all the other things we learn about and need to use as if it was ours all along.

The others nodded, conveying the sense that they knew what she was talking about. As we rushed back to the classroom, Elica apologised. 'Sorry guys, for being so grumpy today. I just feel we confront at the moment so many things all at once.'

Unsurprisingly, throughout my fieldwork at Yuvalim, many of the meaningful exchanges between the conversion classmates took place outside of the classroom, where they had precious opportunities to conduct backstage conversations beyond the scrutiny of their instructors. I found the conversation described above meaningful because the converts allowed themselves to share with each other how bothered they were by the 'so many things' confronting them 'all at once'. I was quite surprised that, alongside the predictably frustrating encounters candidates had experienced with the rabbinic bureaucracy, they were just as worried about their emerging embodied practices and material attachments. Definitely, their sense of uncertain religious performance had to do with the fact that they were novices. But no less important, and as I will show in the following pages, their sense of inaptness also had to do with the fact that they felt expected – but felt incompetent – to perform religiously 'as if it was [theirs] all along'.

As part of their 'pedagogies of conversion' (Galonnier & de los Rios 2016), teachers repeatedly brought identifiably Jewish objects to the rather utilitarian conversion classroom. They employed various objects, some of which Vanessa Ochs (1999) would have defined as 'articulate objects' – things that unambiguously mark a Jewish way of living (e.g. Sabbath candlesticks, Hanukah menorah, a glass of wine and fragrant spices) – as pedagogic tools to facilitate and deepen the conversion socialisation process. Sometimes, they left these artefacts on display in the classroom for a week or two, thus rendering the space – as Heike noted once – 'more Jewish'. The teachers also brought to class mundane objects and kitchenware (like pots and pans) with a possible religion function in observing Jewish law; they played Jewish music; and they brought to the classroom foods with a connection to relevant occasions of the Jewish year. In doing so, as Atara (one of the classroom instructors) once explained to me, they tried to confront some of the obstacles that they faced as conversion educators: to go beyond the 'textbook' pedagogy and to fill classrooms with a tangible sense of Jewish daily life, to overcome resistance, boredom or fatigue on the part of converts, and to animate group discussions. Such an enlivened pedagogy also helped them to transmit more effectively the 'know-how' of Jewish life, rather than merely the 'know what' (see also Galonnier & de los Rios 2016: 64). In other words, the teachers attempted to make the learning process more meaningful and inclusive, in order to better connect the prospective converts to Jewish life, and help them secure the insider's modes of belonging.

## Belonging and Belongings

To the extent that the Jewish objects travelled provisionally from the teachers' home to the classroom, they implicitly highlighted the gap between Jews and converts, between the Jewish home to which these objects organically belonged and the conversion classroom to which they are displaced. In being presented to the class, these objects were instrumentalised as vivid demonstrations of what 'real Jewish life' looks like. These objects were also employed, awkwardly, out of the Jewish temporal context. For example, in order to teach converts how to observe Shabbat, Shabbat candle-lighting was practiced on a weekday. Repeatedly throughout my fieldwork, I felt a growing sense that Jewish life, or the 'Jewish home' (Ochs 1999), was 'packed into class'. The



metaphor of ‘packed Jewish life’ materialised as, on one occasion, Harvey, one of the teachers, came to class with an enormous suitcase. When asked whether he was on his way to the airport, he laughed and replied: ‘No, I just packed and brought my home to show you how Jews live.’ When Miriam, another teacher, demonstrated Sabbath candle-lighting, the class was enthralled because, as Heike put it, ‘[it] was so natural for her, she really knew from within how to do it’. The teacher’s habitual movements stood in sharp contrast to the students’ clumsiness and hesitancy in practicing Jewish prayers and rituals. In this and other moments, the habitus gap between the still-outsiders and the complete insiders created a tangible ambience of longing to belong.

