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Jewish Conversion during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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JEWISH CONVERSION DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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Victoria Davide

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To: Dean John F. Stack
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This thesis, written by Victoria Davide, and entitled Jewish Conversion during the COVID-19 Pandemic, having been approved in respect to style and intellectual content, is referred to you for judgment.

We have read this thesis and recommend that it be approved.

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The thesis of Victoria Davide is approved.

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Florida International University, 2022

DEDICATION

For my friend, Yaneth, thank you for being my guiding light for so many years. You mean so much to me and all the people that you have ever come across. You said life is wasted on the living, and I promise I am determined not to waste it. May your memory be a blessing. For my parents, Cindy and Sal, thanks for bringing me to this country. Your love and dedication to giving me so many opportunities mean more to me than you will ever know. And finally, for the millions who have lost their lives due to the coronavirus pandemic may this tragedy help bring out compassion in us all. May your memory remind us of the humanity we all share.

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

JEWISH CONVERSION DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

by

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Miami, Florida

Professor Tudor Parfitt, Major Professor

March 2020 saw a stark change in the daily life and religious practices of many Jews because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Those converting to Judaism, or in the process of wanting to convert, found themselves physically isolated from their Jewish communities. This thesis examines what aspects are important when creating a Jewish identity and how individuals have circumnavigated these changes in this crisis. Through the use of qualitative interviews this thesis illuminates the many different changes and experiences that individuals went through as they were converting to Judaism during the COVID-19 pandemic. I bring many distinct groups for comparison including different branches within Judaism and ethnic backgrounds. Findings suggest that the pandemic has affected the method of conversion as technology has been incorporated into several aspects. It has also affected the Jewish identity of those converting as COVID-19, and the crisis surrounding it, has been at the forefront of these individuals' mind. Finally, due to the newfound accessibility from the incorporation of technology, individuals who would not have been able to convert before are now able to do so. And this has changed the face of Judaism.

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CHAPTER I. INTRODUCTION

In 2020, Jewish individuals experienced great changes in daily life and practice in the United States.[1] Due to the potential danger of the highly contagious COVID-19[2] virus, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommended[3] that people avoid large gatherings and close contact with anyone not within their immediate household.[4] For Jewish individuals, this led to many holiday, learning, and lifecycle events being curtailed, cut back, or moved entirely to remote video streaming and conferencing modalities. The switch to online attendance for these events not only affected the way that current members of the Jewish community practice Judaism, but also changed how potential members learned about and developed first impressions of Judaism.

The nature of Jewish conversion is intrinsically related to the question of Jewish identity. Jewish identity itself is complex. It is not only a matter of religion, but also ethnicity, ancestry, culture, linguistics, and political affiliations combined.[5] Jewishness[6] is

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[1] Newswire, "COVID-19 Has Changed the Way Many Practice Religion," *ULOOP Inc*, 2020, https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A633119876/EAIM?u=anon~1c3f717a&sid=bookmark-EAIM&xid=b902265.

[2] COVID-19, known by its colloquial name "Covid," is a respiratory syndrome coronavirus that originally emerged in 2019.

[3] Restrictions and lockdowns in the United States began mid-March 2020.

[4]" COVID-19: Events & Gatherings," Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, accessed February, 14, 2021, https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/your-health/quarantine-isolation.html.

[5]" A Portrait of Jewish Americans," Pew Research Center: Religion & Public Life, 2013.

[6] "Jewishness" is a colloquial term used to describe the Jewish aspects of an individual and is used throughout this study.

determined by an individual's own affirmation of their Jewish identity and by external labels. These labels include, but not limited to, the *halakhic*[7] ruling of maternal lineage[8], and, for instance hateful labels such as theological, cultural, and racial slurs that are antisemitic in nature.

With so many aspects that are connected to Jewish identity, the question of "Who is Jewish?" and "Who can call themselves Jewish?" arise. These questions have been investigated within academic and rabbinical scholarship for centuries. The question of the validity of one's Jewishness can be answered in two ways. The first way is externally, through *halakhic* means or by validation by the outside community.[9] And the second, explored within more contemporary scholarship, is by internal means. This internal authority tends to be more personal and self-imposed. These two factors of Jewish identity are also used for those who want to become Jewish.

Conversion can be a tool for reaffirmation and validation of one's Jewish identity, not only by the individual, but also by the surrounding community. Within this process, an individual goes through a period of re-identification, relearning, and reordering to a Jewish perspective. There is never a sudden severance of one's old identity in favor of the new one, but rather an endless undertaking of learning. This learning includes textual,

[7] *Halakha* (Hebrew for "the way to walk") are the Jewish laws outlined in the Talmud and other Jewish texts.

[8] *Halakha* states that if an individual's mother was Jewish, they themselves are also Jewish.

[9] Reform and Conservative Judaism do not necessarily convert someone through *halakhic* means.

physical, or online features, as well as experiential, solitary, or communal ones. The goal is to locate a form of habitus[10] and belonging within the Jewish community.[11]

The modern process of Jewish conversion takes into consideration this period of learning. While external validation is important, it can vary depending on which practice of Judaism the individual decides to partake in. I believe that the individual's own affirmation of Jewishness is one of the most important goals of Jewish conversion. If an individual does not begin to feel Jewish, whatever the external community thinks about them will do little to nothing to persuade the individual to feel Jewish.[12]

Conversion to Judaism starts with a question. An individual begins by asking permission from a rabbi to start studying. A rabbi then, traditionally but not always, rejects them three times to test their sincerity and persistence. Then the student begins to study with the rabbi individually or in a group. They then attend *shul*[13] for holidays and weekly Sabbath services, and sometimes join community members for private celebrations. After a minimum of about a year[14] and in some cases longer, the individual enters the final stages of conversion. Here, they take the ritual steps to finally become a

[10] A term coined by sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, "habitus" refers to a person's surroundings, skills, and knowledge and how they use these to perceive the world.

[11] Diane Austin-Broos, "The Anthropology of Conversion: An Introduction," in *The Anthropology of Religious Conversion*, edited by Andrew Buckser and Steven Glazier (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2003), 1-3.

[12] Judaism is not a proselytizing religion and generally frowns upon coercing converts.

[13] *Shul* (Yiddish for "synagogue") is used frequently in this project to describe a synagogue.

[14] A year is typically the minimum timespan for a conversion as it allows the convert to experience a full cycle of Jewish holidays.

member of the Jewish people. Those rituals are as follows: a *brit milah* (circumcision)[15], approval by a *beit din*,[16] and finally a *mikveh* (ritual bath)[17], from which they emerge a full member of the Jewish community. These practices vary not only according to different branches[18] of Judaism, but also by individual cases. Depending on each person and their unique circumstances, the learning period might look different and ceremonial rituals can vary.

Jewish conversion and its methods change according to factors in the outside environment. As previously mentioned, the COVID-19 pandemic is one of the factors that has changed U.S. Jewish conversions in the past two years. In order to remain safe and limit exposure, many communities have moved the Jewish learning experience online. Some more reformed communities have even transitioned many of their other practices to online formats, including *shabbat*[19] and High Holiday[20] services. These communities have also made changes to the ceremonies that occur at the end of

[15] *Brit milah* (Hebrew for "covenant of circumcision") is only done on an individual who has a penis. I use inclusive vernacular throughout this study.

[16] A *beit din* (Hebrew for "house of judgment") is a rabbinical court.

[17] A *mikveh* (Hebrew for "collection") is a ritual bath.

[18] Technically there is no such thing as sects or denominations within Judaism, simply different levels of *halakhic* adherence. For the purpose of this thesis I will use the term "groupings" to describe this phenomenon.

[19] *Shabbat* (Hebrew for "Sabbath") is the period of rest observed by practicing Jews between the hours of sundown on Friday to nightfall on Saturday. *Shabbat* and Sabbath are used interchangeably.

[20]" High Holiday" denotes a major holiday in which Jewish individuals abstain from work.

conversions, such as swapping the traditional indoor *mikveh* for an open air *mikveh*[21] or moving the *beit din* online. These changes not only impact the process of conversion, but also the distinct expression of Judaism that individuals experience.

Within this thesis I address topics including the process of building a Jewish identity, Jewish community during times of crisis, Jewish responses to adaptability, the challenges and advantages of technology within sacred space, and human belonging and community. This thesis specifically addresses the experiences of those converting to Judaism during the COVID-19 pandemic and how they negotiate and build identity. The following questions are addressed: How has COVID-19 impacted the process of Jewish conversion? Does the change of methodology of Jewish conversion during the pandemic impact the nature of converts' Jewish identity? What do contemporary Jewish converts feel is the essential nature of Jewish conversion? Finally, how has increased technology use changed the nature of Judaism and its survival? Additionally, this research predominantly: (1) sheds light on the individual experiences of those converting to Judaism during the COVID-19 pandemic, (2) adds to scholarly discussion of Jewish identity, (3) discusses the rabbinical response to COVID-19 and its restrictions, and (4) explores Judaism in times of crisis and how social media and technology play a role within contemporary Judaism.

This thesis expresses various individual opinions on the nature of Judaism and identity through the use of ethnography. As this work is based on scholarly concepts and

[21] Open air *mikvot* include a body of moving water or a lake if it just rained.

is heavily reliant on emic[22] perspectives, I would like to clarify my intentions. This thesis is not a statement of my own opinion on Judaism or Jewish identity. It is not an expression of my opinion on the authenticity of Jewishness or the authenticity of the Jewish individuals converting. This thesis is also not a criticism of the specifics of the processes of Jewish conversion, nor is it about the validity of some conversion processes over others. Finally, this project does not aim to express the perspectives of everyone converting to Judaism during the COVID-19 pandemic, but only those directly involved in the study.

Because this research focuses on recent and current events and highly personal experiences related to those events, I decided to use fieldwork as the primary method of data collection. Results are from 17 personal interviews and 9 survey responses, conducted by Zoom[23] and telephone from October 2021 to January 2022. All respondents were either involved in or undergoing conversion to Judaism during the COVID-19 pandemic. I decided to include not only those converting to Judaism, but also the individuals involved in the conversion process, including rabbis and Jewish education leaders. This is for two reasons: first, to gain more respondents and for this project to encompass more perspectives. Second, rabbis and Jewish education leaders are the

[22] Emic is an anthropological term referring to the approach of understanding a perspective through the terms of the individual being studied.

[23] Zoom is a video conferencing software that became popular for communication during the COVID-19 pandemic.

individuals who directly lead and guide students[24], therefore *their* experiences and thoughts influence converts.

Respondents were drawn through three methods. First, I contacted synagogues and reached out to rabbis who are involved in the conversion process. These rabbis[25] then reached out to their students and explained the project. Those students then reached out to me saying they were interested in an interview. If students found themselves too busy for an interview, they had the option to fill out a short survey. Second, I posted a short survey on Facebook pages related to conversion to Judaism. Finally, I spoke to individuals who I personally knew had converted to Judaism during the pandemic.

The individuals who were interviewed and surveyed were not selected based on age[26], gender identity, sexual orientation, race, nationality, ethnicity, or original religion. Due to the sensitive nature of the subject and discussion of online communities, as well as the rabbinical rule of not "outing" those who are converting, all data is anonymous. I chose not to record the interviews to allow for conversation to flow more naturally. Some specific wording and phrases have been copied down and noted in some circumstances.

In the collection of data, I ensured the inclusion of diverse perspectives. I did so by reaching out to congregations with congregants from different areas in the United States, in order to focus on those from Ashkenazi, Sephardic, and Mizrachi[27] backgrounds. I also reached different groupings of synagogues including Reform,

[24] Those who take an introduction to Judaism course or individual study with rabbis are often referred to as students.
[25] And Jewish learning educators.
[26] Minors were not involved.
[27] Mizrachi individuals were not a part of this study.

Conservative, Orthodox, and others. This decision was made due to the different branches' stances on technology within sacred spaces. The choice to focus on diverse respondents was made in order to explore the unique experiences that arise because of intersectional identities. It also allowed for a comparative approach.

As a student with a background in anthropology, I understand that the emic approach in ethnography is important to understanding how individuals express themselves within the world. Therefore, I decided to use first-person interviews because it is an effective way to collect emic perspectives. This decision was also influenced by my own background, one of mixed cultures. I set out to make sure that all research has been conducted ethically. I also aimed to ensure that transparency and respect were upheld on my part toward all those involved in the research process.

I make use of several different theories throughout this project to help guide understanding of the background material and some of the conclusions drawn from the data collected. I use the work of Diane Austin-Broos[28] and Lewis Rambo[29] to help clarify the nature of religious conversion and to give readers an overarching sense of why this project is important and unique. Conversion, according to both Austin-Broos and Rambo, is affected by both external and internal factors. Explained later in greater detail, these theories help demonstrate how conversion to Judaism has changed throughout history. The factors that I examine are (1) the pandemic conditions and (2) times of crisis

[28] Diane Austin-Broos, "The Anthropology of Conversion: An Introduction," in *The Anthropology of Religious Conversion*, edited by Andrew Buckser and Steven Glazier (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2003), 1-3.

[29] Lewis Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, (Yale University Press, 1993), 5-8.

experienced by individuals and how individuals use these to shape their identity and conversion experience. Austin-Broos describes that there is a long passage of relearning and reshaping one's understanding of their identity. I examine how this paradigm shift is influenced by the pandemic. Rambo makes a distinction between two different ways to understand conversion: "normatively," explaining the step-by-step approach to understanding conversion, and "descriptively," delving into the minutiae of conversion experience. This project intends to put Rambo's holistic model of conversion into practice by examining not only textual evidence of conversion to Judaism, but also by exploring first person perspectives.

