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CHAPTER 1

1. INTRODUCTION

Religious proselytisation is as old as the search of mankind for the Divine. It is a sphere of human activity, which has involved both personal conflict as well as intricate interaction between groups and nations. Even wars have been fought in order to enforce changes from one religion to another.

The subject of "*Conversion to Judaism*" is thus an abstraction from a phenomenon of immense magnitude, which has functioned universally over centuries. This inquiry entitled "*Conversion to Judaism in South Africa*" aims to understand the topic in the context of a localised perspective.

As compared to proselytisation in the various major religions, conversion to Judaism has its own specific features. Considering the South African scene itself, this investigation uncovers important aspects, which are unique in respect of this particular society. One is the limited timespan within which the issue of Jewish proselytisation could possibly have been an issue in South Africa. Whereas Jewish communities in many European countries can be traced back to medieval, if not Biblical times and in America almost since its colonisation, the major presence of South African Jewry begins in 1886. And whilst a handful of Jews did arrive with the 1820 settlers and fragmentary evidence of interest in conversion to Judaism in the earlier years does manifest itself, the archives of the Johannesburg Beth Din with regard to conversion starts in 1924. Conversionist activity in the region of South African Jewry is therefore, for the most part, related to this current century and the actual programme for the procedure is still to undergo further evolution.

Moreover, when compared to the numerical strength of Jews in America, the European countries, the United Kingdom and Israel, South African Jewry can be seen as a small population. It never at any time exceeded an estimated 120,000 souls. The size itself governs its dynamics.

South African Jewry stands out, too, as an entity which is strongly influenced by the Orthodox denomination. Its vast majority affiliates in some way or another with Orthodox congregations and regard their standards as the religious mentor. Reform Judaism has come onto the scene. In this study of local conversions it is felt as a significant factor. As a rival to Orthodoxy, however, South African Reform Judaism has lacked the impact it has had on Jewish communities abroad.

Further, in contrast to rates of intermarriage in Jewries in other parts of the world, the South African figure ranks low. This is not, however, to say that it is not a matter of concern to Jewish representative bodies in South Africa, both religious and secular. Small as marriage out of the Jewish faith may be rated as a comparative cipher, its occurrence has been of sufficient frequency to play its role in the development of conversion policies by the *Batei Dinim* in South Africa.

Outmarriage, however, has not necessarily precipitated assimilation within South African Jewry. Whereas the American example of assimilation has alarmed its Jewish leadership, only a small percentage of South African Jews, including those who have intermarried, have totally severed themselves from their roots.

Various reasons may be advanced for the strong sense of ethnic identity prevalent amongst South African Jews. It has been said that the level of Jewish group awareness is an outgrowth of the politically emphasised racial segregation that dominated the South African scene until quite recently. Suffice to say, any new entrant into the Jewish faith in South Africa invariably comes into contact with the strength of Jewish consciousness.

This powerful sense of identity may have been generated by religious consideration or purely by ethnicity. Either way, it has led to a noticeable cohesion in Jewish communal organisations. Here, too, a structure can be detected which singles out South Africa. Equally, this centrality of control has been achieved by the Beth Din in its jurisdiction over the various activities in the country, which are of religious momentum. Into their province falls the issue of conversion. It is the Beth Din that formulates the relevant policies and monitors the process, stage by stage. And it is its decision that accords a finalised proselytisation the stamp of approval and reciprocity. To this end, the matter of conversion procedure in South Africa shares common denominators with those conducted elsewhere. Halakhic yardsticks are globally aligned. Its rigidity, however, is tempered with flexibility. Conversion authorities base this approach on these variations as well as immutable principles and the Johannesburg Beth Din has evolved its particular strategy in responding to the demands for conversion, which have, over the past 70 years, emerged more and more as a challenge.

Here, in South Africa, conversions are administered by this single authoritative body. This is not so in the Americas where, even within the Orthodox denominations, individual Rabbis act autonomously. In other parts of the world, there may well be found a chain of command in the religious authoritative structure resembling the local model. Conversions in Israel have so far been exclusively the prerogative of the Chief Rabbinate of the country but their executive power is bound up with the civil law of the country. In this sense, Israel differs from *Batei Dinim* elsewhere, whose decisions are not legally binding outside their respective ambits.

In South Africa there have only been two *Batei Dinim*, the Johannesburg Beth Din and the Cape Beth Din, which have since merged into a single body.

For the purpose of this research, this centrality of control is beneficial. Data are thus obtainable from a single source. The investigator is therefore provided with the unique opportunity to study the subject of conversion in a holistic manner.

Although a vast amount of research has hitherto been conducted on the topic of conversion in a general sense, in the main these inquiries have been based on samples and specific periods of time. This work, on the other hand, is equipped to attempt an all-embracing coverage of almost a complete history of all the Orthodox conversions, which have taken place in an entire country.

From the Religious Studies paradigm into which the specified topic falls, certain relevant aspects are selected to comprise the principal focus of this essay. In the centre is the converttee and the formidable undertaking upon which he or she is embarking. The researcher has to examine the various forces to which the prospective convert to Judaism is subjected.

From a study of the archives of the Johannesburg Beth Din, recurrent patterns become discernible. At the same time, each applicant has a personal background and an individualised perception of the venture. A transition is intended which does not find place in vacuum but rather as part of a historical continuum, which proceeds from its Biblical origins to the present and the future. Part and parcel of that perpetuated ancient tradition is Halakha. Therein the intending entrant to the faith encounters a sophisticated legal system and this is the code of behaviour, which the converttee has to accept as an obligation. To this end, the proselyte finds himself or herself bound by the expectations of the Beth Din. Inevitably, the converttee is proceeding, too, from one background to the social environment of another. From both of these, there is a gravitational pull. Addressing these various challenges confronting the prospective proselyte is a study in adaptation, which is more than a mere academic exercise. The socio-psychological interaction between the candidate and the phenomenon forms an integral part of an in-depth investigation upon which findings

recommendations are intended to deal with the subject of conversions in the country as a vibrant reality.