This ambience was also highly tangible when converts engaged with teachers’ objects, confronting, in the process, their ineradicable lack of Jewish origins and upbringing. These objects presented converts with a certain otherness, not simply because the objects were not theirs but because they *could not* have been theirs. These Jewish objects had a lifespan that preceded that of converts as potential Jews. These teachers’ belongings belonged to a different temporal order, indexing past experiences, memories and relations that converts could only hear about and imagine from afar: that is, not from personal experience. If habitus is ‘an amalgamation of the impact of a certain society on an individuals’ past condensed into their predisposition for the present and the future’ (Grusendorf 2016: 7), one might say that the teachers’ belongings fleshed out the missing past, and hence the lack of appropriate predispositions for both the present and the future. As Rebecca Bryant writes (in a very different research context), ‘[there is] a connection between the question of what belongs to whom and who belongs where or with whom’ (2014: 695). In what follows, I illustrate the interdependent dynamics of longing, belonging and belongings that unfolded in the classroom when Atara brought her private collection of Haggadah books to class.

It was a busy period, just before Passover. Atara brought to the conversion class an impressive collection of Haggadah books. She spread them out on her table, and invited the students to gather around to have a look. ‘This is just a sample of my private collection’, she said. ‘Me and my deceased husband liked collecting them. Some we got as gifts from relatives who knew how we love them, others I bought on our travels. I can tell about most Haggadah books where and when I bought them.’ Some of these Haggadah books seemed old, crumpled and stained, and the converts seemed hesitant and uncomfortable thumbing through them, as though the books were a museum collection on display. ‘My deceased husband collected them from different places. This one, for example [pointing to a particularly worn Haggadah] found its way to our house from my husband’s extended family, who escaped from Germany at the very last minute.’ When the class ended, I went out with Kathy and Silvia. We were all impressed with Atara’s collection, and Kathy wondered rhetorically if she would ever be able to own even half of Atara’s collection of Haggadah books. A few weeks later, in the course of a conversation we had over a lunch break about our recent Passover experiences, Silvia asked me about the festive meal that I attended with my secular family. Interestingly, one of the questions she asked was whether my family ‘also holds a great collection of Haggadah’.

By capturing a rich Jewish past, this private collection of Haggadah books simultaneously connected and disconnected converts with the Jewish fold. On the one hand, the collection provided converts with a glimpse of Jewish life outside the

classroom and outside the contemporary Jewish moment. By this, the collection harnessed the power of living history in order to facilitate the development of the converts' habitus, as those expected to buy and to use Haggadah books in their new life. It seemed to immerse, or situate, converts within a magnificent Jewish communal, family and material tradition. The Haggadah books fostered a sense of nostalgia, not only for Atara, who was clearly absorbed in the intimate and family memories that came flooding back to her as she talked about the books, but also for the converts, who seemed to fetishise the books as traces of an otherwise inaccessible living history and habitus. In common with the role of souvenirs in the lives of people in exile (Naficy 1991), the Haggadah books produced a tangible sense of imagined continuity and connectivity with something beyond the here-and-now. In this regard, the sheer materiality of the books – their poor condition, their aesthetics as old books – was more important than the text itself.

On the other hand, the encounter with these historically saturated Haggadah books was an encounter with a void – the absence, for the converts, of a living Jewish history, belonging and habitus. These books enfolded within their pages material traces of the many festive meals during which they were read, and of the various relationships that embedded their exchange. These books also captured the memory of the paths on which Jews wandered. One of these Haggadah books even possessed a unique aura, as it came from Nazi Germany. Similar to the Jewish belongings explored by Vanessa Ochs in the context of American Jewish homes (1999), the Haggadah books were animated by powerful stories about their social life. The stories seemed to ignite corporeal memories for Atara the narrator, but as they circulated around the room, they also seemed to generate aspiration, even a sort of envy, among the prospective converts. Lacking a Jewish past and family traditions of their own, the converts yearned for such a past. As Fred once told me, 'We only have a Jewish future; not a Jewish past, and not even a fully Jewish present.' In a way, the Haggadah books manifested a stronger and older agency as Jewish objects, in comparison to the converts as Jewish subjects. They pushed converts to confront their precarious belonging to the Jewish world. The encounter with the Haggadah books did not contribute to forming a deeper sense of belonging among the converts, because it was a nostalgic interaction with a past and habitus that did not 'belong' to them. This is why, I believe, the occasion turned out to be so effective and affective for many of the converts. This is also why Silvia was interested to learn, a few weeks later, about my secular family's collection of Haggadah books. Even though I am a secular Jew, I nonetheless represented for them a Jew with appropriate habits, memories and objects. From their perspective, I had something that they clearly desired.