Roy Baumeister and Mark Leary's work describes how individuals build identity. According to these scholars, individuals have an inherent sense and need to belong and they do so by frequent, positive, and personal connections.[30] Due to COVID-19, individuals initially lacked the ability to experience these connections. However, thanks to the assistance of technology, many connections persisted. Throughout this paper, I frequently speak about how human connections are made and how their quality can be attributed to senses of identity and belonging.

After addressing the nature of conversion and examining the nature of identity building, I then look at how to understand the nature of the change in Judaism during the pandemic. In Pierre Bourdieu's sociological concept of habitus, the author explains that individuals are not only affected by their environment and culture, but also that culture

[30] Roy F. Baumeister and Mark R. Leary, "The Need to Belong: Desire for Interpersonal Attachments as a Fundamental Human Motivation," *Psychological Bulletin* 117, no. 3 (1995): 500.

and environment are shaped by individuals. This is because, according to Bourdieu, knowledge is constructed actively. The world, its culture, and its social norms are actively exerting their influences on the individual. However, this 'habitus' in the first place is shaped by individual and collective practice. Individuals and the collective project their experiences and perspectives onto the world.[31] Therefore, not only does the pandemic shape understandings of Judaism for those converting, but those converting are now shaping Judaism with their new understandings. This especially pertains to individuals who now are able to start converting due to the new accessibility that pandemic conditions have provided. This is explained further in a later chapter.

The COVID-19 pandemic, coupled with sweeping access to technology, places those converting to Judaism in an unprecedented period of history. The pandemic and its many variants are still raging today. As the global community struggles to effectively deal with unprecedented circumstances, only time will tell how these changes truly affect Judaism. This thesis provides merely a glimpse into how these circumstances affect those converting to and experiencing contemporary Judaism. To begin to examine the results of the interviews and surveys conducted, it is important to delve into the historical, anthropological, and social development of conversion to Judaism. Chapter 2 presents an overview of the background and history of Jewish conversion. Tracing its biblical origins, this chapter serves as an in-depth look at how conversion evolved throughout history into the present day. Special attention is paid to times of crisis. Chapter 3 delves into the individual experiences found within the study. This includes a more detailed telling of the

[31] Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), 52-55.

actual process of conversion throughout the pandemic. It will also delineate specific themes such as technology and its impact on conversion, as well as the pandemic and its impact on conversion. Individual rabbinical and Jewish education leadership opinions are also discussed. Chapter 4 provides detailed analysis. Here, I explore how the results in the previous chapter address some of the overarching topics previously mentioned, such as Jewish identity, the nature of conversion, and Judaism's survival and future. Finally, I examine the limitations of this project, propose topics for future study, and demonstrate that the COVID-19 pandemic has potentially shaped the future of Judaism in profound and unexpected ways.

CHAPTER II. HISTORY OF JEWISH CONVERSION

Theories on Religious Conversion

Before exploring the process of how to convert to Judaism, it is helpful to consider some of the contemporary theories surrounding conversion. The theories presented not only inform our understanding of the evolution of Jewish conversion, but also help us understand modern Jewish conversion. Conversion has given rise to different theories and understandings within various academic disciplines. There are two specific theoretical works that utilize anthropological methodology: first, Diane Austin-Broos ' "The Anthropology of Religious Conversion" and second, Lewis Rambo's *Understanding Religious Conversion*."

In "The Anthropology of Religious Conversion," Austin-Broos focuses on how conversion is affected by both external influences, such as the state, and an individual's own previous religious identity. Conversion shapes an individual's aspirations and social life. This "paradigm shift"[32] can be viewed in multiple ways. According to Austin-Broos, conversion is a rite of passage centered on re-identification, relearning, and reordering. This takes time. Although there might be a singular event in which the convert 'finishes' their formal process, an individual never really ends the process of learning about their new faith tradition. There are never what Austin-Broos calls a sudden and "absolute breach"[33] with a previous social life, but rather a continued quest for knowledge about the new one. The "goal" for an individual is to find a new belonging. Every individual's

[32] Austin-Broos, "The Anthropology of Conversion," 1.

[33] Ibid.

passage is distinctive and has attributes not only unique to their new religious community, but also to the one they are leaving behind.[34] Similar sentiments are echoed within Rambo's methods of conversion.

Rambo's theory, outlined in *Understanding Religious Conversion*, encompasses many of the aspects previously mentioned by Austin-Broos. First, a convert's reasoning for conversion is not only affected by an individual's experience but also by the world around them. Second, the actual process of conversion is shaped by the individual and their environment. And last, it does not happen overnight.[35] These three aspects serve as background information to study the process of conversion.

According to Rambo there are two different ways to study conversion: normative and descriptive. Normative method of study pertains to theological conviction and dogma of a tradition, requirements for valid conversion. Then there is the descriptive method, which encompasses all the little nuances that come with conversion. This method comes with the fundamental understanding that there is no "pure" process of conversion. The difference between normative and descriptive mirrors the conceptual process versus the actual process. It is important to understand both methods because conversion is not stagnant. It is constantly adjusted by the group to fit the convert's expectations and aspirations. Conversion changes not only throughout time, but also on

[34] Ibid., 2.

[35] Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, 5.

an individual basis.[36] Because there is no "set" way to convert, to fully study conversion, Rambo recommends looking at many of the various aspects of the conversion process.

The holistic model, according to Rambo, revolves around an exploratory framework. It is not only based on scrutiny of the literature, but also on participant observation and interviews with converts.[37] This thesis uses modern sources and historical literature to observe how conversion to Judaism has evolved throughout history. Both Austin-Broos 'and Rambo's understanding of religious conversion are used to explain this evolution. These theories guide the exploration of Jewish conversion to give a rounded understanding of the evolution of the methodology of Jewish conversion.

Contemporary Jewish Conversion

To understand the historical aspects of conversion, I explore the modern method for conversion first so that it may serve as a reference. As explained briefly earlier, conversion is complicated, and each individual conversion may differ due to the circumstances of the individual and the outside environment.[38] Therefore, the normative method is helpful in giving a basic introduction to modern Jewish conversion. This is an outline of the step-by-step guide to Jewish conversion.

Conversion to Judaism, especially within the United States and other western countries, is an arduous process. One essentially leaves mainstream society to join a

[36] Ibid., 6-7.

[37] Ibid., 7-8.

[38] Ibid., 5.

parallel Jewish one.[39] In the modern day, there is also a common misunderstanding that Judaism does not welcome new converts. This is explained in more detail later in this chapter, but this perceived "aversion" to converts likely stems from historical precedents. One of the main arguments is that, unlike Christianity, Judaism traditionally does not proselytize. This is because, according to Jewish belief, one does not need to be Jewish in order to gain favor with G-d.[40] Therefore, because Judaism is not a proselytizing religion and because rabbis do not seek converts, conversion to Judaism is not as common as conversion to other mainstream religions.[41]

The actual ritual process of conversion is not too complicated. There are three required components. The first is *milah*, or removal of the foreskin.[42] The second is *tevilah*, or immersion, within a *mikveh*. The last consists of acceptance of *mitzvot*, or commandments. The complicated aspect comes in the form of approval by a three-person *beit din*. A *beit din* consists of three learned men[43] from the community whose decision it is to confirm and affirm the individual's status as a Jew.[44] These steps, according to

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[39] Motti Inbari, *The Making of Modern Jewish Identity: Ideological Change and Religious Conversion*, (United Kingdom: Taylor And Francis, 2019), 2-3.

[40] Within Jewish tradition the name of G-d is holy, therefore it is customary not to write the full word in English and substitute a "-" for the letter "o."

[41] Marc Angel, *Choosing to be Jewish: The Orthodox Road to Conversion*, (Jersey City, NJ: KTAV Publishing House, 2005), 5.

[42] This only applies to individuals with a penis. Those who are already circumcised undergo a symbolic *milah*.

[43] Or women, within Reform and Conservative branches.

[44] Angel, *Choosing to be Jewish*, 5.

Rambo, are categorized as normative aspects within Jewish conversion. However, these three rituals only account for the *end* of the process.

If an individual is interested in converting to Judaism, they would first need to contact a rabbi. Traditionally, in order to determine a person's commitment, the rabbi would reject the individual three times.[45] On the third time, the rabbi would finally allow the person to begin studying under him or her. Next comes the longest part of the process: Jewish learning. For this period, Rambo's descriptive method is most applicable. This is because there are no exact steps for learning and engaging in Jewish culture. There are, however, milestones that individuals need to reach including participation in all the holidays, learning basic Hebrew, learning about *mitzvot*, choosing a Hebrew name, and engaging with the Jewish community.[46] It is only when an individual and their sponsoring rabbi feel that they are ready that the final ritual steps of conversion are undergone.

In the United States and most of the western world, Orthodox Judaism is not the only denomination. There are other branches, such as Reform, Conservative, Reconstructionist, etc. The main difference between these groupings is the strictness of adherence to *halakha*. Normally, Reform and Conservative Jews do not follow strict codes on gender roles, dress, dietary requirements, Sabbath, and High Holiday

[45] Aron Moss, "Why do Rabbis Discourage Conversions?," Chabad, last modified 2005, https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/248165/jewish/Why-Do-Rabbis-Discourage-Conversions.htm.

[46] My Jewish Learning, "How To Convert to Judaism," 2021, accessed December 11, 2021 https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/the-conversion-process/.

observance. This gives them the ability to blend more into modern day society.[47] Converting through Conservative or Reform synagogues can have effects on the conversion process and the individual's status as a Jew.

According to Orthodox Judaism, an individual who converts through a Reform or Conservative rabbi and *beit din* is not considered Jewish. They technically are considered a *goy tzedek* or a righteous gentile. This is because even though they live within Jewish culture, they were not converted by people who observe *halakha* strictly, making the conversion invalid.[48] This can have several social implications for the individual.

The first, as mentioned before, is that they are not considered Jewish within an Orthodox setting. This puts restrictions on certain ritualistic events. These events include but are not limited to being called up to the Torah, restriction from marrying other Jews, and others.[49] Additionally, up until recently, individuals who did not convert to Judaism through Orthodox means also were barred from the Law of Return.[50]

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[47] Holly Lebowitz Rossi, "Reform Judaism: The State of Reform Judaism Today," Jewish Virtual Library, accessed December 11, 2021, https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/the-state-of-reform-judaism-today.

[48] Angel, *Choosing to be Jewish*, 9.

[49] Maurice Lam, *Becoming a Jew*, (Middle Village: Jonathan David Publishers, Inc, 1991), 226-235.

[50]" Israel's Basic Laws: An Introduction to the Law of Return," Jewish Virtual Library, accessed 2021, https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/an-introduction-to-the-law-of-return.

Establishing Traditions: Biblical Times to the Middle Ages

The steps for modern conversion did not appear out of thin air. Like many of the practices in Jewish tradition, their origins can be traced back to the writings in the Hebrew Bible or *Tanakh*, the standardization of practices during the Second Temple period (586 BCE-70 CE), and the Rabbinical Era (70 CE-500 CE). These different steps and social implications are significant because they would later go on to be modified and incorporated into modern conversion practices. To give a full analysis of the methodology of conversion, this section demonstrates the steps and social implications of conversion within the *Tanakh* through the Middle Ages.

According to the Hebrew Bible, one of the earliest instances of Jewish conversion occurred long before the establishment of the religion of Judaism. In order to pass on their lineage and establish a land for their future nation, Abram and Sarai made a covenant with G-d. The sign of this covenant was the cutting of the foreskin, *brit milah*, by Abram. The couple also formally changed their names to Abraham and Sarah.[51] This change signified a transformation within themselves.[52] It also marked Abraham and Sarah as the first ever Jewish 'converts.'[53] Through this story, pivotal steps of conversion were synthesized, including the undergoing of the *brit milah* and changing of one's name. These rituals would later be incorporated into the formal Jewish conversion process.

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[51] Gen. 17.

[52] Walter Homolka and Walter Jacob, *Not by Birth Alone: Conversion to Judaism*, (London: Cassell, 1997), 11-15.

[53] Moshe Lavee, "Converting the Missionary Image of Abraham" in *Abraham, the Nations, and the Hagarites*, edited by Martin Goodman, George H. van Kooten, and J.T.A.G.M. van Ruiten (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 203-204.

One of the most famous stories of conversion mentioned in the *Tanakh* is Ruth's, told in the Book of Ruth.[54] The tale goes as follows: Ruth, a Moabite, wanted to accompany Naomi, her mother-in-law, to Bethlehem after Ruth's husband had died. Even after Naomi's warning of hardship, Ruth refused to leave Naomi's side and stated that she wanted to join Naomi and her people. At this moment of strong affirmation, Ruth was then 'converted.' Ruth later went on to marry a Jewish man named Boaz, and their children became canonically Jewish at birth.[55] This story established two ideas that are echoed in modern conversion. First, the acquisition of "Jewishness" is judged by accepting *mitzvot* and G-d, not exclusively by ancestry. Second, this narrative expresses the need for a strong affirmation by an individual in order to join the Jewish people.[56] Ruth's story, as well as the story of Abraham and Sarah, would later be considered when Jewish ritual conversion was formalized.

As we see in the story of Ruth, there is no formal conversion process found within the *Tanakh*. The first somewhat formal process of conversion is only found after the destruction of the First Temple in 586 BCE. Rituals of conversion developed while the Jewish people were in exile in Babylon. Far away from their homeland, the Land of Israel, the Jewish people needed to establish exactly who was and was not a member of their community and how one *could become* a member of their community. This caused many different rituals to be codified for those wishing to convert. However, conversion to

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[54] Ruth. 1-4.

[55] Homolka and Jacob, *Not by Birth Alone*, 11-15.

[56]" Ruth," Jewish Virtual Library, accessed 2021, https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/ruth.

Judaism during the Babylonian Exile was illegal and viewed more as a theoretical possibility than an actual process that frequently took place.[57] This guide to conversion then evolved as a way to gain citizenship within the Land of Israel once some Jewish people returned to their ancestral homeland.