1.1 Methodology

Yin has outlined various strategies namely, "*experiment, survey, archival analysis, history...*" (1990:17) which he has also described as "*not mutually exclusive*"

For the purpose of investigation into the central topic, these strategies have been integrated. Since, in this instance, the researcher has no control over behavioural events, experiment is hardly applicable in this sphere. Each of the other mechanisms has, however, been utilised at different stages in the essay. A chapter is devoted to history. The interviews and questionnaire and the personal experience of the researcher form the basis of a survey. Archival analysis is seen in the statistical presentation. All the strategies employed meet and become magnified to bring into focus the Durban model, as this becomes the ideal observation point for post conversions.

In the conduct of this research, descriptive and exploratory methods combine. From the historical and archival sources, together with Halakha, data are collected and assembled to answer questions concerning the current status of the subject and the material thus compiled is supplemented by fieldwork, case studies, interviews and questionnaires.

Exploratory studies are generally undertaken when relatively little is known regarding the subject. Perhaps it has a "deviant" character, or it occurs infrequently.

As to whether the subject of conversion to Judaism is widely known has depended upon time and place and the same determines the regularity of its

occurrence. In terms of a scholastic issue, it was known already in the Talmud and subsequent Rabbinic qualification included a first-hand knowledge of this aspect of Judaism. At the beginning of the millennium of the current era the Greeks and the Romans showed great interest in proselytising to Judaism and the Idumeans, who were forcibly converted, knew it well. How it was perceived was a question that proved applicable even to the here and now. It will emerge, too, from the historical chapter that, from the close of the first century which saw an end to Jewish evangelism till almost the current century, there were legal restrictions on conversion to Judaism. Isolated instances will be revealed where it was sought but, even within the Jewish fold, it was viewed with resistance. This attitude was true, too, of the South African scene as well until relatively recently. With the phased lifting of the "closed door" policy of the Beth Din and the increase in demand for conversion, and consequently its acceptability, it would be logically assumed more was known about the subject. It affected a wide spectrum of Jewish families and a substantial number of Gentiles. Still to this day, a number of perceptions regarding conversion remain cloudy. Certainly, no in-depth work on "*Conversion to Judaism in South Africa*" has yet come forth.

In his thesis on South African Jewry, Simon (1996) included a chapter on conversions, which only covered the period until 1933. This work has drawn on his contribution and followed it up with an historical account constructed from patterns and trends detectable in the Beth Din files, which were utilised, too, as basis for case study, as well as decisions recorded in the minutes of their meetings and information gained from interviews. The assembly of all these sources has resulted in a compilation, which stands out on its own, as an authoritative historical survey of conversions to Judaism in South Africa.

A great deal has been written regarding the current application of Halakha to the issue of conversion but how the Johannesburg Beth Din have followed this route

and interpreted it in terms of conversion in South Africa forms an essential theme of this essay.

Dubb (1994) has published reports arising from a survey of the Jewish population in South Africa. This was used to obtain socio-demographic data, which would assist the statistical analysis undertaken in this work. This inquiry, however, stands unique in the way it has initiated an analysis of data relating to local conversion which clarify previously-held perceptions of the phenomenon on the part of both the uninformed as well as informed members of the South African Jewish public.

There has been no previous attempt to present case studies of conversions, which have taken place in this country. Besides providing a basis for historical inquiry and Halakhic application, the case studies have immense value in unfolding the stories of the converts themselves. This is because the convertee has been positioned as the focal point of this study. At the core of the investigation is the human angle. This is a field which, from its beginning to its finale, involves the participation of human beings. Through each stage of the process of conversion human contact is involved, whether it takes place between the candidate and the conversion authorities, or whether between other individuals and peer groups from both the society of origin and the newly acquired environment.

To comprehend the mechanics of the psycho-sociological interaction, which finds place in the conversion experience, the researcher has to engage in fieldwork. This is why a number of interviews were held with accomplished proselytes and those in the process, as well as personnel, including Rabbis, who have dealt with this aspect of practical Judaism. A questionnaire was sent out to the Durban Jewish community as an opinion poll on the subject of conversion and was completed by converts themselves, as also the broader spectrum of local Jewry. Another questionnaire was sent to all officiating Rabbis in South Africa in order to

obtain their opinions on the subject of conversion to Judaism in South Africa and thus the case study was instrumental in obtaining insight into human reactions to the phenomenon.

To this end the archives available in Durban were the immediate source as this is a centre which has been carrying out conversions for several decades and forms a special personal interest in the subject, mainly as I have access to the cases themselves. Even more advantageous was the permission obtained to peruse the archives of the Johannesburg Beth Din which number hundreds of files dating back virtually to its inception, covering the entirety of the Southern African hemisphere. These records, however, serve another purpose. From the data contained therein, tables were formulated to reflect the issues of conversion in South Africa from a statistical viewpoint as a basis for demarcating relevant patterns and trends, which are presented in Chapter 4 of the work.

Although this research is mainly interested in the local scenario, a general background to the topic at hand was necessary. Other models had to be consulted. Moreover, significant historical development in the field of conversion, with particular emphasis on South Africa, was surveyed leading up to the present day position with reference to Halakhic *responsa* and actual trends and procedures. Aspects of the Halakha germane to the issues in question were examined. From the exploration of these facts, results of the investigation are intended to crystallise into concrete proposals and recommendations for conversion authorities in this country, such that edify the approach to the issue, as well as the conversion programmes themselves, which are constantly reviewed and updated.

A further significant concern is the pastoral care which proselytes to Judaism receive after their academic graduation and acceptance. In order to understand the stage, which could be called "*life after conversion*" requires an explorative study of the consequences of the undertaking.

Lewis R. Rambo (1993:142), professor of Psychology and Religion at the San Francisco Theological Seminary, outlines five approaches to this aspect of the inquiry,

"The role of personal bias in assessment, general observations and in-depth look at socio-cultural and historical consequences, psychological consequences and theological consequences of conversion."

In the course of this essay, socio-cultural, psychological and theological effects of conversion will be addressed. For this purpose of methodological outline, the role of bias, general observations and the incorporation of empirical data have to be considered. Rambo looks at two principal sources of bias. Firstly, the process of converting is a religious experience within a religious community and tradition with its own set of internal evaluative criteria and any objective assessment of an individual's conversion requires a lucid articulation of these standards. Secondly, scholars are not immune to bias. This Rambo (1993:144) says should be made as explicit as possible as to the areas of potential subjectivity. An introspective questionnaire needs to be compiled by the investigator asking,

"Am I religious or not?"