### **Corporeal Taste**

Numerous studies have demonstrated the central role played by food and foodways (the production, preparation, serving and eating of food; Diemling & Ray 2014) in the politics of belonging of immigrants and newcomers. The food practices of immigrants are often treated with ethnocentrism, suspicion and fear, leading to them becoming a domain through which people, society, minority groups and the state manage differences and evoke boundaries of solidarity (Bonnekessen 2010; Karrebaek 2012). To the extent that Jewish converts can be seen as 'immigrants' to the Jewish fold, and given the salience of food practices and restrictions in Jewish life, it is not surprising

that food is central to the double-edged development of Jewish habitus and belonging discussed in this essay.

During my fieldwork, Jewish preferences, habits and rules of eating, as well as the relationship between Jews and prohibited foods, were the subject matter of many remarks, jokes and teachings on the part of both the prospective converts and the conversion agents. Remarks about Jewish food were brought up in the context of introducing converts to Jewish cuisine, as though trying to help them ‘digest’ and internalise it. Customary Jewish foods, such as Gefilte fish, matzah balls and other, usually Ashkenazi (i.e. European in origin) foods, were a major topic in the teachers’ stories about Jewish holidays. Teachers constantly invited students to stay in the kibbutz over the Sabbath and to experience Sabbath dinner at the kibbutz’s communal table. Some emphasised that even secular Israeli Jews have a Sabbath dinner with traditional food. In another case, a teacher expressed delight with the knowledge that converts were getting used to eating ‘Israeli breakfast’ (vegetables, spread cheese, eggs and bread) at the kibbutz, in doing so revealing once again the blurred lines between the cultural and religious dimensions of Israeli Jewish habitus. Overall, Jewish food – it was implied – made Jewish people. I imagine that Harvey, one of the conversion teachers, had not read Mary Douglas’s canonical *Purity and Danger* ([1966] 2002), where she famously analyses how biblical dietary rules forbidding Jews from eating ‘impure’ food were used to maintain social order and set boundaries. But, when presenting dietary laws in class, Harvey reinforced Douglas’s logic: ‘The bible makes it very clear to us that the sacredness [i.e., separateness] of the Jewish people is intimately related to the food that enters the mouth.’

At the same time that Jewish food, writ large, served for converts as a somatic doorway to the Jewish experience, engaging with Jewish food also brought up, inevitably, a very practice-oriented and embodied barrier – that of foodways. For example, from Atara, their Jewish law teacher, the conversion students learned how ‘The Rabbis, the sages, attempted to disconnect Jews from other groups; and this is why *we* are not allowed to drink wine, eat bread or eat from dishware that is made by non-Jews.’ Because aspiring converts did not yet secure their sense of being part of a Jewish *we*, they heard Atara’s message as testaments to their daily experiences of estrangement as ‘non-Jews’. Atara’s message represented not merely rationalisations for rabbinic ways of thinking in the past, but also as relevant categories speaking truths to their vulnerable position as non-Jews, a position they had to confront in their daily lives. Take, for example, the following classroom exchange:

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| Atara:  | Like the wine prohibition I mentioned to you last week, we have prohibitions regarding both bread and dishes. The sages wanted Jews to refrain from social relationships with gentiles.                 |
| Marry, a Dane married to an Israeli Jew, smiling: | Well ... surprise-surprise, they do have relationships. Sometimes I bake for my husband and his religious family, and I totally forget that I’m not allowed to, and his mother gives me such a look ... |
| Atara:  | Right, a Jew cannot eat from dishes that belong to, or were made by, a non-Jew. During the last program we had a convert that asked me what to do in  |

Marry:

case she wants to invite kibbutz members for coffee and cake and can't because of the dishes.