Conversion during the period of the Second Temple was seen as a way to move from one social category to another. There were three ways to identify an individual in this period. One could be classified as either a *zar*, *ger*, or an *ezrach*. Each level had different obligations and received different levels of social benefits. Z*ar* or *nokri* referred to a foreigner. As a foreigner in the Land of Israel, one did not have to follow all of the laws, one was not allowed to own property, and one was restricted from certain social privileges. A *ger* or resident was someone who was not born a member of *am yisrael*,[58] but who moved to and lived within the Land of Israel. As a *ger*, one would only have to uphold the nine Noahide laws, but they would have a higher social status than a *zar*. Last of all, there was the *ezrach*, a full Israelite. An *ezrach* was expected to uphold the Law of Moses. They enjoyed all of the benefits of the in-group and could own land.[59] These social categories were somewhat porous and it was possible for an individual to move from one category to another.

Individuals could move from one social category to another with one restriction; an *ezrach*, a born citizen of Israel, could not relinquish their citizenship. This was

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[57] Lawrence J. Epstein, *Converts to Judaism: Stories from Biblical Times to Today*, (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015), 24.

[58] Hebrew for "People of Israel."

[59] Homolka and Jacob, *Not by Birth Alone*, 15-23.

because as an Israelite, one could not have this title taken away. The term was a description of their ethnos. A *zar* could become a *ger* by simply settling in the Land of Israel and obeying the Noahide Laws. Though if a *ger* wanted to become an *ezrach*, they would have to go through a more detailed conversion process. During this process, the individual would be known as a *ger tzedek*, or righteous convert.[60] Today, an individual who is going through the conversion process is also referred to as a *ger tzedek.* These categories and shifts of social status were a precursor to modern conversion, but even so the process of conversion was not codified.

With the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE, and as by this time most of the Jewish people lived in the diaspora, religion and life no longer revolved around Jerusalem. Therefore, *am yisrael* had to rebuild their society and practices to reflect the realities of the diaspora. The Temple was a concept of the past and academies and synagogues had become the center of Jewish life. Learned men worked together to consolidate traditions and redefine Jewish life.[61] Many different practices and traditions were codified, including conversion, by the end of this period.[62] These practices were derived from earlier traditions and stories mentioned within the *Tanakh*, such as Abraham's covenant and Ruth's conversion.

One of the most widely accepted versions of codified Jewish law, the *Shulchan Aruch* (1500 CE), was composed during the end of the Talmudic Era and the late Middle

[60] Epstein, *Converts to Judaism*, 21-23.

[61] Angel, *Choosing to be Jewish*, 19.

[62] Epstein, *Converts to Judaism*, 46.

Ages. The *Yoreh De'ah* compilation of Jewish law details many Jewish daily practices and includes a section about conversion.[63] Included in the *Yoreh De'ah* is the requirement of circumcision, questions to ask a convert about the desire for conversion, the importance of following *mitzvot*, the requirement of *mikvah*, the need for a three-person *beit din*, how a convert's Jewish lineage would be determined, and more.[64] Some of these practices were mentioned earlier when describing conversion stories in the *Tanakh.* These practices are also used in today's Jewish conversions. However, as is common in Judaism, there were and are disagreements about the interpretations, which result in slightly different variations and practices.

Evolution of Jewish Conversion: Middle Ages to Modern Era

Codification of methods of conversion does not necessarily imply that conversions happened often. There were still many different hurdles that kept Jewish conversion from becoming widespread. One of the main hurdles was that it was illegal in many parts of the world.[65] Therefore, the sparse amount of information available from records is a result of people being severely punished for this transgression.[66] This section

[63] Joseph Davis, "The Reception of the Shulhan 'Arukh and the Formation of Ashkenazic Jewish Identity," *AJS Review* 26, no. 2 (2003): 251-252.

[64] Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh De'ah 268.

[65] Lawrence J. Epstein, *Questions and Answers on Conversion to Judaism*, (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson Inc, 1998), 176.

[66] Until the emancipation in the 18th and 19th centuries.

discusses the records of rabbinical writings, legal decisions, and testimonies of individual converts to give an overview of historical Jewish conversion.

Conversion to Judaism was illegal in many locations throughout Byzantium and other places in the diaspora. Oftentimes, the consequence of government officials learning about an individual's conversion was death.[67] This, paired with the rise of antisemitism and the growing popularity of Christianity, rendered the prospect of converting to Judaism both unusual and risky. As a result, Jewish communities went from welcoming converts to discouraging them. Before, Judaism did not seek out converts but was seen as an enticing alternative. Judaism was often practiced by employing activities that were appealing to the gentile community.[68] The rabbis' reluctance to encourage conversion was founded on their desire to focus on their community rather than concerning themselves with outsiders.

Even though there were obstacles for converts seeking to become Jewish, conversions still took place throughout the Middle Ages. The first step for a potential convert was to make it through a rabbi's selective process in order to start learning about the religion. The selection process was demanding because an individual who did not blend into a Jewish society that strictly observed *halakhah* would not only put themselves in danger, but also the community they were converting into.[69]

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[67] Epstein, *Questions and Answers*, 176.

[68] Ibid., 179.

[69] Epstein, *Converts to Judaism*, 50-51.

In the High Middle Ages, there are examples of successful conversions and unsuccessful conversions, which led to dire consequences. An example of a convert who was successful in joining the Jewish society is Obdiah (1250s-1300s). As an Italian Catholic priest who had prior knowledge of the Hebrew Bible, his literacy skills allowed him to read the history of the Jewish people. This gave him not only motivation for converting, but an advantage in joining the community. An example of a convert who was not able to fit the mold was a Polish woman named Catherine Wiegel (1450-1539). Unlike Obadiah, who was able to blend 'quietly' into Jewish society, Wiegel attempted to spread the message of Judaism to others. This led to her discovery as a convert, and subsequent arrest and later death.[70]

There were also instances throughout history of Jewish people being falsely accused of proselytizing, mainly to Christians. One of the many antisemitic accusations that circulated during the Middle Ages up until the mid-18th century was that Jewish people were eager to convert their Christian neighbors. An example of this included Rabbi Manasseh Ben Israel (1604-1657) and his plea to allow the Jewish people back into England.[71] According to Lawrence Epstein, Cromwell, the Lord Protector, stated that he was reluctant to allow the Jews back into England due to a Jewish propensity for converting Christians to Judaism. Another similar case occurred in Russia during the rule of Peter the Great (1682-1725). A synagogue built in Smolensk was condemned by the Orthodox Christian Church as a ploy to convert the Christian community, leading to the

[70] Epstein, *Questions and Answers*, 175.

[71] They were expelled in 1290.

deportation of the Jewish people of the city and the destruction of the synagogue.[72] As mentioned before, these accusations were false. At the time, conversion to Judaism was extremely limited and secretive. However, this would soon change.

Conversion changed drastically during the emancipation of the Jewish people in Europe during the Haskalah (1750s-1850s).[73] Jewish people were no longer restricted to certain occupations and, subsequently, Jewish ideas and practices were reintroduced into the public eye. The Haskalah sparked new Jewish ideas and learning, including most notably the reformation of Orthodox Jewish practices. The Reform movement allowed Judaism to blend more into modern mainstream western society. This is because many of the restrictive laws no longer needed to be followed, such as dress, dietary restrictions, and Sabbath observance.[74] Two results of this were that (1) overall numbers of born Jews who 'defected' increased and (2) conversions to Judaism increased.[75] This was also a period in which public antisemitism was lower. However, the Orthodox community still remained somewhat wary of converts.

Due to the increased number of conversions and the wider acceptance of converts during this period, scholars have access to more information about converts' experiences

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[72] Epstein, *Converts to Judaism*, 85-89.

[73] The Haskalah refers to the Jewish Enlightenment and comes from the Hebrew word *haskalah*, meaning "wisdom."

[74] Shira Schoenberg, "Modern Jewish History: The Haskalah," Jewish Virtual Library, accessed December 10, 2021, https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/the-haskalah.

[75] Theodor Dunkelgrün and Pawel Maciejko, *Bastards and Believers: Jewish Converts and Conversion from the Bible to the Present*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2020), 233-235.

in this time. This includes the case of Yelizaveta Ivanovna Zhirkova (1889-1949), who, after being close with a religious Jewish family, began to study with them and later converted. However, it was still difficult to convert to Judaism; Aime Palliere, even after studying for years with a rabbi, never converted at the behest of the rabbi. He instead remained known as a *goy tzedek.*[76] Trends of knowledge on conversion to Judaism would remain on the increase during this time of relative calm.

This period was short lived. As the rise of antisemitism in the early 20th century led to a crisis within the Jewish community, rabbis found themselves once again putting up 'gates' to conversion. This included a rabbi in Australia who only allowed a few people to convert and a rabbi in Argentina who stopped converting people altogether.[77] The rise of antisemitism during the early 20th century led to the Shoah[78] in Europe. The Shoah would have a large effect not only on modern Judaism, but conversion practices as well.

The Shoah brought Jewish pain and suffering to the forefront of global awareness, which in turn brought attention to the Jewish community. Reuel Abrahman, born Karl Heinz Schneider, was a Hitler Youth volunteer at the age of 18. After witnessing the SS torture and kill Jewish people, Schneider quietly began to distance himself from the Nazi movement. After working 20 years in hard labor as a means of repentance, he moved to

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[76] Epstein, *Converts to Judaism,* 90-92.

[77]" The Ban on Conversion to Judaism in Argentina," Mi Yodeya, 2019, https://judaism.stackexchange.com/questions/105175/the-ban-on-conversion-to-judaism-in-argentina.

[78]" Shoah," coming from the Hebrew word for destruction, is often used instead of the more popular term "Holocaust." These words are used interchangeably throughout this study.

Israel and converted to Judaism. Schneider, like many others, found himself drawn to Judaism. The Germans who did convert to Judaism found in it a means of atonement through identification.[79] This was one of the many ways the Shoah changed conversion to Judaism.

After the Shoah and the ensuing period of crisis for the Jewish community, information about conversion once again began to steadily increase. This was in part because of the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948 and the desire of many people to identify with it.[80] Moreover, a new type of convert arose because of globalization. Many individuals from around the world started to stake their claim to Judaism through a newfound belief that they belonged to the long-lost tribes of Israel.[81] Conservative and Reform movements of Judaism found themselves at the forefront of this movement.

Globalization in the 20th century allowed for widespread information about Judaism to reach the furthest corners of the globe. Suddenly, people across the globe, such as the Abayudaya[82] in Uganda, found themselves wanting to connect with Judaism. Started by Semei Kakungulu in 1919, this tribe began to observe Jewish traditions and were formally converted by a Conservative rabbi in 2002.[83] Mass conversions, such as the one undergone by the Abayudaya, continued to be a common occurrence into the 21st

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[79] Epstein, *Questions and Answers*, 172.

[80] Angel, *Choosing to be Jewish*, 23.

[81] Ibid., 24-25.

[82]" People of Judah."

[83] Kulanu, "Uganda-Abayudaya," last modified 2019, https://kulanu.org/communities/uganda/.

century. Millions of people now find themselves either actively pursuing conversion, wanting to convert, or identifying as Jews.[84]

Evolution of the Methodology of Jewish Conversion: An Analysis

Modern methods of Jewish conversion have a clear relationship to their historical counterparts. This includes references from the *Tanakh*, which transformed into some of the rituals seen today, including *brit milah*, name change, Jewish lineage, and convert's affirmation. The codification of the conversion process within the *Yoreh De'ah* provides a glimpse into Jewish conversion but does not demonstrate exactly how an individual should convert. Using Rambo's descriptive methodology, one can see how conversion has changed throughout time.

Jewish conversion throughout time has been and continues to be affected not only by the individual, but also the surrounding world. An example of this exists in the rise of economic and racial antisemitism in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. This period brought a major change not only to Judaism, but also to individuals' reasons for conversion to Judaism. As mentioned above, the historical atrocities of the Shoah inspired some individuals to convert to Judaism. Events may also discourage people from converting to Judaism.

Various events throughout history caused public hesitancy to convert. These included pressures from within Judaism, such as rabbis making it more restrictive, as well as external pressures such as antisemitism. These factors, as well as others, often led to a

[84] Netanel Fisher and Tudor Parfitt, *Becoming Jewish: New Jews and Emerging Jewish Communities in a Globalized World*, (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2016), ix-x.

decrease in converts to Judaism. It seems that in times of crisis, conversion tended to be viewed in a negative light. However, during times of relative peace, when information was allowed to spread, conversion to Judaism became more popular.

A recent example of how conversion to Judaism is molded by its environment can be seen in the 20th century. At the end of the 20th century, with the rise of globalization and relative decrease in antisemitism, millions of people were taking steps toward conversion.[85] The modern age has brought to the forefront the issue of conversion to Judaism. Once a merely theoretical issue, it has become one of immediate concern.

Literature Review

Because this project's subject matter is recent, academic literature pertaining to this exact topic is limited. Therefore, I delve into some literature that is only loosely related to the wider topic. This small literature review consists of articles pertaining to how COVID-19 has led to macro and micro changes within human society; how scholars understand Jewish and religious responses to COVID-19; and some popular articles about people converting to Judaism during the pandemic.

The changes that COVID-19 has brought about can be explained using the macro + micro model. Sheriff Ibrahim's article "Socio-Political Impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic" states that changes to our global society by COVID-19 may have much longer

[85] Ibid.

lasting effects on humanity.[86] Personal changes told by Iris Benaroia, et al. in "COVID Made Me Do It" describe how individuals now find themselves making drastic life transformations due to "calamity survivors' syndrome." People are gravitating and jumping to life changes as a self-assurance to better times. They are also finding safe spaces to be a valuable "commodity" during these uncertain times.[87] These macro and micro changes are also found within religious life, including the decision to convert.