Am I religious in a way that is the same as or similar to that of the person I am assessing?"

If I am not religious, what is my personal response to the nature of the religious conversion I am studying?"

Am I repulsed or attracted?"

What is my fundamental agenda in studying such phenomena?"

As the researcher I can best answer these questions by the addition of yet another approach to the five supplied by Rambo, namely personal experience. I have served 15 years as the Rabbi of a community where the rate of intermarriages is relatively high and the demand for conversion of proportionate

frequency. My response to this phenomenon has proved an interesting and thought-provoking aspect of my ministership to the congregation. As a locally based Rabbi who has monitored every conversion in the community during my period of service and maintained close contact with the candidate as long as he/she remained in the community, the whole process of conversion, including its post-conversion, is perceptible in its totality. As a role player, I am also a student striving for a more comprehensive grasp of the issue. The research is for me a learning experience. It is my fervent desire that the knowledge herein acquired, supplemented by my active experience, will assist the different interested parties as we are orientating ourselves in an area which only promises to increase in its momentum, both locally and abroad.

It can be seen that, because of a particularised interest in this subject, which extends beyond its academic parameters and seeks to exert a positive influence on the *status quo*, there exist elements of personal bias. Moreover, it can be argued that, despite the fact that personal experience adds enrichment to mere predisposition, there is a substantial overlap between subjectivity and personal experience.

In an attempt, however, to reduce bias to its minimum, this exercise seeks to gather a wealth of established information surrounding the topic of conversion, principally proselytisation to Judaism, from various authors on the subject as well as historic and Halakhic sources, as a basis for testing personally held beliefs and the findings arising out of my own observations of the phenomenon.

The translation of data extracted from archival sources into a statistical analysis further provides groundwork for a critical examination of conjectures. A further step towards objectivity is achieved in view of the fact that this work treats its principal topic autonomously in that it does not compare one denomination with another, whether within or without the Jewish faith. This work is about conversion to Orthodox Judaism, more especially on the local scene. It gathers

facts and integrates them with theories. Bias thus serves the purpose of hypothesis, which enters the arena of affirmed factualities.

1.2 The long road to conversion

When a party approaches the Beth Din to seek conversion to Judaism its initial response is one of discouragement, which is in line with the interrogation of the applicant as found in the Talmud,

"What reason have you for desiring to become a proselyte? Do you not know that the Jews at the present time are persecuted and oppressed, despised, harassed and overcome by affliction?" ⁽¹⁾

This is to inform the intending proselyte of the formidable responsibility attaching to the undertaking and the weight of consequences that could arise out of such a decisive step. Indeed, the path taken by the convert deigns to become a long rugged road. Moreover, it could well be a frustrating and lonely highway. This metaphor could well be expressed in the choice of the Hebrew word for convert – "ger". In the view of Rambo (1993:13),

"In the Judeo-Christian Scriptures, the Hebrew and Greek words generally equated with conversion are words that literally mean "to turn" or "to return".

I do not, however, find this translation to be aligned with the Judaic term used for convert, which is "ger". Rather the Hebrew word "La-shuv" is used in Scriptural and Rabbinic literature to refer to a turning or returning in the sense of "teshuva" (repentance). In the Jewish context the terminology brought down by Rambo would apply to a *Chozeir Bi-T'shuvah*, a distant Jew who has returned to his religion. It is understandable, too, that certain religious sects would interpret the relinquishment of one faith for another as a form of atonement for having followed a previously erroneous path in terms of religious conviction.

Judaism, however, does not hold to this view. Rather, Judaism maintains that the righteous of all nations have a place in the world to come. This has been the majority rule since the days of the Talmud. Judaism does not assert that Jews are better than other people. Although Jews are referred to as G-d's chosen people, they do not believe that G-d chose the Jews because of any inherent superiority.

Rather the Jewish concept of election is a response to a Biblical passage where G-d commands Moses *"....and ye shall be unto Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. These are the words which thou shalt speak unto the children of Israel."* ⁽²⁾ The practical application of this passage manifests itself in the copious laws and customs which the religion of Judaism regards as Biblically based and incumbent upon the Jewish people as the descendants of the children of Israel. Moreover, it sees these peculiar obligations as pertaining only to its genetic adherents and converts who embrace the faith.

To appreciate more fully this ethos, Judaism looks back in Scripture to Noah. In the verses that follow the account of the deluge, a series of instructions are issued which Rabbinic interpretation has designated as the *"seven commandments given to the offspring of Noah."* This fundamental morality consists of the establishment of courts of justice, the prohibition of blasphemy, of idolatry, of incest, of bloodshed, of robbery and of eating flesh cut from a living animal. Whereas an Israelite was to carry out all the precepts of the Torah, obedience to the seven commandments alone was, in ancient times, required of non-Jews living among Israelites or attaching themselves to the Jewish community.

Thus Judaism regards the Noahic commandments as binding on all people because all mankind is descended from Noah and his family. The 613 laws of the Torah, on the other hand, are only applicable to the descendants of those

who accepted the commandments at Sinai and upon those who take on the selfsame obligations voluntarily, as by conversion.

Thus a Gentile, who has been living according to these basic precepts is not, in the eyes of Judaism, a case for repentance nor is the turning involved in a decision to convert to the Jewish faith seen in that light. A convert to Judaism is rather defined by the word "ger", translated in the *Evenshushan Dictionary* (1953:368) as "a person who came to live in a strange land."

Abraham refers to himself by this term when negotiating the purchase of the *Cave of Machpelah* from the Hittites. His words, "I am an alien and a resident among you"⁽³⁾ are interpreted by Rashi to mean "I am both an alien from another land and a resident who has settled among you." The subsequent use of "ger" is found in *Exodus*, "Do not oppress a stranger; you know the feelings of a stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt."⁽⁴⁾ This theme is reiterated on further occasions in the Torah to denote the resident alien.