In my home, all our dishes 'belong' to my husband rather than to me or to both of us. That's the only way we can invite people over.

This exchange is an example of a broader pattern I observed in the classroom, one in which the material halakhic fences conversion students learned to live by were experienced by them as concrete signifiers of their exclusion or inherent inferiority. As Inga, a convert from Germany once told me, it attested to 'why *they* [Jews] say they let *us* in but all the time remind us that *we* are outsiders'.

I was not surprised to notice throughout my fieldwork that taste featured as another key site in the development of a Jewish habitus – a 'socially informed body, with its tastes and distastes, its compulsions and repulsions' (Bourdieu 1977: 124) – among converts. This ethnographic observation echoes a similar insight documented by Diemling and Ray in their study of Reform Jews in England. They write,

For these respondents, the observance of dietary laws is the most important marker of Jewish identity, which is reinforced through condemnation of 'transgressive' behavior. While others are more flexible, they still regard the preference of certain foods and the avoidance of others as part of their distinctive Jewish identity. For example, aversion to *trefah* [non kosher] was often described as deeply embedded in practice, taste and identity, thus an example of religious habitus. (2014: 131)

Indeed, for my interlocutors, disgust, appetite, craving and abstention provoked and revealed a wide range of emotions and conventions about belonging: the questions of who is willing to eat which food, how one should relate to prohibited food and how one should develop new tastes are paramount in demarcating social and cultural boundaries. To the extent that tastes are developed across entire life histories as a deeply embodied construct, the converts' ability to develop a Jewish corporeal taste – 'Jewish taste buds', or 'a Jewish belly' – was an especially demanding barrier to cross. Atara, one of the teachers, often elaborated on 'Jewish taste' while essentialising and objectifying it. 'Jewish taste', according to her, negates the option of eating raw meat and pork: 'It is just not Jewish', she maintained. She added: 'In Israel you won't find a real red steak, because even Jews who don't observe the religious laws of kosher food are repulsed by the entire matter of blood. It is well known everywhere. And, also, Jews don't eat pork. Period.' Conversion students, on their part, commented on their revulsion with some Jewish dishes: one mentioned how repulsive she found *charoset* (a customary sweet Passover festive dish), remarking that 'the first time I saw charoset, I couldn't believe people were actually eating it. That is gross'. Another convert mentioned the disgust he felt for gefilte fish, humorously threatening to withdraw from the conversion process: 'This is what I have to eat from now on? Disgusting, maybe I should rethink the whole issue of conversion.'

The next ethnographic piece, taken from my fieldwork at the Rabbinical Court of Conversion, resonates with this essentialised notion of Jewish taste. In this vignette, we learn that religious gatekeepers expect converts not only to understand what 'Jewish taste' is, but also to develop and display it as a vital, visceral part of the 'conversion performance' (Author a).

It was late in the morning, and what was soon to become another busy day at the court had begun behind schedule. Restless and tense, Danny, who appeared to be in his early forties, paced back and forth in the hall outside the court room, ignoring the 'no smoking' sign as he waited to be summoned to appear before the Rabbinical court. Three hours later, after the discussion of Danny's conversion petition had come to an end, Rabbi Zigdon (one of the three rabbinic judges in charge) sighed, saying to me: 'This was the most challenging case I've had in years.'