Although nothing has yet been published on conversion to Judaism during the COVID-19 pandemic, there are articles which discuss changes to religious rituals and religion in general. In the conclusion of Evan Imber-Black's article, "Rituals in the Time of COVID-19," Imber-Black states that, "[r]rituals bent but did not break during COVID-19. New rituals were created, designed, and invented that captured and expressed the current moment. Our rituals hold us, shape us, sustain us, and connect us. When the shutdown finally becomes a memory and some of the newly invented rituals slip away, I predict that many will remain as discoveries of our creativities, our capacities, and our requirement for the human connections rituals provide."[88] Many of the rituals mentioned here are also being performed by those converting to Judaism during the pandemic.

Heidi Campbell draws attention to additional religious perspectives in her book *Religion in Quarantine*. Within this book, academics express their own personal

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[86] Sheriff Ibrahim, "Socio-Political Impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Human Existence and Society: a Critical Analysis," *African Journal of Biology and Medical Research* 3 no. 2, (2020): abstract, 204, 212.

[87] Benaroia et al., "Covid Made Me Do It," *Toronto Life*, 2020, 51.

[88] Evan Imber-Black, "Rituals in The Time of COVID-19: Imagination, Responsiveness, and the Human Spirit," *Family Process* 59, no. 3, (2020): 920-921, https://doi.org/10.1111/famp.12581.

reflections and discuss how their studies in religion were impacted by the virus.[89] These six key lessons are derived from the book: "(1) Some religious groups will easily adapt, and others will not, (2) sacred holidays and rituals are disturbed in all religious traditions, (3) the forced move from offline to online makes researchers ponder the future of gathered religions, (4) religious communities that are flexible and willing to innovate will adapt to current and coming changes, (5) quarantine reveals the power of technology that many religious groups were previously unaware of, and (6) lockdown raises the question, "How much that is religious is necessarily embodied?"[90]

Campbell and Imber-Black demonstrate that there is a current trend in religious studies and anthropology to trace pandemic-related changes along ritual lines. Their work also embodies some of the conclusions I arrived at in my study. This is explored more in Chapter 4.

Some articles specifically examine how rituals in Judaism have been affected. Elazar Ben-Lulu's observations on Reform communities' observance of *shabbat* led to an observed change in spiritual worship with the context of an online platform.[91] On the other side of the spectrum of Jewish religious adherence, we can consider the impact on

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[89] Heidi Campbell, *Religion in Quarantine: The Future of Religion in a Post-Pandemic World*, (Digital Religion Publications, 2020), 4.

[90] Ibid., 60.

[91] Elazar Ben-Lulu, "Zooming in and out of Virtual Jewish Prayer Services During the COVID-19 Pandemic," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 60, no. 4, (2021): 852. https://doi.org/10.1111/jssr.12746.

the Haredi[92] community. COVID-19 has led to exposure of Haredi practices in the wider media and also to the wider media's exposure to the Haredi community. The pandemic has had an immense impact on all aspects of Jewish life and subsequently on Jewish conversion.

All of these articles used a similar approach to my project, in that the researchers and journalists interviewed rabbis who talked about their experiences of converting individuals during the pandemic. These articles highlight some of the initial conclusions that individuals have made regarding converting to Judaism during the pandemic. *The Pittsburgh Jewish Chronicle* states that converts largely exhibit a positive outlook, as they view this experience as once in a lifetime.[93] *CBC Montreal* uses an individual's story to help demonstrate the diversity of opinions on Jewish conversion during this time; this individual determined that so much of experiencing Judaism is sensory and one simply can't become Jewish alone.[94] A *Jewish Insider* article also mentions that people who converted during this time may require an adjustment period after the pandemic ends and circumstances return to normal.[95] *The Sun Sentinel* paints a vignette of individuals

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[92] Cohen et al., "The Haredi Media, Religious Identity, and the COVID-19 Crisis," *Israel Affairs* 27, no. 5, (2021): 921-922, https://doi.org/10.1080/13537121.2021.1968213.

[93] David Rullo, "COVID-19 Forces Jewish Conversions to Adapt to Once-in-a-Century Challenge," *Pittsburgh Jewish Chronicle* 2020, https://jewishchronicle.timesofisrael.com/covid-19-forces-jewish-conversions-to-adapt-to-once-in-a-century-challenge/.

[94] Allegra Moyle and Moritz Wittmann, "Montrealers Converting to Reform Judaism Learn you Can't be Jewish Alone," *CBC Montreal* 2021, https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/montreal/reform-judaism-online-conversion-1.6060568.

[95] Marie-Rose Sheinerman, '"Beautiful in its Own Way"': Converting to Judaism Amid the Pandemic," *Jewish Insider* 2020, https://jewishinsider.com/2020/12/rabbi-conversion-judaism-coronavirus.

experiencing conversion from all over the country. Some of the observations that came from these articles were from individuals in the Reform community who did a non-traditional *mikveh* in which a cup of water was poured over their head. Others referred to the Orthodox community putting most conversions on hold.[96] These articles help set the tone for the many types of responses from individuals who are confronted with such challenges.

Finally, the last article from *Tablet,* aptly entitled "Surprising Trends Driving Conversion to Judaism" discusses how the pandemic has affected trends over the last year as well as how modern society and technology have impacted the issue. First, and most notably, there are more people converting to Judaism than ever before, which the article attributes to several factors including the outlook on conversion by those converting as a personal means of life fulfillment rather than as a means to marriage.[97] Another factor is the wide availability of commercial DNA tests that include "Jewish" DNA markers, the presence of which may inspire non-Jews who strongly identify with the Jewish community to convert.[98] Finally, members of marginalized communities, such as LGBTQ+-identifying people, are converting more due to the solidarity and public

[96] Josefin Dolsten, "While Conversions to Judaism are Delayed, Others Move Ahead Creatively," *Sun Sentinel* 2020, https://www.sun-sentinel.com/florida-jewish-journal/fl-jj-conversions-judaism-delayed-others-move-ahead-creatively-20200512-tlw3gu2cdvdxbbineszs3ofve4-story.html.

[97] Ibid.

[98] Caitlyn Rose Campana, "Sephardi Identity & Legitimacy in the Age of Direct-to-Consumer DNA Tests," master's thesis, Florida International University, 2021.

acceptance they experience within a large part of the Jewish community.[99] These trends are interesting as they also appear within the small population of individuals I interviewed.

Jewish conversion and the modern-day study of it is an ever-evolving process. Looking throughout Jewish history and recent times, we can see how external factors that have affected the Jewish people have also affected conversion to Judaism. Conversion's methodology has evolved to fit the needs and desires of its environment and of the Jewish people. However, external factors have not only affected the process of Jewish conversion, but also how it appears to those who are curious about converting.

[99] Mark Oppenhiemer, "Surprising Trends Driving Conversion to Judaism," *Tablet* 2021.

CHAPTER III. EXPERIENCES OF CONVERTING DURING COVID-19

Methodology

The analysis and results of this project come from the qualitative data gathered from my interviews and surveys. The minimal quantitative data collected explain the diversity of the respondents in the interviews and surveys. Respondents divide into those who participate in conversion to Judaism[100] and those who facilitate the process of conversion.[101] Respondents were given a choice between two different survey methods: the longer interview and the shorter online survey form. These two methods of collection, and the data received from them, are explained later.

In total, there were 26 responses to both surveys and interviews. Among these were people who assisted in conversions, including nine rabbis and one Jewish education leader. They represent a wide range of groups in Judaism. Included was one non-denominational rabbi, four Reform rabbis, one Reform Jewish education leader, two Conservative rabbis, and two Orthodox rabbis. Among those who underwent the conversion process, seven respondents had a formal interview and nine filled out the survey. Those interviewed further split up as follows: three Ashkenazi Reform converts, three Sephardic Reform converts, and one Conservative convert who did not mention any ancestry. Among those who filled out the short survey, only two mentioned an ethnic association and self-identified as Ashkenazi Reform converts. The rest did not mention

[100] Some had not yet finished their conversion at the time of this interview.

[101] These individuals include rabbis and Jewish learning educators.

an ethnic association, including: one Reconstructionist convert, four more Reform converts, one Conservative convert, and one Orthodox convert.

These groups and categories are important because they help facilitate comparisons not only between individuals, but among the groups themselves. Individual respondents are labeled and distinguished based on their specific ethnicity,[102] grouping, and role; for example, "Ashkenazi Reform Convert." For ease of reading, these labels have been shortened to one letter. If multiple informants fit within a certain label, a numerical value[103] is assigned as demonstrated by figure 1. Individuals are also addressed through gender-neutral pronouns such as 'they' and 'them.' Spouses or partners of individuals are also addressed with gender-neutral pronouns. Individual family members mentioned by the respondents do not have gender-neutral pronouns. This is because of the importance of lineage when it comes to Jewishness. Omitting this information would detract from the statements of the respondents.

Ashkenazi	A
Sephardi	S
No Ethnicity Identified	N
Non-Denominational	D

[102] If applicable.

[103] These numerical values are random. They do not delineate any order of interview, nor qualitative value.

Reform	R
Reconstructionist	T
Conservative	C
Orthodox	O
Filled out Form Only	F
Example: Form Only Sephardi Orthodox Convert #2	FSO Convert #2

Figure 1. Key for Abbreviations.

The first category in the chart is the method of data collection. Those who participated in the longer interviews do not have a letter denoting this in the front of their name. These interviews were 30- to 45-minutes long, qualitative, and semi-structured. Questions were used to keep respondents on topic, or if they found themselves lacking in what to say. They were also geared towards the specific role of the individual. For example, I would not ask a rabbi about their conversion experience during the pandemic, nor would I ask a convert about their role in facilitating a conversion. These interviews gave rich insights into the experience of converting during the pandemic. They took a lot of time on the part of the respondent. Because of this, I gave interviewees the option to participate in a shorter survey (F). These surveys consisted of nine questions similar to

those asked during the interview. This survey did not allow for detailed answers, but it did help expand the pool of respondents. This survey was also used as a recruitment tactic, as respondents had the opportunity to provide their contact information.

The second category refers to the level of religious adherence, or in other terms, how strictly *halakha* is followed. Orthodox (O) is the strictest, Reform (R) is the least, and Conservative (C) is in the middle. In the case of the non-denominational rabbi, I paired them with Reform. This is because they have slightly different practices than Reform, but have similar *halakhic* adherence. Jewish branches are often miscategorized as 'sect' or 'denominations.' For ease of language and succinctness, I refer to the branch category as "groupings."[104]

Finally, the last category mentioned in the key refers to the Jewish ancestry mentioned by converts. These individual respondents identified as having some Jewish ancestry through word of mouth by relatives, popular DNA testing kits,[105] or intuitive premonition. These self-identified connections to Jewish ancestry are important distinctions, as they serve as a motivating factor and marker of Jewish identity for these individuals. Jewish ethnicity markers such as these are distinguished by geographic location. These categories include Ashkenazi (A) from Eastern and Central Europe, Sephardi (S) from the Iberian Peninsula and North Africa, and Mizrachi (not found in survey) from the Middle East. Sephardi sometimes denotes those who do not identify as Ashkenazi.

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[104] Sects are groups of people who differ in religious beliefs from the larger groups they belong to.

[105] These include companies such as 23andMe and AncestryDNA.

Initial Assumptions

Before attempting an analysis of Jewish conversion during the pandemic, I would like to explain how I thought of my initial idea and how I developed my initial assumptions for this project. In my third year of undergraduate study, I had the opportunity to study abroad in England. Arriving two weeks before the High Holidays, I found myself still experiencing culture shock. This prevented me from reaching out to a Jewish community for the holidays. I also had some inhibitions about connecting with this new community. This apprehension stemmed from my anxiety about not knowing British customs, and this led me to think that I might insult this community during the High Holidays. Another fear was that my limited knowledge of Hebrew and some traditions would lead others to question my identity. Feeling overwhelmed, I decided to stay home and observe the High Holidays alone in my dorm.

For both Rosh Hashanah[106] and Yom Kippur[107] I watched a live stream of the services. The experience was dull at best. Services were long and boring without any reference to a *siddur*.[108] Even the parts in English were barely comprehensible because of the poor streaming quality. Yom Kippur was the worst of the two. Sequestered in my

[106] Rosh Hashanah (Hebrew for "head of the year") is the Jewish New Year.

[107] Yom Kippur (Hebrew for "day of atonement") is an extremely important Jewish holiday marked by fasting and intensive prayer.

[108] A *siddur* (Hebrew for "order") is a Hebrew prayer book.

room alone, I did not feel the sense of communal bond and awe I normally would. I was just tired and hungry. By the time Sukkot[109] came around, I had enough of the solitary practice of Judaism; I decided to reach out to a synagogue.

In the synagogue, I experienced a welcoming and friendly environment. I was lost in many of the practices so I decided to join a class of adults who were in the process of converting. This class helped me fill in the gaps of my knowledge regarding practices, traditions, and Hebrew. These classes not only brought me closer to my fellow classmates, but also to the congregation as a whole. It was in this community that I felt my connection to Judaism most strongly.

A year later, back in the United States, and with the pandemic restrictions beginning, I once again found myself alone for the High Holidays. With my parents out of town and all my other relatives and friends too scared to have anyone over, I was left to celebrate Passover[110] alone. Reading through the *haggadah*[111] and having the traditional *seder*[112] foods alone, I was reminded of the experience I had had in England.

It was also at this time that a friend of mine mentioned to me that they had begun to convert to Judaism. I was confused. Why were they converting now and why during a pandemic of all times? Practicing Judaism in isolation made me feel less Jewish than usual, so how could my friend hope to build a new Jewish identity alone in these

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[109] Sukkot (Hebrew for "tabernacle") is one of three major pilgrimage festivals observed by Jews.