Further on in the Bible, the use of the word "ger" as for stranger is once more encountered. There is a passage in the Prophetic section which reads, "and the stranger (ger) shall join himself with them and they shall cleave to the House of Jacob."⁽⁵⁾

In the commentary supplied by the Soncino Edition of the book, Rev. Dr. I.W. Slotki (1941:67) states,

"The text uses 'ger', which in Biblical Hebrew signifies a non-Israelite, although some authorities detect here the meaning of 'proselyte', which is acquired in later Hebrew."

It would seem, therefore, that the employment of the term "ger" (convert) was borrowed from the concept of the resident alien within the ancient Israelite fold.

The closest accurate Hebrew word for “conversion” is “*mityahed*” (*becoming Jewish*), which is seldom used.

I should, however, like to suggest that the choice of “*ger*” as the most frequent rendition of “convert” has a great deal to do with the process and consequences of the action of proselytisation. In general, conversion reflects the strangeness of the proselyte during the process and more especially when it is a conversion to Judaism, which is not *ab initio* even encouraged. There have been cases where the successful candidate is made to feel unwelcome, even after the completion of the process. He/she may still feel as a stranger in the new environment. This is because the entrance to Judaism by those who were not born into its ethno-religious structure presents a number of challenges and hurdles. The adjustment of the convert to the consequent social geography of the transformation may, on the other hand, not be at all traumatic. Nevertheless, it is a significant change in relation to the original environment and as such will invariably contain an element of unfamiliarity and strangeness.

Comparing the concept of conversion as “*strangeness*” as opposed to “*turning*” or “*returning*” the difference between these perceptions becomes evident, too, as this work analyses a construction by Rambo, which he defines as a stage model organising the themes, patterns and processes operative in religious change.

The seven stages given by Rambo (1993:17) are “*context, crisis, quest, encounter, interaction, commitment and consequences*”. These stages apply to all religious conversions, including Jewish proselytisation. They interact with one another and vary according to different times and circumstances.

The context in which conversion takes place is described as the ecology of the process. Rambo’s theory of the interaction of the individual with his environment is based on an intimate connection. Thus, the individual is part of a magnetic field, which includes the influence of organised religion, by way of various cultural

media. Rambo's view of religious institutions as a force would clearly impact to a greater or lesser extent depending upon the role religion and evangelical activity play in a particular society. He holds, however, that mostly there is a resistance to change.

Where proselytisation has taken place, Rambo (1993:20) supplies reasons. He gives crisis as a catalyst for change but equally he sees it as a force that is capable of strengthening beliefs already held. Another motive is that of quest for upliftment outside one's situation. The crisis, which directs the party to engage in active search, need not necessarily be trauma related but merely a desire for self-fulfillment.

Where crisis leads to active search, the fourth stage in Rambo's model is the encounter between the potential convert and those seeking to provide the questor with a new orientation. The latter parties, termed by Rambo as the advocates, are discernible in the various evangelical movements. Nevertheless, points out Rambo, encounters do not generally result in conversion. The mechanics of resistance generally prove a stronger force. Where the advocate has been persuasive in the encounter with the potential convert, Rambo places interaction as the next phase. This he calls the matrix of change and provides a vivid description of what actually takes place in this crucial area of development. New relationships form the basis of a new lifestyle. Rituals make their impact. Rhetoric impresses. In this stage, the questor may develop a new sense of self. From there, the journey of the potential convert reaches a decisive turning point. Though earlier Rambo has made it clear that conversion is a process that takes place over a substantial period of time, the interaction stage is not seen as an elongated development. Commitment becomes expected. This is the consummation and consolidation of transformation, often requiring declaration and ritual.

Finally, Rambo (1993:170) addresses the post conversion stage, which he has stated are the consequences, the effects of converting processes. Some, he says, feel the benefits of a radically transformed life, a significant difference in their beliefs, a sense of mission and purpose and a great sense of security and peace. Others may be disappointed in their expectations and feel they have been manipulated. In any event, he points out the precarious nature of conversion and the need for post conversion care and support contending that *“as converts develop spiritually, their understanding becomes more sophisticated as they review, re-interpret and re-value their experience.”*

Having perused the graphic anatomy of a conversion supplied by Rambo this inquiry proceeds to find common denominators and/or differences between the stage model provided and the actualities of conversion to Judaism in South Africa, as detected from the methodology employed in this work.

The main variables, which will emerge, subsist in the motives for conversion and the attitude of conversion authorities towards the intending proselyte. Both these subjects will be treated in greater depth in the ensuing chapters. At this stage, however, mention will be made of them insofar as they are represented in Rambo's model.

Although the representation of Judaism in the general ecology is limited by its position as a minority religion, with a non-missionary stance, it does draw some participational interest from outside the faith. Some are dissatisfied with the religious milieu in which they have been raised, invariably a branch of Christianity. In some instances, the background was totally non-religious. To many, Judaism represents an alternative world, replete with the mystery of a minority devoted to their ancestral religion who miraculously survived centuries of persecution and found fulfillment in a return to their Biblical homeland. Though idealism played a major role in Jewish historical conversion – and still manifests

itself to a certain extent in the present – marriage to a Jewish partner will emerge as the leading current motive for conversion.

Whereas Rambo tends to look more closely at the convert for conviction, his model does not adequately cover the convert for marriage, which is the major prototype in the present time.

Looking at the stage, which Rambo has designated as a catalyst for change, the sense of crisis was usually felt when early courtship stages led to anticipation of a permanent relationship. It has to be taken into account that whilst the original motive for conversion in the majority of cases could be said to be ulterior, the desire for its attainment proved strong enough to induce religious conviction. This possible development was recognised by many of the classical exponents on this subject. The extent to which a prospective convert for the sake of marriage could be likened to a questor purely for conviction depended largely on the tenacity of the applicant as the stages of conversion increased in their intensity.

There were other crises, too, that are particularly characteristic of motives for conversion to Judaism. For instance, the offspring of a Jewish father and a Gentile mother is Halakhically a Gentile. As he or she seeks to return to the roots by way of conversion, a certain similarity is seen in relation to the concept of conversion as "*a turning*" or "*returning*". Nevertheless, this category of proselyte has to undergo a full conversion and this particular situation does not fall within the ambit of the Rambo model.