Inside the courtroom, the judges studied the details of Danny's case, reading the file documentation out loud. At this stage, I was already inside the courtroom. The judges discussed Danny's short biographical notes: an American with a religious protestant background; resident in Israel for almost three decades; six kids, four of them with his second wife, Ziva, a Jew who had immigrated to Israel from the former Soviet Union more than 20 years ago. When the rabbis felt they had enough of a background on Danny, he was invited in. Danny's conversation hearing, like many other conversion hearings I observed, initially took the form of a 'quiz' on his knowledge of daily religious practices and general Jewish knowledge (bible, history); this 'quiz' always included questions about materially embedded religious practice. Fortunately for Danny, he was well prepared and was able to answer most of the questions comfortably. At some point during the hearing, Danny mentioned his two sisters, both of whom were converts to Judaism. The comment piqued the judges' curiosity, allowing for a more personal conversation to ensue.

- Rabbi Meir: Where did you get this family virus [of conversion] from? It seems like you were all infected by it.
- Danny: My parents were believers, and they knew that the Jewish people are a treasured nation (*Am segula*). My father was in training to become a pastor, but he realized this was not what God wanted him to do. He told God: 'I'm available, just tell me what you want from me.' So, one day, as he was driving, he had a vision which led him to Israel.

The exchange soon took the form of an investigation of the differences between Christian and Jewish theology. Danny became confused, and seemed as though he felt misunderstood: no, he assured the rabbis, he did not believe that Jesus actually walked on the sea of Galilee, but at the same time he could not fully discount the idea; and no, he was not a believer anymore and he actually never was one, but that did not mean that Christianity was all wrong. The discussion moved in circles, and the tension in the room thickened. Danny asked for a glass of water. The judges tried to defuse the conversation by shifting to more questions about Danny's religious practices, for which they were pleased to receive relatively reassuring answers.

After asking Danny to leave the room, the judges were free to discuss their impressions. Even more interesting (and surprising) than their decision to endorse Danny's petition, were their lengthy and tormented deliberations, a short excerpt of which I present here.

- Rabbi Meir: I have the feeling that he does not perceive any contradiction between Protestantism and Judaism. He does not express the kind of aversion, the instinct to recoil, that we feel when we are just reminded of Jesus or pork, for example. We want to spit merely at the mention of these words, and he doesn't.
- Rabbi Shlomo: Right, the revulsion that we feel doesn't exist for him.

- Rabbi Elkana (the conversion teacher): But we have to understand it in perspective. We have to think about how it is for somebody who is not familiar with this thing.
- Rabbi Zigdon: It is true. We have a 2,000-year history of exile among Christians, and we cannot expect him to have the same physical reaction as we have.
- Rabbi Meir: We want him to be a Jew just like us, in the sense that when he hears the word 'pork', or 'Jesus', he will immediately feel an aversion.
- Rabbi Elkana: Give him 20 years and he will have it, don't worry.
- Rabbi Shlomo: But he did go through a whole year of studying for conversion, and I want him to already have some of the inner effects.
- Rabbi Elkana: Yes, but not at this most deep level. You can't demand it from him, not yet.
- Rabbi Meir: I must admit, I myself don't spit when I say 'Jesus' or 'pork'. But if I were a conversion teacher, I would have taught former Christians to spit when they hear these words.

Danny's court procedure was atypical, both in terms of its length as well as the challenges it presented to the judges. Unlike the more everyday proceedings, in which judges debated the nebulous matter of sincerity – pondering whether the convert was sincere in describing her religious observance – these judges fully trusted Danny's honesty, but were unsure about the depth of his visceral Jewish reactions. Unlike many other cases, in which judges wondered whether the candidate's prayer book looked 'used enough', or whether she knew how to handle the separation between meat and dairy in her kitchen, in this case they struggled to determine whether he had already internalised what they perceived to be proper embodied Jewish modes of being. The preoccupation of the judges with the issue of pork was especially striking, in light of the fact that it was never mentioned during the procedure itself. Instead, it was discussed only in association with the supposedly embodied Jewish reaction to the name of Jesus. The associations with 'Jesus' and 'pork', with regard to the inner aversion supposedly elicited by such terms, attests to the extent to which Jewish belonging is perceived by these gatekeepers in material, somatic terms. The judges exercised their power in assessing whether Danny had sufficiently crossed the material, embodying the emotional boundary between Jews and their significant others. This discussion between the rabbis is particularly telling because it renders the politically contested question of 'who is a Jew' – a question frequently raised before the Israeli Supreme Court, eliciting heated public discussions about the nature of Jewish belonging – into a series of fine-grained questions about what, and how long, it takes to develop a Jewish habitus.