[110] Passover is a major Jewish holiday celebrating the biblical Exodus from Egypt.

[111] The *haggadah* (Hebrew for "telling") is a narrative of the Exodus story read on the first night of Passover.

[112] The *seder* (Hebrew for "order") is the ritual meal held on the first night of Passover.

unpromising circumstances? I could not find any spiritual connection when watching live stream services, so how could they find spirituality online? Would they ultimately feel less Jewish or not at all Jewish due to this isolation and lack of physical presence? I would soon learn from speaking to this individual that building a Jewish identity is complex and multifaceted.

Rabbinical and Jewish Educator Leader Qualitative Responses

Jewish education leaders guide classes of converts, while rabbis are in charge of sponsoring the conversion process. Rabbis teach individuals about Judaism and are also present during the ritual events of conversion. The opinions of these individuals have been included because they give insider knowledge on conversion and Jewish rituals. They also serve as key gatekeepers in their communities. These two roles directly influence those converting to Judaism.

I divide responses into two sections. The first is the impact of COVID-19: how do individuals deal with such crises? Was Judaism, in any way, used to cope with challenges such as Covid? Does the pandemic affect the way Judaism is practiced? The next category deals with the more frequent use of technology: how has it been incorporated into these communities? Did technology hinder or aid finding spirituality and community? These baseline experiences lead to answering the central question: how does COVID-19 change the building of Jewish identity and the process of conversion in Judaism?

The Pandemic and its Effects on Conversion

The Orthodox community[113] experienced the least amount of lasting changes due to the pandemic. This is because they were one of the first Jewish communities to resume business-as-usual. O Rabbi #1 stated that they only had their synagogue closed for three months: March 2020-June 2020. Because the pandemic restrictions were in place for such a short time, they stated that they experienced little to no change to the process of conversion.

Both Orthodox rabbis found their conversion candidates at somewhat of a stand-still. There were no *beit din* meetings or trips to the *mikveh*. O Rabbi #1 stated that during the period of pause, there were no *shabbat* meals or social interactions, while O Rabbi #2 also stated that no one reached out to them to start converting during this period.

This pause also seemed to have exacerbated a problem that existed before the pandemic: *beit din* meetings had a sizable backlog, leading to longer finishing times. O Rabbi #1 stated that such a problem could not be fixed and finishing conversion was not the priority of rabbis. O Rabbi #2 stated that this problem could and needed to be fixed. They addressed the root of the problem stemming from "major ego" from their rabbinical council and the inability to consider change. O Rabbi #2 also stated that they worried how this problem would affect the future of conversion. Specifically, as people were going to find themselves going elsewhere for less than kosher conversion.

There were advantages in the conversion process brought about by the pandemic. O Rabbi #2 stated that individuals could study and self-reflect more due to more personal

[113] According to the members in the Orthodox community I interviewed.

free time. This three-month period of pause also gave conversion students more time to practice the Jewish life they wanted to live. More time allowed their students to find a deeper understanding of concepts discussed before finishing the formal conversion process. Although these sentiments were not echoed by O Rabbi #1, O Rabbi #2 was not alone in thinking this way. Other rabbis also saw the advantages of free time for self-discovery.

Conservative Rabbis found themselves affected a bit more than the Orthodox community. This is because they took more precautions when it came to pandemic restrictions. C Rabbi #2's main observation was that personal bonds slowed and suffered as a result of COVID-19. This was due to the lack of personal interactions and the discomfort in spaces that remained open during the lockdowns. More specifically, they mentioned they did not see the effects on converts. There were only a small number of people that converted during the pandemic, which made it difficult for them to get a general gauge for the feelings of the group as a whole. They also stated that no one started converting during the pandemic. However, C Rabbi #1 argued the opposite. For them they saw spirituality develop because there was more time for reflection, echoing what O Rabbi #2 had stated. C Rabbi #2 also continued to see the positives within the pandemic, as they mentioned how many opportunities for Jewish learning arose.

The Reform community was the strictest when it came to COVID-19 restrictions. Because of the Reform community's affinity for change, this community saw most new practices. The Reform community also was the most reflective out of the other groupings for two reasons. First, as Reform rabbis, one of their major focuses is how to bring the practices of Judaism into the modern day and how to deal with daily challenges; this

brought COVID-19 to the forefront of conversations and sermons. The second is due to a more personal reason: my own previous relationship to some of the Reform rabbis. I felt possibly that these respondents were more comfortable talking to me about their personal reflections than the Orthodox or Conservative rabbis were. Even with all these changes within their community, many of the Reform rabbis also expressed similar sentiments mentioned by previous rabbis: they did not notice any significant changes to conversion. However, as explained in Chapter 4, Jewish conversion did change during the pandemic. This change is explored more in the section concerned with technology.

Reform rabbis and the Jewish education leader echoed the statement made by both O Rabbi #2 and C Rabbi #2: the pandemic allowed more time for people to pause and reflect. More time allowed for deeper explorations into Judaism and spirituality. R Jewish education leader #1 stated that people were always hungry to learn and now had the time and opportunity to do so.

Many rabbis stated that people had time to explore their spirituality and Judaism's importance within their life. D Rabbi #1 said that the pandemic led people to learn more about themselves and their spirituality. R Rabbi # 1 mentioned that people are always in search of spirituality. And now because of the pandemic, with people stuck in their homes, there was nothing to do but explore that spirituality. They labeled this as an "existential crisis" that led converts to find spirituality again. Many of the converts I ended up interviewing had similar soul-searching moments, which in part led them to begin converting. R Rabbi #4 eloquently summarized this phenomenon: Covid made room for G-d.

Effects of the Incorporation of Technology into Conversion

The Orthodox community is unique among the other groups insofar as they have strict limitations on the use of technology during holidays and other holy times such as *shabbat*.[114] However, this community has slowly begun to incorporate technology into their practices due to COVID-19. In one case, O Rabbi #2 explained that they were already familiar with communication about Judaism online, as they frequently wrote articles about guiding Jews through life and were contacted virtually by people with questions. However, they mentioned that they still had worries about the viability of learning Judaism solely through online means. They compared it to the feeling of a book versus an e-book, believing that there is something about electronics that distorts knowledge acquisition. O Rabbi #1 also echoed this sentiment. They said that for them, it took a while to "slowly figure out" the convenience of Zoom. When they finally did, they saw how easily Zoom had allowed for meeting with those converting as well as other rabbis. They did note, however, that it is still not a replacement for some aspects and traditions, as Judaism has "high standards" of success in conversion.

Decisions made by a *beit din* is a component that both Orthodox rabbis agree should not be placed online. O Rabbi #1 states that through an online presence a real sense of a person cannot be determined. O Rabbi #2 argued that an online presence creates a slight "distortion" that renders it difficult for a *beit din* to really know a person's true nature. Zoom could allow for some questioning, but final decisions should be restricted to an in-person environment.

[114] According to *halakha*, it is forbidden to light a flame, including modern electricity, during the Sabbath and High Holidays.

Overall, during COVID-19 mostly all conversions within the Orthodox communities that I examined were stalled. Some learning had continued within these two communities, but both rabbis echoed the sentiment that learning also needs to take place in person. O Rabbi #2 mentioned that the personal and spiritual connection of learning about Judaism is lost online. While O Rabbi #1 did not echo the same strong feeling, they argued the need of a physical conversion class. Again, this is because of the high standards and need to have people fully integrated into Jewish society, so a few years down the road they don't "stop being Jewish." According to O Rabbi #1, this is because conversion to Judaism is a process of "enculturation", one experiences. No one can convert to Judaism "on a desert island." Therefore, technology cannot be the only vehicle of conversion.

While Orthodox communities are strict regarding their use of technology, Conservative communities are less strict, yet not as relaxed as Reform communities.[115] While actual s*habbat* services may not be streamed online, pre-*shabbat* meetings and *havdalah*[116] services are done on Zoom. It is within this community that I located the biggest difference of opinion. While C Rabbi #2 seemingly leans towards the Orthodox opinion, C Rabbi #1 seemed to be more in agreement with prevailing Reform opinion. Overall, however, they seemed to agree that there are more positive aspects associated with technology being incorporated into the conversion process.

[115] According to the Conservative communities I interviewed.

[116] *havdalah* (Hebrew for "separation") refers to the closing ritual of *shabbat*.

While in person contact is preferred for both the Conservative rabbis, C Rabbi #1 stated that Zoom had a value for conversion. They saw the added benefit of having more frequent talks. These talks could also be more personal. This is because it allows rabbis to have one-on-one conversations with converts and to enter their personal space. They also stated that this lack of barriers on Zoom gives people more confidence to discuss private manner. C Rabbi #2 mentioned that the biggest advantage they saw was the added safety measures (leading to less COVID spread). One also does not have to worry about traveling all the way to *shul*. Some of the services they had on Zoom, such as *havdalah* and pre-*shabbat,* did reaffirm communal bonds within their own community. This rabbi did note that this only helped their current community and did little to nothing to attract outsiders.

C Rabbi #2 also echoed many of the sentiments of the disconnection felt on Zoom that Orthodox rabbis felt. The quality of relationships on Zoom is different from in person. These disadvantages include the difficulty of building new relationships with potential converts. They also echoed the problem with the *beit din* that the Orthodox rabbis mentioned, maintaining that the barrier of an online presence makes it difficult for them to judge a convert's nature.

C Rabbi #1, on the other hand, leaned more towards the Reform rabbis. They are interested in pushing for a *beit din* on Zoom. C Rabbi #1 even remarked that they knew of several Zoom conversions and *beit din* that took place under Orthodox rabbis around the world. They also mentioned that a positive development that came about was a mass attendance of synagogues and increased quality of services. This is found in local American synagogues and international synagogues, both of which draw, interestingly

enough, a sizable crypto-Jewish[117] population. They did, however, express that maybe staying in front of the computer all day is not the healthiest experience.

Technology within the Reform community easily blends with ritual. In some of these communities, streaming services were already the norm. They are not limited in the use of technology during sacred times and in sacred spaces, and in some cases are advocates for technology when it helps religious adherence. Therefore, within this group, religious leaders are the most likely to incorporate technology in many aspects of Jewish life and conversion. Unlike Orthodox communities, where technology may only be an aid to learning–and Conservative communities where technology contributed to community social aspects too–Reform communities incorporated technology into spiritual experiences. During the pandemic, the Reform community used technology for initial recruitment, services and spirituality, building community, and Jewish learning. Though some wariness regarding technology remains, it is far outweighed by positive aspects mentioned by the rabbis.

Many of the Reform communities, as evidenced by the words of R Rabbis #2, 3, and 4, saw a significant increase in those converting to Judaism. R Rabbi #4 saw it mainly with the increased availability and accessibility. Now people from "all walks of life," no matter their disability or location, can now join an introduction to Judaism course. R Rabbis #2 and #3 attributed the increase in conversions to the easing of social pressure to attend synagogue in person. R Rabbi #2 mentioned that there is sometimes an

[117] Crypto-Jews were individuals who secretly practiced Judaism during the Spanish Inquisition. Within its modern context, the term can refer to individuals who claim ancestry from these individuals.

element of shyness in people. These individuals no longer have to go right away to talk to the rabbi in a synagogue; they can now join from Zoom. By dipping their toes at first, one can be more comfortable before eventually taking the next step of talking to a rabbi. R Rabbi #3 echoed this same sentiment.

Demographics also appear to have changed due to the incorporation of technology. Reform rabbis I interviewed described an increase in Zoom attendance among those who have disabilities and people with young kids. R Jewish education leader #1 also added that they noticed more higher ed students in attendance. They attributed this increase to the pandemic, as these students now have more time. R Rabbi #3 added that many of the individuals who are now converting are part of the LGBTQ+ community. They attribute this phenomenon to diminished social anxiety because of the online barrier, rendering it more comfortable for some of these individuals to go forward and begin their conversion.

The next aspect that was changed or affected by technology, unique to the Reform movement, comprises of religious services and communal spirituality. According to all Reform rabbis interviewed, online services give accessibility to those who cannot normally attend *shul*. Excuses, whether it be traffic, personal crises, disability, or location, no longer apply. People can now simply log into Zoom in the comfort of their own homes. D Rabbi #1 even stated that this comfort goes further as attendees could even be in their PJs sitting on a comfy couch. They described this newfound comfort-focused approach to *shabbat* as an advantage. D Rabbi #1 also mentioned that if individuals want to, they can also make *shabbat* a formal affair. This includes building their *mikdash*

me'at[118] and, if they want to, finding *kavanah*[119] for *shabbat* by dressing up and eliminating distractions. The choice is theirs.

Uniquely, spirituality is an aspect that technology either hindered or facilitated within the Reform community. D Rabbi #1 did mention that there were aspects of spirituality associated with the sanctuary and community that they themselves miss. R Rabbi #1 stated that they did not like being a "lonely pulpit rabbi" and they didn't "feel the connection" without everyone in the sanctuary. D Rabbi #1 and R Rabbi #2 said they missed hugging and actual physical connection with people. D Rabbi #1 explained how their congregation used to join together by interlocking arms. Now they put their hands close to the screen, which to them creates a similar effect. R Rabbi #3 just stated that they did not like Zoom services, and that conversations afterwards were awkward without the social lubricant of food. R Rabbi #4 expressed that, in an attempt to connect everyone in their congregation with spirituality, they sent out candles for everyone to light during the *chag*[120], but it "only did so much." It is salient to note that some of those converting echoed similar sentiments.

Personal connections that were normally made during the period of learning about Judaism were altered by technology, as noted by the Conversative rabbis interviewed. Many of the Reform rabbis and the Jewish education leader stated that it was harder for converts to make connections during online Jewish learning classes. R Jewish education

[118] A *mikdash me'at* (Hebrew for "holy from you") is a small temple space built for worship.