There were also cases of applicants who had actually been brought up to believe they were Jewish and only found out to the contrary when asked to produce the Jewish marriage document of their parents. This was more especially complicated when the mother had been converted in the Reform. In all probability, the child had attended classes in Hebrew and religious studies,

undergone a Barmitzvah or Batmitzvah ceremony, attended Synagogue and celebrated Jewish Festivals, only to be visited with a sense of shock to discover the conversion was not recognised by the Orthodox denomination. Here the quest on the part of the intending proselyte is one of regularisation rather than seeking another religion as a means of elevation as in the Rambo model.

Another category of convert to Judaism, which forms a substantial percentage of the total conversions, is that of infants. Mostly, these are the offspring prior to a conversion who are ceremonially proselytised together with the mother or as an adopted child. In the case of young children, this is done without their consent. This type of convert who is totally passive is also not addressed by Rambo's theory.

A further significant difference in the process of conversion to Judaism and the model presented by Rambo is seen in the stage of encounter. Whereas evangelical movements will readily make use of this scenario to enroll the interested party, conversion authorities adopt a totally different approach. Theirs is to discourage and present demands, which would have to be met if the candidate is to continue pursuing the undertaking.

In the process of conversion to Judaism, the interaction stage in Rambo's model may be equivalent to the conversion programme. Acceptance of the candidate into a formal instructional course takes place some time after the application. In the interim, however, the prospective candidate is issued with preliminary conditions. These initial steps consist of a prescribed reading list, attendance at Synagogue and lectures on Judaism, circulation in Jewish environment and physical orientation in the Jewish religious lifestyle. It is during these stages of interaction that either new relationships are formed or the feeling of strangeness is aggravated. Ritualistic aspects and observances will either stimulate or prove themselves a hardship. Rhetoric will affirm a sense of conviction or arouse

cynicism. Where the reaction is positive, the words of Rambo (1993:168) invariably ring true,

“Playing a role that conforms to reciprocal expectations in a social setting enables the potential or new convert to experience and enact a new way of life, frequently with a sense of mission; a new sense of self often emerges through the internalization of a new role as a convert.”

Throughout the successive stages of conversion to Judaism to the very last, the candidate has the option of relinquishment, without any inducement on the part of the conversion authorities to do otherwise. Whereas in the Rambo model commitment is expected of the convert, in conversion to Judaism this has to be demonstrated before the final stage of conversion takes place and declaration to abide by the regulations of Judaism is a prerequisite, which is re-affirmed at the actual ceremony. Once the process is complete, commitment to the 613 laws of Judaism does indeed become an expectation.

Comparing the position of the Jewish convert, in the light of Rambo’s post conversion model, by the time of accomplishment the convert will already have been living a radically transformed life for some time. The nature of the physical observances – Sabbath, Kashruth and the laws of family purity – have ensured this. The learning experience, which forms an integral part of the programme, will inspire the sense of mission and purpose. As to whether the proselyte will acquire security and peace depends largely on the surrounding circumstances and here the feeling of strangeness or acceptance will play a greater or lesser role.

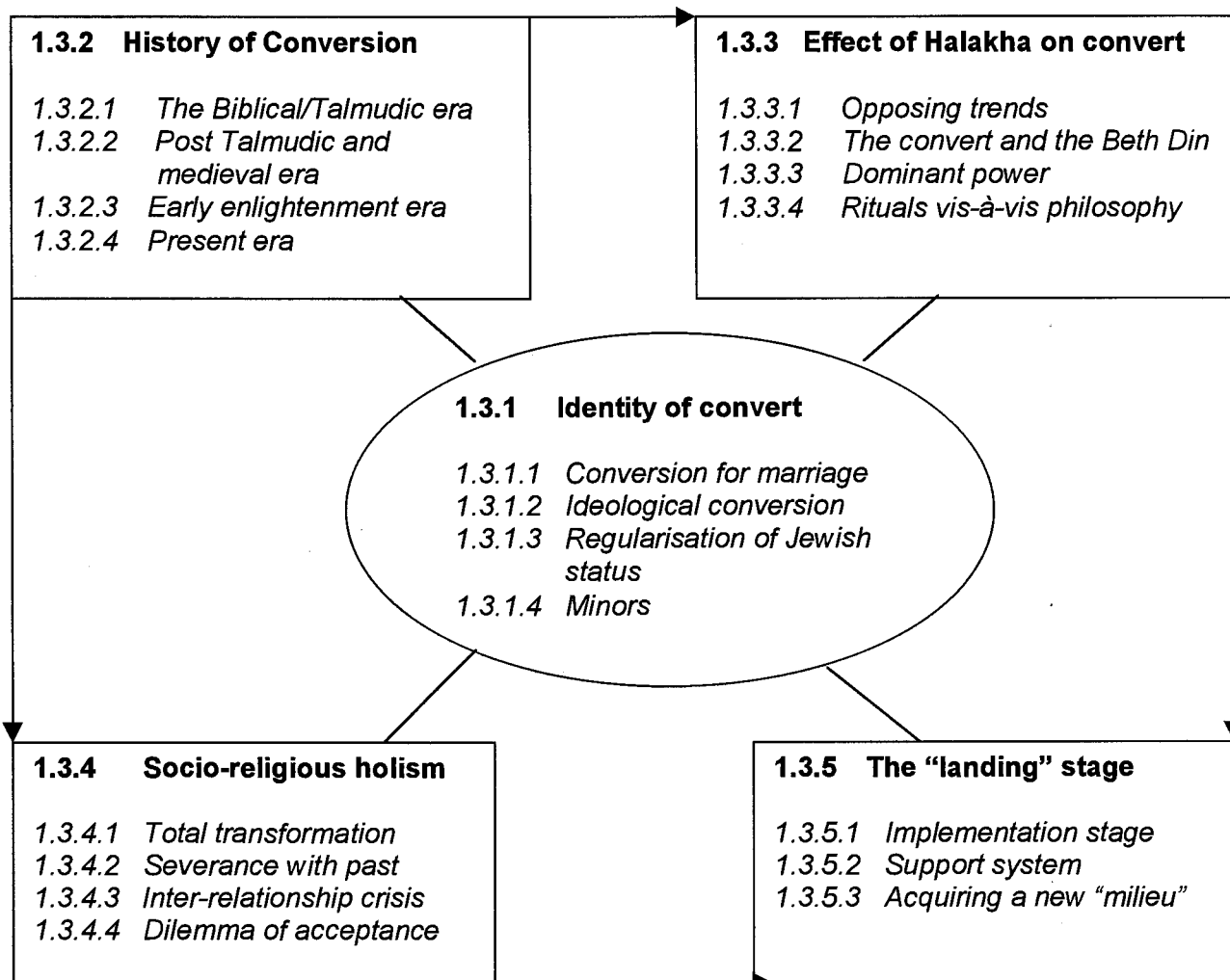
Although there are criteria brought down by Rambo which are universally applicable across the entire religious spectrum, the subject of *“conversion to Orthodox Judaism in the present time”* contains its own unique characteristics