A few months after Danny's hearing, I met Anna, a successful convert of Polish origins, whom I had met in Yuvalim. Before we sat in the living room of her rented apartment in a Tel Aviv suburb, she showed me a few personal belongings she had brought with her from Poland, mainly photos, cards and mementoes that gave her, as she described it, 'a texture of home'. She also proudly showed me a couple of Jewish religious artefacts, both relatively new: a *mezuzah* she had received from a friend, and Sabbath candleholders she had bought 'as a gift to myself' after her conversion. When, during our conversation, I shared with her some of the impressions I had taken from Danny's hearing, she recalled how, similarly, in her own hearing, the judges

had wanted to know how she now felt about Christmas meals and Christmas tree, and whether she was able to establish the necessary distance from her upbringing. She told me: ‘I assured them that traditional Polish Christmas foods disgusted me, and that I even experience a tinge of nausea when I travel in Europe and see Christmas trees.’ She paused for a moment and added, playfully, ‘I think they knew that I am a good convert.’

## Discussion: The Materialisation of Conversion

While the habitus may not be determining in the ability to achieve a sense of belonging, it is a powerful mediating construct. (Bottomley 1992, in Marshall & Foster 2002: 67)

In her eye-opening essay on the ‘corporeal turn’ in Jewish studies, Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett reminds us of some of the works demonstrating the religious, cultural and political labour that Jews undertake in daily life in order to materialise their Jewishness (2005). In this article, I contribute to this understanding by considering the tremendously challenging work that Jewish converts do to materialise their emerging Jewishness, while negotiating the double-edged belonging offered to them.

I have argued that converts’ unavoidable embeddedness within Jewish practice, corporeal experiences and material attachments places them within a double-edged engagement in relation to the boundaries of the Jewish collective. On the one hand, the all-encompassing nature of Jewish religious and cultural practice presents itself as a conducive route with which to create one’s place within it. It is a tangible bridge to insidership, to modes of being and doing as a Jew, and it is democratic in the sense that it is typically open and accessible to anyone pursuing such engagements. As Rivka, the conversion teacher at Yuvalim, told the anxious Fred in the vignette described above, ‘it is up to you’. On the other hand, Jewish habitus reveals itself as a medium through which hierarchies of belonging, mostly in relation to ‘real Jews’, are inevitably expressed and experienced in the daily sociality of converts in Jewish settings.

The socialisation towards Jewish life tells us a complicated story about the bilateral role of habitus formation in fostering converts’ Jewish belonging, simultaneously erecting and blurring boundaries; paving the path towards inclusion, but also raising doubts among converts about the possibility of fully doing so. While Orthodox conversion invites – if not regiments – conversion candidates to intimately engage with Jewish material culture, these new religious engagements also create deep religious anxieties about precarious insidership.

Interestingly, aspiring converts and conversion agents do not necessarily share these anxieties, or the underlying understandings regarding habitus and belonging. Whereas Fred was anxious about the authenticity and legitimacy of his religious observance, Rivka, his teacher, welcomed him to explore Jewish life from within – to start developing his Jewish habitus – presenting it as a welcomed and potentially productive accelerated apprenticeship to Jewish life and belonging. In other words, while Fred thickened the perceived boundaries between the non-Jewish person he still was and the Jewish person he aspired to become, Rivka conveyed inclusive pedagogic messages, and let him work towards acquiring a Jewish habitus a while before the official gatekeepers at the rabbinical court announced their acceptance of him as a Jew. As the court encounter with Danny demonstrated, sometimes the conversion agents are the ones

to essentialise Jewish habitus, and are more regarded than aspiring converts are regarding its development. The rabbinic judges' deliberations demonstrate that even among the gatekeepers themselves, people hold divergent perceptions regarding Jewish habitus – while some expect converts to perform a secured Jewishness as if 'it was theirs all along', others – more realistically, perhaps – understand that the Jewish future that aspiring converts would eventually inhabit holds a promise for the development of an appropriate habitus. One day, it is implied, Jewish converts might become real Jews.

