

CONVERSION TO JUDAISM; CONVERSION AT EMANUEL

For thousands of years people have been converting to Judaism, and for thousands of years we have welcomed sincere converts. To be a Jew is to belong to a faith people. Conversion to Judaism, therefore, is not just a matter of accepting a faith or belief in God (although it is that as well). Conversion means joining the Jewish people. Accordingly, it requires internalising our history and heritage, adopting our values and ethics, and practicing the mitzvot (commandments learned from the Torah). All this learning, internalising and observance takes time – and indeed, once a Jew, the process continues.

It is important to speak with an Orthodox rabbi in addition to one of the rabbis of our synagogue. While we believe our conversions follow the requirements of halakha (Jewish law), the Orthodox rabbinate does not accept our opinion or authority. Consequently, someone who converts through our synagogue is not accepted as a Jew by Orthodox rabbis. If the convert is a woman, this holds true for her children as well. Our converts and their children cannot marry within in an Orthodox synagogue or receive honours there and they may not attend an Orthodox Jewish day school. (In Israel, where marriage is controlled by the Orthodox, they can only be married religiously after a civil marriage outside Israel.) However, they are accepted as Jews in Israel and everywhere around the world, including by 90% of the Jewish people.

Conversion to Judaism, therefore, is a very serious matter. Accordingly, the process of conversion begins slowly and gradually. At Emanuel, it includes reading, synagogue attendance, course study and personal observance. You should read books (for example, from those on the Book List) on Jewish history, festivals, and living.

You should start attending synagogue regularly. In addition to speaking to different rabbis, you should explore the differences between the various synagogues and styles – Orthodox, Conservative and Progressive. Emanuel runs both a Conservative and Progressive service. We hold services the evening and morning of Shabbat and festivals as well as certain mornings during the week. It is important to attend, over time, all of these services. Before you complete the conversion, you need to have participated in at least a full year's cycle of Jewish festivals.

During this time, your Jewish partner (if there is one) must join the congregation; the process of learning and belonging is to be shared. Joining the synagogue expresses a commitment to being involved with the Jewish people, as does support of other Jewish organisations, locally and in Israel, as well. If you have a partner who has joined the synagogue there are no fees for our courses; if you are single, there is a small fee for our learning programs.

Hebrew is the language of our people and you will be required to learn to read the language primarily of the Siddur, or prayerbook. This will allow you to participate in synagogue, home and communal functions. Moreover, Hebrew is the language of Israel where half of the Jewish people live, and also the language of our original stories. Hebrew best expresses our values and concepts. You may learn Hebrew through our evening courses, or pay a private tutor, names of whom we can supply.

Our most introductory class you are required to attend is called Basic Jewish Concepts. It lasts about eleven months and meets once a week in the evening. Again, your partner, if you have one, is expected to attend classes with you. The sessions include lectures and discussions on Israel, Jewish festivals and history, Jewish living and literature.

Over the months, you will be attending services, learning Hebrew and studying Judaism. Gradually, you begin living a Jewish life as well, through daily readings and prayers, Shabbat and festival observance at home as well as synagogue, dietary discipline and support of Jewish charities and institutions. Further education opportunities also exist with our current topics discussion series "Breakfast With the Rabbi", our weekly Torah study and other advanced classes.

You must study with us at least one year, observing the Jewish calendar that time and experiencing all the Jewish festivals in that time. Sometime thereafter, after discussion with your rabbi, you may apply for an interview with the Sydney Va'ad (rabbinical 'court') for an interview to conclude your conversion. The rabbis will want to be sure that you have a good basic knowledge of our history, customs and festivals. . One aspect of ascertaining your knowledge is a basic written exam covering the material discussed in the Basic Jewish Concepts course. After passing that exam, the Va'ad will discuss with you your practice of Judaism to affirm your sincere commitment to join the Jewish people under any and all circumstances.

The halakhic requirements for conversion, in addition to learning and accepting the mitzvot as one's path of life, also include mikvah (ritual immersion in living water) and for men circumcision or hatafat dam brit. This is arranged before the final conversion ceremony. You would invite family and friends to this ceremony if you like.

Following the ceremony, you are considered fully a Jew. As Moses Maimonides wrote: "the fundamental point here is that it was Abraham our father who instructed the nation, enlightening them and informing them of the true faith, and of God's unity and singularity. Therefore all who embrace Judaism until the end of the generations, and all who profess the unity of the Lord's name as directed in the Torah, are like pupils of Abraham of blessed memory and are members in his household." We expect you to join the synagogue, continue with your learning and personal growth.

All this assumes that one follows the process from beginning to the moment of acceptance of the mitzvot and Jewish way of life. However, our synagogue services and courses are open to everyone, whether they intend to convert or not. Similarly, attendance does not guarantee that one can automatically convert at a set time. Rather, we welcome you into our community for exposure to and exploration of Judaism. We look forward to continuing the dialogue of discovery with you in the months and years ahead.