requiring specialised treatment which I proceed to apply in a model which I feel will more appropriately address the main thrust of this thesis.

1.3 Theory of conversion to Judaism in the present context

This model proceeds to examine four principal components of the conversion experience – *the history of conversion from its earliest origin, the application of Halakha, the holism encompassing socio-religious factors and the “landing stage”*. Within the dynamics of interaction between these forces, the convertee is centrally situated. How these forces affect the prospective convert and how he or she reacts to them determines the flow of the process.

Figure 1



In order to understand the mechanics, which are operative in this model, the following criteria are addressed.

1.3.1 *Identity of the convert*

First, it has to be asked as to who are the applicants for conversion to Judaism at this present time. Results of case study reveal four main categories of questors – *converts for the sake of marriage, idealists, parties seeking regularisation of Jewish status and minors*. Identification of the convert defines motivation.

1.3.1.1 *Conversion for marriage*

Of the motives which are outlined, the most predominant is marriage to a Jewish partner. For practical reasons the non-Jewish party chooses conversion to Judaism as a preferable option to a mixed marriage. Since there is pressure exerted from the family and peer groups of the Jewish spouse, the other is prepared to sacrifice any previously held religious affiliation for the sake of a stable marriage and family unity. One subject at an interview sensed animosity on the part of the family of the Jewish partner and the adverse effect it had on both his emotional well being as well as their relationship. *“I did it for the sake of my future husband”*, she said.

In another interview, a converttee explained that her decision was based on a perception of the significant role Judaism played in the family of the future spouse. The latter did not feel the same with regard to the religion of her own family. In her words, *“Religion in my family was not nearly as important an issue as it was in that of the background of my husband-to-be.”*

Another reason for conversion in this category is to have one religion in the family. Here, a subject told me, *“I felt it important to raise our children in a united religious environment so that confusion would be avoided. Since it was*

obvious that my partner would not convert to Christianity, I surrendered to his religion.”

Very few cases are known in South Africa of Jews who have converted to Christianity for the sake of marriage. The taboo of adopting alternative religions remains a powerful factor in the sociology of South African Jewry.

1.3.1.2 Ideological conversion

Although, in researching the various cases, it was found that conversion for conviction was far from a leading motivation, there were nevertheless an appreciable number of instances where the proselyte had no ulterior motive for the undertaking. This category of convert is called “*ger tzedek*”, a righteous convert. Ideological conversion may stem from a selection of reasons.

Lofland and Skonovd (1985:385), whose contribution to the subject was included in the work of Rambo, identify six conversion motifs – *intellectual, mystical, experimental, affectional, revivalist and coercive*. Within certain of these motifs will be found the motivation of the convert to Judaism by conviction.

First the rationale of the ideological convert to Judaism has to exclude the role played by coercive forces. It did emerge that certain converts for marriage felt the weight of family and peer pressure. This form of coercion, however, remains localised within the immediate social environment of the party concerned. Judaism as a system does not engage in outreach, either aggressive or benign, outside its boundaries, such that would influence a potential convert for ideological reasons. Revivalism, as described by Lofland and Skonovd, can be seen in the activities of charismatic Christian missionary movements. Any such counterpart in Orthodox Judaism is directed exclusively to its membership and is therefore unlikely to act as a primary cause of ideological conversion. Once the applicant has been admitted to a conversion

programme, he or she will invariably be exposed to the dynamics of Jewish internal outreach.

Looking, however, at the other motifs supplied by Lofland and Skonovd, *intellectual, mystical, experimental and affectional*, are seen factors which appear operative to some degree or other in the survey of ideologically-motivated proselytisation to Judaism.

Intellectual conversion is preceded by the study of authoritative sources in religions. The party engages in intensive exploration of the various faiths and draws comparison. This search sometimes leads to a preference for Judaism, which is followed up with a proselytisation. The same could be said of experimental conversion, except that the search is experiential rather than academic and is judged by the party on the benefits personally derived from joining a particular religious group.

Whilst in some religions, the advocates urge the potential convert to try out the system for themselves hoping that they will eventually opt for it, Orthodox Jewish conversion authorities will leave the choice entirely to the applicant.

Mystical conversion is seen as a reaction to claimed supernatural experience, for instance visions and voices. Whilst certain applicants for Jewish proselytisation expressed that they were so motivated, conversion authorities will generally look upon these candidates with a measure of suspicion, to the point of discouraging the pursuit of conversion.

The affectional motif refers to the overwhelming feeling on the part of the prospective convert of being made welcome in the circles of the particular religious group in which he or she is interested. In Judaism, this motif may well play a role in influencing the route of a potential conversion. This is not, however, seen as an initiating motive for ideological conversion.

There is another motif I would like to suggest which has emerged from the profiles of some converts to Judaism. This is the exposure motif. A non-Jewish party may encounter exposure to the Jewish lifestyle and find himself/herself attracted to it. This could arise from being present at Jewish ceremonies, or in Jewish circles or close associations with Jewish people.

1.3.1.3 *Regularisation of Jewish status*

There appeared in the archives of the Johannesburg Beth Din a large number of applicants not seeking transformation to Judaism from another faith but rather desiring to Halakhically legalise their status as Jewish. Chiefly, there are three categories – *the progeny of a mixed marriage, the offspring of a Reform maternal conversion and the one who discovers a technical non-Jewish status.*

Mostly, these were raised in a Jewish environment. They feel on the one hand ethnically Jewish but on the other they are not recognised as such by the Orthodox system. To reconcile these opposing factors they seek conversion to Orthodox Judaism, although their decision is often prompted by conviction and/or the desire to wed a Jewish partner.