[119] *Kavanah* (Hebrew for "intention") denotes a sincere feeling or direction of the heart.

[120] *Chag* is Hebrew for "holiday."

leader #1 stated that it's harder for people to get to know each other initially. R Rabbi #1 stated that banter and side conversations were no longer really possible. They felt this absence because, to them, such conversations facilitated learning. They also state that it's hard to tell if a student is lost because body language is harder to read through a screen.

Other rabbis discussed how more meaningful conversations do come from these groups. D Rabbi #1 stated that it promoted learning as people looked each other in the face. COVID-19 gave people the opportunity to really focus on learning about Judaism, according to R Rabbi #1. R Rabbi #4 also echoed this sentiment, stating that one of the most meaningful conversations they ever experienced in the introduction to Judaism class took place on Zoom. R Jewish education leader #1 also stated that they never want to go back to 'in-person,' as giving people the flexibility to learn about these things helps more than the benefit of 'in-person' mode. Another reason they mentioned was the ability to go back and listen to a recorded lesson again.

The Reform rabbis also had a unique perspective because they witnessed individuals complete their conversion through online rituals. While the Orthodox and Conservative communities are currently debating the implementation of virtual conversion rituals, the Reform community had already begun to incorporate them. Some of the rabbis were wary of this at first, including R Rabbis #3 and #4. They stated that they would have never completed these rituals this way before the pandemic. R Rabbi #3 was indifferent, though preferred in-person. This is because, to them, the dynamic between the rabbi and the individual converting during the *beit din* was "weird," and they did not know how to explain it further. R Rabbi #4 stated that they could never go back to the way things were before, where everything was in-person.

All Reform rabbis interviewed had their conversion candidates submerge in an open-air *mikveh*, but two of the rabbis, R Rabbis #4 and #2, watched the *mikveh* ritual on Facetime. This was an interesting occurrence for them. As a third party held the phone, the rabbis witnessed each convert recite the blessing and submerge fully. When I asked them if the converts had any comments about this experience, R Rabbi #2 stated that the person found it just as meaningful. However, R Rabbi #4 stated that some of her students preferred to wait for an indoor *mikveh*, as they wanted to experience the ritual as it is normally done. However, this seems to be the minority opinion, in comparison to others I interviewed.

Students, Converts, and Jew-By-Choice Qualitative Responses

The individuals that I interviewed and surveyed ranged in the stages of their conversion. Some were just beginning and some had already finished their conversion. Similar to the rabbis and the Jewish education leader, converts were also affected by the pandemic. Many of the observations made by rabbis were also made by those converting. This is because of the direct connection between those converting and their rabbis.

The Pandemic and its Effects on Conversion

The Orthodox community's conversion practices experienced the least impact when it came to COVID-19, compared to the other groupings examined. FNO Convert #1 felt a sense of isolation, lack of community, and lack of holiday observance. Some of the notable things that they missed were attending *shul* and experiencing *shabbat* and holiday

hospitality.[121] However, despite these tumultuous times, they were able to connect more to G-d, which they state has kept them grounded. Even though they were isolated from their community during the lockdown period, they still believe that Judaism to them is "everything" in life. This is similar to what many of the rabbis observed within their community members and themselves. Despite hard times, Jewish spirituality seems to keep strong and may even be on the rise.

Among the Conservative individuals I interviewed, both FNC Convert #1 and NC Convert #1 explained how conversion during the pandemic was a blessing. NC Convert #1 explained that converting to Judaism was a time of joy and happiness during the bleakness of the pandemic. The community and friends they made during conversion before the pandemic helped them during the pandemic. However, FNC Convert #1, who began the process of conversion during the pandemic, did report feelings of isolation and difficulty getting in touch and together with individuals.

The Reform group is the largest group of respondents who were surveyed and interviewed. Here there is a clear diverse range of ideas among respondents. These individuals were also the ones who asserted Jewish ancestry, therefore I chose to divide this group further to explore any differences between those who identified Jewish ancestry and those who did not.

First, many respondents who did not claim to have Jewish ancestry tended to find themselves isolated from other communities. FNT Convert #1 and FNR Convert #2 both stated that they experienced a lack of community when converting during the pandemic.

[121] It is typical among Jewish families to invite individuals who do not have a place to spend the High Holidays or *shabbat.*

FNT Convert #1 stated the disadvantage of not having any community to experience "first" within Judaism, such as during holiday observances. FNR Convert #2 felt that not having a community of previous conversion students who they could talk to was a disadvantage.

Those who were originally homebound or lacked community before the pandemic such as FNR Convert #1, who lives in a rural area, or FNR Convert #3, who was disabled and homebound, reported finding a community thanks to the online presence of the *shuls* and other Jewish community groups. Many others also noted that converting to Judaism has brought them a sense of peace during the pandemic. This includes FNR Converts #3 and #4, who claim to have found peace within Judaism while political tensions in the U.S. have been high. FNT Convert #1 stated that they used the compassion of their community as a guide to motivate them during this difficult time. FNT Convert #1 also stated that finding time to observe *shabbat* has been a difficult transition because of the hectic state of the pandemic.

The next group of Reform individuals also had similar experiences to those who do not identify with a Jewish ethnic background, though they themselves also had some unique experiences specific to having identified a Jewish background. First, many of them expressed similar sentiments: the pandemic really gave them time to explore themselves and Judaism. AR Convert #2 stated that this time allotted to them by COVID-19 restrictions led them to convert to Judaism. They mentioned that converting with their mother, who now has the time to start her conversion, led to strong moments of connection to Judaism. They expressed to me moments of serenity while lighting the

shabbat candles with their mom. This gave them a moment to not only be closer to their parent, but also to their spirituality and religion.

AR Convert #1 also stated that their deep exploration of G-d was a major change that came about, given to them because of the time allotted by the pandemic. Another unique perspective on how individuals viewed the changes brought about by COVID-19 is embodied by AR Convert #1. They were easily able to fit their passion of helping others with the Jewish concept of *tikkun olam*[122] and the new opportunities for community service presented to them during the pandemic. AR Convert #3 also made it a point to state a similar perspective. Before, they felt alone in their desire to help others, especially during the pandemic. They felt they were isolated in ideas and motivations, even simple things such as wearing a mask or getting vaccinated. They, however, saw these similar values in their own Jewish community which, for them, gave them reasons to continue converting.

A unique element within this group of individuals was that they all mentioned having a Jewish background. Some mentioned that it was from their mother's side and some mentioned that it was from their father's side. None of them claim this as an identity marker, as in 'I am Ashkenazi Jewish,' but they do have a strong connection towards Jews historically. There is also a great sense of "homecoming" when it comes to these respondents. FAR #2 stated that the pandemic was timed fortuitously, as it gave them time to explore their family history and when they did it felt like coming home. AR #2 also expressed similar sentiments, as they felt like it was right where they were

[122] *Tikkun olam* (Hebrew for "repair the world") is used by the liberal Jewish community to invoke a sense of responsibility toward fixing what is wrong in the world.

supposed to be. They noted that they are thankful the pandemic gave them time to explore their past. AR Convert #1 actually discovered their Jewish ancestry during the pandemic, as the timing of having more freedom of self-discovery led them to Judaism.

Another interesting aspect within this group is how they use Jewish history as a way to understand and deal with the troubles and woes of the pandemic. AR Convert #3 stated that the Jewish people have endured for thousands of years through many different "unprecedented times." They applied this sentiment to themselves, finding their own strength to deal with these unprecedented times. AR Convert #3 also mentioned reading lots of Holocaust literature. They contrasted the times of the Shoah to the times of today. They stated that if the Jewish people survived the tragedies of the Shoah, they themselves can get through this pandemic. This historical comparison by respondents is seen within the Sephardi group as well.

Reformed Sephardi respondents all mentioned an increase in spirituality. SR Convert #1 mentioned how COVID did not make them want to convert to Judaism, but rather pushed them to start pursuing it. At one point during the pandemic they experienced a sense of existential dread surrounding the thought of not dying Jewish, which drove them to begin converting. SR Convert #3 stated that Judaism was the "comfort and joy" they needed during these 'crazy' times. These are, of course, attitudes seen before within the rabbinical community and with other converts.

Something unique that did come from this group, also seen in the Ashkenazi group, was the use of Jewish history as a method for coping with the pandemic. SR convert #3 also noted the Shoah as an example of Jewish perseverance, mentioning that if those who experienced the Shoah can thrive after that experience, converts can also do

the same during and after the pandemic. SR Convert #2 had a unique take on this topic. Living in an antisemitic community and not the most accepting household, they stated that they had to convert to Judaism in secret during COVID-19. They likened their experience to those of crypto-Jews throughout history. They made this connection in part because they have ancestors who were also crypto-Jews. This reveals an interesting parallel to the past.

Effects of Incorporation of Technology in Conversion

As mentioned before, the Orthodox community observes strict adherence to *halakha*, prohibiting the use of technology during the Sabbath and High Holidays. Therefore, one of the impacts of technology within this community during the pandemic was learning. FON Convert #1 also acknowledged the helpful role that technology has played in their learning about Judaism, citing instances of learning with their rabbi online, learning on the phone, the increased use of WhatsApp, and Zoom *shiurim*[123] and *beit din*. They noted that there was still a debate on whether the *beit din* should meet over Zoom.

The Conservative community are in the middle, sometimes leaning towards more Orthodox practices when it involves technology and sometimes more Reform, depending on the community and rabbi. Among the individuals I interviewed, FNC Convert #1 stated that they did have services online, which made going to them convenient, but felt a bit distant from the community. NC Convert #1 did not have services online and because

[123] *Shiurim* (Hebrew for "lesson") denotes Torah study.

of this felt isolated from their synagogue community. However, both converts did mention that technology was a huge resource for Jewish learning. NC Convert #1 stated that online resources were a huge help as they were able to find a mentor and consult online sources. FNC Convert #1 stated that it was easier to meet with their rabbi more frequently.

The Reform individuals interviewed and surveyed within this study have also expressed a wide range of perspectives on how they have used technology and how technology served or hindered them during the pandemic. Most notable is the finding of community thanks to more free time and Jewish learning online. This was also seen by converts as literally "finding" the Jewish community, as in the case of FNR Convert #3, who first found out about Judaism during a browsing session online during the pandemic. Individuals also noted that they found community using online resources.

FNR Convert #1 and FNR Convert #3, who were homebound and too far away, respectively, to regularly attend *shul* before could now do so. Now that the pandemic has isolated them, this online *shul* community is one of their main sources of communal bonding and friendship. As both Conservative and Orthodox individuals have also attested to, it has helped in the Jewish learning process for all individuals. For example, FNR Convert #4 has been able to learn about daily *parsha*[124] commentary and FNR Convert #2 has stated that without online learning they think the experience would have taken much longer.

[124] *Parsha* (Hebrew for "portion") denotes a passage in Jewish scripture.

Among the Ashkenazi Reform individuals there are many similar experiences to those with no Jewish ethnic background. The only difference is that many of them used direct-to-consumer DNA testing to learn more about their ancestry, which led to their further exploration of Judaism. Many similar experiences appeared, such as the ease of accessibility for learning mentioned by all individuals within these categories. Interestingly, AR Converts #1 and #3 and FAR Convert #2 all mentioned having a disability that would have previously hindered their ability to convert. Another advantage specifically mentioned by AR Converts #1 and #2 is that they found reaching out to their rabbi to be much easier because of technology.

This group also identified some of the disadvantages of finding community and spirituality on Zoom. AR Convert #1 stated that although Zoom does help them when they can't make it to *shul*, they view it only as "the next best thing." AR Convert #3 stated that spirituality in general is hard for them, but that it is especially hard to find on Zoom. AR Convert #1 mentioned that although they did have an online community of spiritual seekers similar to them, they tried to pursue getting involved in the nearby Jewish community. AR Convert #3 stated that Zoom limits their interactions with others and that they could not really form any bonds on Zoom in their introduction to Judaism class. AR Convert #3 also mentioned that they imagine that without their partner, who is Jewish, converting would have been much more difficult and lonelier.

Among the group of individuals who identified as having Sephardi heritage, many of the same concepts emerged. Online classes were very helpful. SR Convert #2 stated that learning virtually gave them the opportunity to explore more in their own space and practice Hebrew, which was easier for them to pick up. SR Convert #3 stated that the

online element of learning during conversion was “everything,” and was convenient as it matched their busy lifestyle as a parent to young children. They mentioned there was no way they could have started converting without the assistance of technology because of the life stage they were in. In terms of building community, there was a range of opinions within this group. While SR Convert #1 stated that Zoom “sucked” and it was hard to engage with the community, SR Convert #3 stated that they were able to easily build community. They also mentioned what many of the rabbis had observed: they felt closer to individuals because they could see inside each other’s homes.

CHAPTER IV. COVID-19 AND THE EFFECTS ON CONVERSION

Building Jewish Identity During COVID-19

Initially, I pondered if there were any factors brought about by the pandemic which led some individuals to Judaism. I assumed perhaps an enhanced need for community, due to the increased social isolation, led individuals to seek communal solidarity within different groups. However, as I have discovered, it was not that such factors led individuals to discover Judaism at this time per se, it was rather that a greater online accessibility and availability of free time led individuals to finally begin to pursue their prior interest in Judaism.

Jewish identity is not built overnight. After speaking with many participants, it appears that in their experience, the construction of Jewish identity does not just occur during the formal period of conversion. Many individuals stated that they grew up around Jewish individuals, having close ties and relationships in their formative years. AR Convert #1, FNO Convert #1, and NC Convert #1 all stated that they had many Jewish friends and grew up near Jewish individuals. FNT Convert #1 stated that they grew up with many Jewish friends and even had extended family members who converted to Judaism.