In turning away from the 'big politics' – that is, the politically informed questions regarding Jewish conversion in the context of the Israeli nation-state – this article enriches and nuances our understanding of the many forms that the politics of Jewish conversion can take in Israel. After all, the kinds of precarious material attachments described in this article do not reside in or originate from what we immediately associate with 'the political' – the realm of state-subject institutional relations. Instead, they emerge from mundane cultural and religious domains – the lived experiences of those learning to apply Jewish legal categories in their everyday life, from the sociability of Jewish religious conduct, and from the key role of religious practice in routine Jewish life.

As mentioned earlier in the article, Jewish life, particularly Orthodoxy, is saturated with daily practice-oriented, materially embedded demands. It is not surprising then that Jewish conversion is crafted as a path of inclusion that is predominantly practical, embodied and routinised – one that necessitates the formation of an all-encompassing Jewish habitus. Furthermore, it is not surprising that, whether intentionally or not, such a path of inclusion offers insecure modalities of belonging, and ends up creating an everyday sense of inferiority and exclusion.

Particular and unique as Jewish conversion is (like any other conversion), it can still teach us more generally about the all-encompassing demands of acquiring a new habitus. Take for example the following sentence, an observation made by Elsa (a conversion candidate from Austria) about a month into her conversion programme. Upon commenting to her on how overwhelmed she looked, she replied: 'I do Judaism, I eat Judaism, I wear Judaism, I buy Judaism. This is overwhelming.' This sentence reverberates to a great degree with scholarly descriptions of the routinised embodied practices that Muslim converts are obliged to adopt and perform. Daniel Winchester, for example, writes that Muslim converts in Missouri 'incorporate practices that involve (quite literally) wearing their new religious identities on their sleeves on an ongoing, everyday basis' (2008: 1770). Esra Özyürek describes, in regard to one of her interlocutors, a statement directed towards a German woman who had just converted to Islam, and who was accosted by her cousin: 'you dress differently, you eat differently, you say these strange Arabic words to your friends, you have nothing German about you anymore' (2014: 24). By juxtaposing Elsa's words with these two citations, we see more generally the salience of everyday material and embodied enactments in the realisation of a new religious self. I use these succinct descriptions to suggest that we attend more seriously to the implications that this realisation of self and habitus holds for the convert's belonging, including the possibility of a doubled-edged dynamics of politics in certain religious contexts. In this vein I also note Galonnier and de los Rios's description of both Evangelical and Muslim converts in the U.S.A, as ones who 'expressed that, as converts, it was sometimes difficult to feel like they fully belonged' (2016: 70) as a hint in this direction.



Like so many other contexts of conversion, Jewish conversion is not a single moment of a complete transformation but, rather, a prolonged process of habituation and reorientation in a new cultural and religious field. It is likely that Inga, Elsa, Silvia and the other interlocutors I met throughout my fieldwork have continued to develop a more robust Jewish habitus and more secure modes of relations to the Jewish material world in which this habitus is necessarily entrenched. It is also likely that, in securing their Jewish habitus, these converts – now fully recognised as Jews – have allowed themselves to shy away from the exclusive Orthodox prescriptions regarding how to become a Jew, and have embraced other cultural, even secular, Jewish materialities and practice-oriented dispositions along their path. However, even if such hesitant conjectures are in place, in this article I trace the mechanisms, experiences and repercussions that speak volumes about Jewish conversion as a material socialisation into precarious belonging and habitus: a process targeted at those lacking Jewish doxa.

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