The third category in this classification of convert comprises those who have actually been raised as fully Jewish and some of them may even have had an Orthodox religious life. At some stage a discovery is made, either by the Rabbinate or the party himself or herself, that a complication has arisen regarding the Jewish status – for example, a Gentile maternal ancestress who had not been converted or an adoption that had not been validated by the Beth Din. For this type of convert, the motif is regularisation of a Jewish status.

It will be seen from the historical chapter that a structure has developed within the South African Jewish community that places special importance on the

reciprocal recognition of a Jewish status. Whilst the Reform will certainly acknowledge as a Jew any party accepted by the Orthodox, this is not true of the converse.

The Reform convert and subsequent offspring of a female proselyte admitted outside Orthodoxy may well be regarded as Jews in terms of social acceptance, likewise the child of a Jewish father and Gentile mother who has been raised as a Jew. Such parties become subjected to severe limitations in the religious environment of a society which will be shown to be predominantly Orthodox.

1.3.1.4 *Minors*

The proselytisation of a minor can be categorised as a totally passive conversion. This applies to children converted together with the parents, a Gentile child who was adopted by Jewish parents or one who was converted by the Beth Din. In these instances, the active parties are either the parents or the Beth Din. Either the parents or the Beth Din are obliged to ensure that the child will be raised according to Halakha. On reaching adulthood, however, this type of convert has the right to affirm or reject the decision that was made on his/her behalf.

1.3.2 *History of conversion to Judaism*

It is not sufficient for a prospective convert merely to make up his/her mind to be converted. Proselytisation to Judaism is in fact a response to the forces outlined in this model that are particularly germane to Judaism. One such factor is history.

Rambo (1993:12) suggests that consideration of the historical dimensions of conversion may valuably complement the theoretical model, providing a substantive and detailed data base of information regarding the subject, which may help to trace the nature of conversion over time.

In respect of conversion to Judaism, this statement has particular application since it involves a continuum, which dates back to the conversion of Abraham the Patriarch to the present day. The history of Jewish proselytisation can be divided into four principal eras – the Biblical/Talmudic period; the post-Talmudic and medieval era; the early enlightenment era and the present century. Bulliet in his essay (1979) argued that converts had varying motivations during different historical periods. It will indeed become apparent from Chapter 2 of this work, which is a historical survey of the topic, that the prevalence of particular motives for conversion was relative to varying historical circumstances.

The monotheistic creed of Abraham, which was to develop into Judaism, was decidedly an innovative moment. So, too, the mass reception of the Torah at Mount Sinai by the Israelites. These were prototypes of conversion by conviction. As a motive for conversion to Judaism, idealism predominated throughout the Biblical and Talmudic period. The forced conversion of the Idumeans to Judaism stands out on its own as an example of coercive Jewish proselytisation.

In the long centuries of the Diaspora following the first century, the Jews were cast amongst the Gentile nations. Their mutual interaction was mostly negative. Even where Jews were not persecuted, prohibitions were frequently issued against proselytisation to Judaism. In the main, Jews lived apart from their Gentile neighbours. There were, however, isolated conversions, often perilously undertaken. Historical sources that are available reveal that, apart from the conversion of slaves, known individual proselytes were mainly idealists. Rabbinic sources of the same period, however, demonstrate that conversionist marriage was already an issue, though not in great demand.

The enlightenment in the European countries accorded greater measures of freedom to the Jews. Increased contact with the Gentile world led to

intermarriage. Anti-Semitism, however, was also to play its role. With regard to conversions, although governmental bans had been lifted, Jewish authorities were apprehensive. Though assimilation was not yet the characteristic of that era, it could be assumed that there was a growing demand for conversion and that marriage, as well as conviction, was becoming a motive.

The turn of this century, up till the present day, saw an even greater measure of freedom for the Jews and their integration into the various societies. At the same time, this time-slot has seen both the Holocaust as well as the birth of the State of Israel. Because of the acceptance of the Jews, intermarriage became a widespread phenomenon precipitating a demand for conversion of sizeable proportion. A resultant factor arising out of intermarriage was the offspring of mixed marriages who themselves sought conversion.

This brief historical review has covered a number of the issues that have affected Jewish society over the millennia, in relation to the Gentile world and which remains imprinted on its collective unconscious. Into this milieu enters the prospective convert. In some instances the intending proselyte descends from cultures that have been unfavourable towards the Jews. A case in point was a German who embraced Judaism and always found himself on the defensive long after the conversion. This was because the Holocaust is still fresh in the minds of the Jewish people. On the winding road to conversion the prospective convert is bound to find himself or herself face to face with the vicissitudes of the history that has preceded the society of which he or she wishes to become part.

1.3.3 *Effect of Halakha on the convert*

In the conversion process, the most dominant force is that of Halakha. Its basic principles are immutable but interpretation and application have proved volatile. Evolvement of practical Halakha dynamics to deal with the issue of conversion has interacted with the circumstances appertaining to the periods covered by the

historical survey. Thus the study of Halakhic development in this field, upon which Chapter 3 elaborates, reveals varying attitudes on the part of the exponents.

1.3.3.1 *Opposing trends*

Drawing upon Talmudic sources on the one hand R. Eleazar asserts, "*The Holy One, blessed be he, did not exile Israel among the nations save in order that proselytes might join them.*"⁽⁶⁾ Whilst another remarks, "*Evil after evil comes upon those who receive proselytes.*"⁽⁷⁾ But the Tosafot who comment upon this view explain that the sage in question is referring to those who are not converting in the proper manner.

These seemingly diametrically opposite viewpoints are illustrated by a well-known Talmud paradigm, concerning the sparring Rabbinical houses of Shammai and Hillel.