Another sizable number of participants mentioned having Jewish family and ancestry. AR Convert #2 remembers hearing Yiddish in their household. SR Converts #1 and #2 both stated that they had experienced almost subconscious subliminal moments with Judaism growing up and attributed this to their Sephardi ancestry. Both individuals mentioned being subliminally surrounded by Jewish symbols in their childhood homes

such as the "evil eye"[125] or "hamsa."[126] It was only when they began to learn about Judaism that they realized the meaning and origin behind these symbols. SR Convert #2 linked this subconscious connection to Judaism as a result of their ancestry being tied to the crypto-Jewish community.[127]

Within my surveys and interviews, only two individuals expressed not having any childhood knowledge of Judaism. This included FNR Convert #2 who discovered Judaism recently, in the past couple of years, through the television show *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel.* [128] FNR #3 'discovered' Judaism later in life in online spaces and chat rooms. However, no one interviewed or surveyed related finding Judaism to the events of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Although COVID-19 seems to not have led individuals to discover Judaism, it did allow for some individuals to begin exploring Judaism further. Due to the free time allotted by many of the restrictions of COVID-19, some individuals began to delve deeper into self-exploration and spirituality. Examples include AR Convert #1, who gained free time due to no longer having to commute to work; they used this 'newfound'

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[125] The "evil eye" is believed to bring an individual bad luck; wearing or displaying this symbol will protect an individual. This was originally a Mediterranean symbol adopted by the Sephardi community.

[126] A hand-shaped symbol that offers protection against spiritual entities. This symbol is popular within Middle Eastern communities.

[127] The crypto-Jewish community were those who adhered to Judaism in private and publicly expressed another faith. Oftentimes children and descents of the community would no longer have any knowledge of their Jewish past, but Jewish symbols and iconography within one's home would clue them into their Jewish past.

[128] *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* is a 2017 comedy-drama series that features a Jewish family as its central characters.

time to learn more about their family history and explore their connection to G-d. AR Convert #2 also recalls having a "soul searching" moment because of their increased free time. R Rabbi #1 found many of their congregants, as well as their conversion students, expressing how COVID-19 gave them "room to breathe" which allowed them to start exploring their spirituality. Therefore, these individuals began their formal conversion process due to the free time 'given' to them by the pandemic.

However, there were more reasons why individuals began to convert during the pandemic. SR Convert #1 uniquely expressed how COVID-19 created an "existential crisis" for them. Seeing many die from the disease, they feared that if they also had an untimely demise they would have not fulfilled many of their lifetime goals, one of them being converting to Judaism. It seems that the pandemic and its sense of crisis drove this individual to start converting.

Another reason why many individuals started to convert during the pandemic was because of accessibility facilitated by technology. This accessibility is directly related to the transition of synagogue services and classes to online modalities. FAR Convert #1 directly stated that they were interested in converting for twenty-five years, but could not because of their disability. When Jewish resources such as services and classes were moved online, this finally allowed them to begin the formal process of conversion. They were no longer restricted from becoming part of the Jewish community because of their lack of mobility. In fact, many individuals stated that no longer needing to physically travel in order to convert gave them the opportunity to start converting. AR Converts #1 and #2, FNR Convert #1, and SR Convert #3 all directly stated that the pandemic became

the perfect time to start their conversion because they were no longer restricted by their disability, availability, location, and/or life stage.[129]

COVID-19 and the circumstances surrounding it, the sense of crisis, and the wide availability of technology gave many of the individuals that I surveyed and interviewed the space, push, or opportunity to start converting. Therefore, the pandemic, in a way, can be credited for allowing many of these individuals to explore and build their Jewish identity.

The second question I initially posited concerning individuals and their acquisition of Jewish identity was: how do individuals gain community, and a sense of belonging to that community, during a period of isolation caused by a global health crisis? Indeed, this question was also posited by both O Rabbis #1 and #2. Both did not have an answer. These communities simply waited out the restrictions and immediately resumed business-as-usual in a span of three months. However, the Reform community, who found themselves erring on the side of caution, kept these restrictions in place for much longer and found creative means to circumnavigate them.

According to Baumeister and Leary, there is an inherent need for humans to feel that they belong. Belonging can be accomplished by frequent positive personal contacts and interactions.[130] For individuals who found themselves converting during the pandemic, frequent contact and interactions with members of the Jewish community were limited. As mentioned before, this was especially true in the Reform community.

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[129] Has small children.

[130] Baumeister and Leary, "The Need to Belong," 500.

Therefore, the gateway to frequent and personal interactions during the pandemic became the use of online communication and video communication platforms. I was curious if online platforms gave individuals the opportunity for communal interactions and belonging, or if they were perceived as a barrier.

Some individuals did express that their connection and sense of belonging to the community felt stronger in an online space. SR Convert #3 stated that conversations with their fellow conversion classmates and Jewish congregants felt more personal. This was due to what they refer to as being able to see other "whole life behind them" (in reference to their background) while on Zoom. They stated that there was no hiding personal details and life when showing their background, which to them provided a sense of vulnerability and closeness.

Other individuals mentioned how the use of technology was important in building community and belonging because the Jewish community online was not just a one community they interacted with: it was the only one. This is because many of their earlier communal interactions stopped due to the pandemic. To individuals such as FNR Convert #1 and FAR Convert #2, the only sense of belonging during the pandemic was associated with these Jewish communities because they provided the *opportunities* for converts to do so.

There was also a more neutral response in terms of the quality of communal interactions. Many respondents stated that they had no definitive answer to whether or not community and sense of belonging felt stronger on their online platforms. This is because of their lack of experience in pre-pandemic conditions. They told me that they

could not pinpoint if their integration and interaction with the community would have been worse or better in a physical setting.

There were also many respondents who mentioned they felt their personal connections and experiences were 'less' online. AR Convert #3 regrettably stated that they felt they missed out on the community, wishing they had started converting before the pandemic. However, due to the presence of their partner, who is Jewish, they were able to find some semblance of physical community and belonging. AR Convert #1 mentioned how although they appreciated their group "spiritual seekers" online, they actively wanted to and later pursued an "in-person" community when restrictions began to lift. FNC Convert #1 also stated that distance from the community and services was "not ideal."

Although some individuals stated that their sense of community was weaker due to the lack of a physical presence, this did not affect their own pursuit or sense of Jewish identity. AR Converts #1 and #2 both stated that they wanted more physical time with the community before they are ready for immersion in the *mikveh*. However, they did state that if pandemic conditions were to continue, and they strongly felt ready to finish their conversion, lack of physical communal interaction is not going to stop them. R Rabbi #4 stated that a few of their candidates did communicate they would pause because of pandemic conditions. They mentioned that this was not because of the lack of physical community, but the lack of the physical rituals being online. They did not want to miss out on having a "traditional" *mikveh, beit din,* etc. An examination of this group of individuals reveals that a lack of "in-person" community was not a real hindrance for their conversion and sense of belonging and inclusion.

If physical community was not the aspect through which these individuals found a connection to Judaism or built identity, I wanted to discover what was. In my surveys and interviews I asked what they believed Judaism meant to them. I also wanted to discover if any of these aspects were related to or affected by COVID-19 conditions. Many of the answers were not related to COVID-19. A sense of 'homecoming' or 'finding G-d' existed in the majority of responses. When pressed to answer if COVID-19 affected their view on Judaism and sense of identity, many, but not all, said no.

There were many individuals who expressed that Judaism and their identification with Judaism was related to the idea of *tikkun olam* or similar concepts.[131] These respondents and their connection and correlation to COVID-19 ranged from loose to direct. NC Convert #1 stated that Judaism was about volunteering to help the community especially "during times like these." AR Convert #1 also stated that they found their "sense of purpose in life" by helping others and following the lead of their synagogue. FNR Convert #4 stated that they became politically active because of Judaism and the pandemic.

The strongest connection came from AR Convert #3, who specifically stated that their strengthened identity and connection to the community was because of the pandemic. They felt that their Jewish community shared many similar views to theirs about the response to the pandemic, including wearing a mask and getting vaccinated. It made them feel that they had made the right choice to be involved in their community

[131] Some individuals mentioned helping others.

Jewish. The events of the pandemic were influential in this individual's reaffirmation of their identity as a member of the Jewish community.

I wanted to see how converts' knowledge of Judaism affected the way they viewed the pandemic. I asked respondents to describe any aspects of Judaism that helped them through the pandemic. This was meant to gauge if there were certain Jewish concepts, such as the aforementioned *tikkun olam*, that resonated with respondents. Many individuals felt Judaism made the pandemic easier for them to go through.

Many individuals mentioned how the spiritual aspect of Judaism, such as the concept of G-d, helped them understand and make it through the harder parts of the lockdown. FNO Convert #1 stated that Judaism kept them grounded during the pandemic through G-d. AR Convert #2 stated a similar sentiment, noting that their belief in G-d was the only way they made it through the pandemic. Their reaffirmation in G-d was made during the rituals that they observed, such as lighting *shabbat* candles.

A unique connection between Judaism and coping in times of crisis was made specifically by those with Jewish ancestry. They historically connected Jewish suffering of the past to their contemporary resilience. AR Convert #3 and SR Convert #3 both explained that these circumstances were not so bad, as the Jewish community had faced far greater adversity and challenges in the past. Essentially, these individuals expressed that suffering and times of crisis were nothing new to the Jewish community. These circumstances brought about a sense of solidarity for these individuals. They also felt that, due to their position as 'upcoming' Jewish individuals, it was their responsibility to help others and persevere.

Though my assumption was initially incorrect in that no one chose to become Jewish because of the pandemic alone, the circumstances created by the pandemic helped some individuals begin their conversion process and altered the expression of their Jewish identity. The pandemic brought chaos and crisis to the forefront, which changed not only how these individuals view Judaism, but also how they practice it.

The Nature of Jewish Conversion During COVID-19

One of the main responses that appeared during my interviews with Jewish leaders was that conversion had not changed during the pandemic. However, as previously demonstrated in Chapter 3, conversion *has* changed. This is evident in the incorporation of technology into services and online learning, but also in the content of conversion courses, such as lessons on times of crisis and contemporary Jewish issues. Both of these bring a new aspect to the nature of conversion that has not existed before the pandemic. New challenges have arisen because of the addition of this platform; thus, the nature of conversion has changed in this way as well.

An individual's view of Judaism is directly affected by the way one converts. This is because the majority of one's knowledge and understanding of Judaism is built during this period of conversion. As Austin-Broos explains, the individual is going through their own personal paradigm shift.[132] There is a semi-structured aspect to Jewish conversion; one must achieve certain goals, whether it is to learn basic Hebrew or enter a *mikveh*.

[132] Austin-Broos, "The Anthropology of Conversion," 1.

However, the experiences in between these steps are different for everyone. And, as Rambo adds, they are affected by the world around them.[133]

An overarching world event, such as a pandemic, would affect all of those who are converting. Within my study, I found similarities between individual experiences of identity building *because* of an overarching world event these converts all went through. While individuals have unique factors that influence their conversion, such as Jewish grouping or prior history, they also all have one thing in common. The next section explores how the pandemic affected the actual process of conversion for those interviewed.

The first of these changes included a transition to online learning. Most notably, a range of communication and resources were opened that were not present before. R Rabbi #4, D Rabbi #1, plus SR Convert #3 all stated how conversations within the introduction to Judaism class were deeper and more meaningful because of the online platform. D Rabbi #1 and SR Convert #3 both attribute this to being able to look everyone in the face when in class, rather than at the back of someone's head. R Rabbi #4 states they found this strength in connection because of the slight barrier of separation that online video chatting causes. They mentioned that there is comfort and safety behind a screen and this allowed for their students to speak more openly than in previous in-person classes. As a result, some of the conversations, such as ones pertaining to social justice and political responses to COVID, would likely never have happened if they were in-person. Adding a deeper conversation that would not have happened gives individuals

[133] Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, 5.

the opportunity to learn on a different level. This is especially true of the conversations specifically related to world events such as social justice and the pandemic.

Along with deeper connections facilitated during the process of conversion, the increased use of online resources also influenced conversion classes. R Jewish education leader #1 noted that during the pandemic many students brought outside online resources and shared them with their peers. These extra resources included articles from popular Jewish websites such as "My Jewish Learning" and "Jewish Virtual Library." Also included were more fun and personal resources such as where to buy interesting Judaica and fun Jewish personality quizzes.[134] This gave these students the opportunity to engage with Judaism in a different way than previously seen. R Jewish education leader #1 mentioned this having a positive effect in terms of giving students new knowledge that is not restricted to the exact introduction to Judaism course.

Although this newfound 'freedom' created by the propensity to use online resources helps stylize many of these classes, it can also have a negative side effect. R Rabbi #1 in particular mentioned the case of a student who had found themselves very much into self-exploration. However, without rabbinical guidance, they began to view false antisemitic claims as truths. This was because of the student's discovery of negative articles about Israel and the Jewish people. R Rabbi #1 then restated the importance of discussion and questioning within a group when learning and discussing Judaism.[135]

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[134] Holly Lebowitz Rossi, "Quiz: Which Hamantaschen Are You?," My Jewish Learning, accessed January 2022, https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/quiz-which-hamantaschen-are-you/.

[135] Jill Jacobs, "The Importance of the Community (Kehilla) in Judaism," My Jewish Learning, accessed February 9, 2022, https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/community-focused/.

However, it is also important to note that this is not the case with all self-exploration, as many individuals did suggest that this and the pandemic had little to no effect on their own exploration of Judaism.

Most changes to conversion were seen in Reform circles in my interviews. Orthodox and some Conservative communities were limited in their changes to conversion. This is because of their limited use of technology. However, there has been some discussion of changing the process of conversion in Orthodox circles, such as the introduction of an online *beit din*. While many are opposed to the idea, including both of the Orthodox rabbis I interviewed, C Rabbi #1 did lend some support to it, stating that they knew of some Orthodox communities in Israel and in other Asian countries that did have Zoom *beit din*s.

Another item of note that did arise relating to the change of conversion in the Orthodox community was the need for some alterations in the process. This specifically came from the problem of a backlog of conversions due to the effects of the pandemic. O Rabbi #2 stated that there must be something done by the Rabbinical Council in their area to try to alleviate this issue, as they feared that individuals would be unhappy with their experience and go and convert through non-*halakhic* means. They, along with other rabbis in their community, felt that there needed to be some reform to deal with this problem. This of course means that the Orthodox community is itself undergoing some changes in their conversion process because of the pandemic, although significantly slower than the Reform community is.

The pandemic has influenced conversion and its processes. So, while the ideas and the nature of conversion have shifted to online formats due to the pandemic, seen not

only in the Reform community but also in the Orthodox and Conservative community, I do not see 'solitary' conversion to Judaism ever being the norm. There will always be a social element whether in-person or virtual.

Changing the Face of Judaism: Accessibility and Attractiveness

Changes to the identity-building process and conversion have also created a change in Judaism as a whole. While it is safe to assume that individual converts are shaped by their experience with Judaism, new converts coming into the Jewish fold also change and shape Judaism. Due to the pandemic and its new accessibility and attractiveness, individuals who could not or would have not converted to Judaism are now doing so, bringing a unique change to Judaism due to the pandemic. According to Pierre Bourdieu's sociological concept of 'habitus,' individuals see and react to the social world. Individuals' dispositions are modeled through those of the individuals around them and their backgrounds. Therefore, the individuals are shaped by their social environment and the environment shapes the individuals as a whole.[136]

As mentioned before, for thousands of years, Judaism has typically discouraged conversion. This was typically due to the mindset of thinking about the inside community first and not worrying about bringing outsiders in. It was a defense mechanism at first, due to antisemitism and conversion often being illegal. An individual who wanted to

[136] Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, 52-55.

convert had to be extremely determined and also able to blend within society.[137] However, nowadays it is no longer illegal to convert to Judaism, at least within western countries. Now, during a global pandemic where meeting in person is limited and antisemitism is on the rise,[138] accessibility to and interest in Judaism should be at an all-time low. However, many Reform religious leaders have reported that their introduction to Judaism classes and convert applicants increased during the pandemic.[139] So what makes for the conditions in the pandemic that actually facilitate this increase?

The first reason for the increase that I found within my response was that the pandemic was a time for introspection and self-reflection for some of the individuals I interviewed. However, this came from an individual mindset and not from Judaism. What came from Judaism was the addition of online classes, services, and other events. These changes not only added accessibility to Judaism to groups and individuals, but also inherently the attractiveness of Judaism, especially within the Reform community. This is due to three reasons identified in my interviews. First, mobility was no longer a problem. Second, social situations were deemed to be less intense. And lastly, there were elements of attractiveness because the Reform community insisted on following the CDC guidelines.

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[137] Epstein, *Converts to Judaism*, 50-51.

[138]" Preliminary ADL Data Reveals Uptick in Antisemitic Incidents Linked to Recent Mideast Violence,"Anti-Defamation League, accessed November 2021, https://www.adl.org/news/press-releases/preliminary-adl-data-reveals-uptick-in-antisemitic-incidents-linked-to-recent.

[139] Orthodox and Conservative communities I interviewed reported a "stand still" and no change in their rates of conversion applicants.

The most common response about advantages that individuals saw when converting during the pandemic was the ability to join class, services, and other events online. This increased accessibility tremendously. Now individuals did not have to find themselves in hours of traffic to go to services on Friday nights, nor did they have to worry about missing out on classes due to a minor inconvenience. They could simply "log in" wherever they were and join. This was an added convenience for the average person, but it served as a "lifeline" for others. Mentioned by both the rabbis and those converting, the online platform added accessibility of conversion to those who previously could not proceed with it.

The added accessibility of having everything online due to the pandemic made all the difference. SR Convert #3 stated that they would have never been able to pursue learning about Judaism without COVID-19 due to the fact that they had young children. FNT Convert #1 stated that they would not have been able to convert before because of lack of transportation. SR Convert #2 also stated that the reason why they finished the introduction to Judaism class this time around after not being able to before was because transportation was no longer an issue. AR Convert #2 stated that they could now convert to Judaism because of the accessibility of online options. Jewish Education Leader #1 stated that they also had a significant increase of those within academia such as master's and Ph.D. candidates in their classes. This is likely due to the ease of access to these classes. Individuals who were disabled, lacking transportation, or lacking time due to the stages in life that they were in now were able to convert to Judaism.

The second aspect that made Judaism more attractive in addition to an online platform was the ability for individuals to have a social barrier in which they could

experience Judaism for the first time. According to R Rabbi #2, individuals could now dip their toes into Judaism without having to fully commit to entering a new daunting space. AR Convert #3 also stated that when services went online, they saw it as an added benefit because they felt that they could "test the waters" until they felt comfortable enough to reach out to the rabbi. SR Convert #2 expressed similar sentiments, stating that they did not really enjoy the social aspects as a reclusive person, so converting online allowed them to stay within their "hermit" lifestyle and not have to deal with the daunting social pressures of going to synagogue and interacting with many new people.

AR Convert #1 stated that they at first did not want to convert into a synagogue near them as they were now non-binary and went by a new name. They stated that they did not want to deal with the social anxiety of having their "dead" name being used. They went to a synagogue further away. They found this space ideal as well because the limited number of people in services (about 10 and all spaced out within a garden) was an easier setting to adjust to, rather than, say, the 100 or so people they later interacted with during the High Holidays that same year. The ability for individuals to no longer have to worry about the social pressures of being in a physical new environment allowed many who were socially reserved or from marginalized communities such as the LGBTQ+ community to convert more comfortably.

Because of the changes made during the pandemic, individuals who would not have normally been able to convert to Judaism could now do so. This is not only something that I have noticed, but something explicitly stated by many of the rabbis I interviewed. R Rabbi #3 noted that I should talk about the increasing number LGBTQ+ converts. I initially assumed that this had little to nothing to do with the pandemic, as

synagogues in the area were already openly queer-friendly, as shown in Figure 2. However, after speaking to AR Convert #3 who is a part of the LGBTQ+ community, they mentioned that the online spaces felt more secure for them than in-person ones. They stated that many of their peers felt this way and that this might have been a reason for increased activity.

Figure 2. Picture of LGBTQ+ Sign in Front of Synagogue Taken by Author.

What is important to mention is that many of the rabbis expressed how they were reluctant to move events online. However, due to the amount of people who are now converting and others who were not able to attend before, they realized that they could never go back to the way things were. This is because, according to both D Rabbi #1 and R Rabbi #4, they could not allow those who did not have access before to not have access

again if circumstances were to return to what they were pre-pandemic. Therefore, the pandemic permanently changed how Judaism is practiced for these communities.

Finally, many individuals did mention that they were attracted to the Jewish community because of their belief in science and adherence to safety measures during the pandemic.[140] AR Convert #3 and SR Converts #1 and #3 all mentioned the adherence to CDC guidelines was something they found to be attractive in Judaism. This was in lieu of their previous faith traditions, which did not practice safe COVID-19 protocols.

Because of the increased accessibility and the newfound attractiveness of Judaism, individuals who could not or were not too interested before have been able to convert to Judaism. To connect with Bourdieu's habitus, these individuals who were not included before because of limitability can now join Judaism and help shape its future.[141] These many new faces, particularly those from marginalized groups, will continue to bring change to Jewish communities throughout the United States and around the world.

[140] This observation was made in the Reform communities interviewed.

[141] Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, 52-55.

CHAPTER V. CONCLUSION

Summary of COVID-19 Impact: More Changes to Come

The pandemic has fundamentally changed the way religion is practiced for some groups within Judaism. Reform Judaism, as it has been in the past, continues to move with the times. Its incorporation of technology for services and learning has allowed for a plethora of benefits including, but not limited to, an increase[142] in individuals joining the Jewish fold. This includes individuals who could not do so before due to accessibility limitations, which overall leads to new individuals from many aspects of life entering the global Jewish community. I hypothesize that this could lead to the development of a more tolerant Jewish community, though it is important to note that the Reform community has typically pioneered social justice and inclusion. In addition, this could lead to more accessibility to Jewish learning for individuals who are just curious. Giving more visibility to Judaism increases its attractiveness to the outside community.

While this has many benefits, it can have downsides. When some individuals are not properly taught about certain aspects of Judaism, this can lead to negative assumptions about the religion informed by antisemitic rhetoric. Though overall, while some individuals like the added benefit of technology, many still prefer the "old-school" method of Judaism. So, even though Reform Judaism accelerating the inclusion of technology, I do not foresee brick-and-mortar religious practices going away anytime soon.

[142] According to my short survey.

Orthodox and Conservative communities are slower to change, however this does not mean they have not changed at all due to the pandemic. Many Jewish learning classes and casual meetings with rabbis have now been incorporated into Zoom, and continue to be even long after restrictions have been lifted. I believe that more fundamental changes are now in the works because of some of the problems that have been exacerbated due to the pandemic. So, even though these communities are slower to change, they must continue to do so for their survival in this new digital age.

The pandemic, and its representation as a time of crisis, has also brought change to Judaism and those converting to Judaism. Crisis and how to deal with it is now at the forefront of many of these individuals' changing minds. Those who expressed Jewish heritage mentioned how they used previous historical Jewish events when crisis occurred to help put their situation into perspective. In a way, the concept of Jews in crisis is not new. Converting to Judaism during a worldwide pandemic; what could be more Jewish than that?

Limitations

There were several limitations within this project. The first is the small sample size. The original project's blueprint was to interview 20 individuals who have converted and were in the process of conversion to help provide a narrative of those conversions. This was because of the limited time frame I had to locate and set up interviews. I exceeded my goal and got about 26 individuals. However, only 17 of them were interviews, while the other 9 were surveys. The problem that I did not foresee in surveys versus interviews was that, in interviews, I was able to ask individuals to explain why

they believed certain things or to clarify their responses. Within the surveys I had no way to ask correspondents about further reasons. There was the added constraint that while some respondents answered the question with paragraphs and rich details, some just answered with one or two sentences, or omitted the question altogether. If this project is replicated in the future with a longer time frame it would be beneficial to get more respondents.

Another limitation is my lack of response from Orthodox, Conservative, and Mizrachi backgrounds. It was difficult to correspond with the Orthodox community I interviewed. When interviewing them, they were very distant and responded very curt with their answers to my questions. One Orthodox rabbi went so far as to message me that it was not permitted for me to be asking respondents why they are converting to Judaism. I assured them that this was only a follow-up question for a narrative, and I was not using this information to humiliate the individual or out them as converts to their or any community. I believe this wariness did prevent many Orthodox individuals from reaching out to me and completing my survey.

When it came to Mizrachi and Conservative correspondences it was all determined by the luck of the draw. Although I reached out to Conservative synagogues to request an interview, they did not respond to my interview request, limiting my ability to tap into their community's population of those wanting to convert. The lack of Mizrachi individuals was once again due to the luck of the draw. I had no way of knowing if an individual had any Jewish ancestry until I could interview them. None of these individuals reached out to me or my survey, or if they did they did not know or disclose such information to me.

As mentioned before, one of the objectives of this project was to share the experiences of those who converted to Judaism during the pandemic. I decide not to record participants. This was due to my belief that individuals would more freely speak about their experiences if they did not fear being audio recorded. However, this did lead to some limitations. I could not provide any long direct quotes, instead I was only able to jot down some specific phrases that participants used. Therefore, for this project I traded direct quotations for the comfort of my interviewees.

I wanted to explore how different factors shaped or changed an individual's experiences. The two factors I chose included both level of religious adherence[143] and if the individual had any Jewish ethnicity or Jewish ancestry. However, as I was conducting interviews I noticed that there were differences among other demographic areas such as gender, age, and other identifiers that also shaped the individual's experience in converting during the pandemic. Due to the Institutional Review Board and to protect individuals'privacy, I refrained from mentioning these identifiers. However, not mentioning these did remove this dimension of the project.

Further Exploration

As this project is one of the first to look at how conversion to Judaism was shaped through the pandemic, there are many different ways this project might be reconfigured to yield different data. Some are the ways that I mentioned within my "limitations" section. However, an additional way to reconfigure the project is to continuously follow

[143] Reform, Conversative, Orthodox, Non-denominational, and Reconstructive.

an individual to see how their mindset changes from pandemic conditions to post-pandemic conditions. Some lockdown measures were still in place at the time of this project's completion. Continuing with the theme of post-pandemic conditions, it would be interesting to see if some of the predictions and findings that were established within Chapter 4 hold up within five to ten years' time. Finally, while this project mostly focused on the qualitative aspects of the experience, it would be interesting to see some quantitative aspects to gauge if there are any trends related to how COVID affects conversion statistics.

Reflections for the Future

Throughout this project, I constantly had my assumptions corrected and challenged. While the pandemic was not necessarily the most "normal" circumstance under which someone could convert to Judaism, it seemingly had no effect on respondents' conviction to convert to Judaism. Individuals who I interviewed were adamant in their Jewish identity, and they went and would go to many lengths to solidify that. While conventional communities were important for these individuals, many were adaptive in finding communities to meet COVID-19 restrictions. This included outside activities and online social gatherings. Though many individuals did mention that community was not the end-all be-all of Jewish expression and identity, they attributed such expression and identity to their own feelings and self-realization. The most surprising aspect of this project was the feeling of inclusion, relief, and appreciation that people from marginalized communities felt due to the newfound accessibility of Judaism. While I am excited to see the change these new faces within the Jewish community are

likely to bring about, many questions about other long-term effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on Judaism–a religion characterized by both dramatic change and staunch resiliency–remain unanswered.

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