A certain heathen once came before Shammai and asked him, "*How many Torah have you?*" "*Two*", he replied, "*the Written Torah and the Oral Torah.*" "*I believe you with respect to the Written but not with respect to the Oral Torah. Make me a proselyte on condition that you teach me the Written Torah (only).*" (But) he scolded and repulsed him in anger. When he went before Hillel, he accepted him as a proselyte. On the first day he taught him *aleph, bet, gimmel, dalet*. The following day he reversed (them) to him. "*But yesterday you did not teach them to me thus*", he protested. "*Must you then not rely upon me? Then rely upon me with respect to the Oral (Torah) too.*"⁽⁸⁾

On another occasion it happened that a certain heathen came before Shammai and said to him, "*Make me a proselyte on condition that you teach me the whole Torah while I stand on one foot.*" Thereupon he repulsed him with the builder's cubit, which was in his hand. When he went before Hillel he said to him, "*What is*

hateful to you, do not to your neighbour : that is the whole Torah while the rest is the commentary thereof. Go and learn it."

Shammai comes forth as one readily repulsed by misconception on the part of the applicant as to the meaning of Judaism. Hillel looks out for possible growth points but his conciliatory interaction with the party concerned is accompanied by a selfsame recognition of the erroneous notions regarding the faith that concerned Shammai. Accordingly, Hillel set out to educate. But even the Shammai – Hillel polemic is subject to interpretation.

Further study shows that this illustration proves neither encouragement nor discouragement of conversion to Judaism. The celebrated exponent, Rashi, explains both were in agreement regarding the acceptance of converts. Only Shammai had his doubts as to the capabilities of the parties in question whilst Hillel was more optimistic. These proselytes approached them with conditions. Both Hillel and Shammai were at one on the principle that conversion had to be unconditional. Only Hillel felt he could effectively bring this home to the pupils if their initial overtures were faulty.

This apparent dilemma has been persisting to these days, leading to a variety of opinions expressed in the Halakha. Subsequent to the Talmud, however, Halakhic sources devote comparatively little material to the issue of conversion. Even in the Talmud, *Tractate Gerim*, which is dedicated to conversion, ranks as one of the shortest treatises. The codifier Maimonides addresses the subject in *Isurei Biah* ⁽⁹⁾ and there are two subsections in the *Yoreh Deah* section of the *Shulchan Aruch* entitled *Hilchot Gerim*.

Where the topic does come alive with great intensity is in the *Responsa* handed down through the ages providing a chain of guidelines for modern authorities dealing with conversions, such as the Beth Din whose executive power is one of the forces with which the applicant for conversion will come in direct contact.

1.3.3.2 *The convert and the Beth Din*

It is the Beth Din that determines the current operative policy on conversions. Halakha is the fundamental source of its criteria but its interpretation is influenced by the social circumstances of the time and place and the character and motivation of the applicant. The mechanics of rejection or encouragement employed by the Beth Din is also dependent on its progress of the post-conversion stages.

They have to take into account that conversions may encourage mixed marriages. On the other hand, they have to look at the advantages of keeping the Jewish partner within the fold of Orthodox Judaism, especially where the Reform movements offer easier alternatives.

Where the Beth Din opts to entertain the concept of proselytisation, it will impose strenuous conditions upon the prospective proselyte, such that will shape the candidate's thoughts, feelings and actions. The intending convert will be required to change eating habits, sexual norms, mode of dress and even sometimes residential patterns.

Since this discussion covers the force of the Halakhic authority as confronted by the intending convert, it may be asked as to the extent to which the applicant is an active or a passive player.

1.3.3.3 *Dominant power*

Apart from the one who is converted without his or her consent, for example a child who obviously plays a totally submissive role, other categories will vary in the scale of activity and passivity. Since, in Judaism, the onus is upon the candidate to initiate the conversion, at that stage the applicant is the active party.

From thence, the level of dominant power in achieving the ultimate goal will depend upon the motive for conversion.

A convert for conviction is a ready compliant with the demands of the Beth Din, without feeling resentment. The applicant with an ulterior motive, however, could well feel compelled to pay a high price in order to achieve the goal which is sought.

Even an idealist, however, may meet the resistance of the Beth Din, who may be tempted to test the source of conviction.

Psychologist Chana Ulman (1989:29) discovered by way of fieldwork that converts, in contrast to home born members of the faith, had in common protracted histories of emotional and relational disturbances in childhood, adolescence or shortly before the conversion. As these factors could well have played an influential part in formulating religious ideologies, the Beth Din will carefully scrutinise a claim of conviction as the motive for conversion.

1.3.3.4 *Rituals vis-à-vis Philosophy*

Another major encounter involved in the interaction between the prospective convert and the Beth Din is the question of ritual. Jennings (1982:113) expresses the view that, *"ritual serves as a paradigm for all significant action"*.

Whilst all religions have their prescribed ritualistic requirements, I posit that in Judaism this is a matter of special emphasis, taking exceptional precedence over philosophic motivation. A great deal of the conversion process deals with the *"how"* rather than the *"why"* aspect. In the period of preparation for the conversion, the Beth Din is more concerned whether the convert is maintaining the physical observances, rather than ideological acceptance. For the

prospective converts, the route to the goal involves conformity to the requirements of Halakha to the satisfaction of the body that administers it.

1.3.4 *Socio-religious holism*

1.3.4.1 *Total transformation*

Akabya, the son of Mahalel, said,

"Know where thou comest and whither thou are going" ⁽¹⁰⁾

The two forces previously mentioned as affecting the conversion experience, namely the historical and the Halakhic, refer to the road ahead to be travelled by the prospective convert.

This section looks at the *"know where thou comest"* aspect – how the past journeys of the convert meet up with the process of proselytisation. Contained in this component are socio-cultural criteria, which form the theme of Chapter 4 of this work.

In Christianity, and other religions, the proselyte converts to a faith; in Judaism it is to a people and a way of life. The demands of Jewish proselytisation extend beyond its ideology or even its rituals and observances. Transformation in this context is a totality.

A Jew or a Jewess is from birth given a Hebrew name for religious purposes. Say, for example, his registered name is Jack Smith and his father is David Smith, the name that would most probably be used for the various rituals in which he is involved would read *Jaakov ben* (i.e. son of) David. If, however, Jack was a converted Jew he would become *Jaakov ben Avraham Avinu* (the son of Abraham, our Father) and a female *bat* (daughter of Abraham, our Father).

This form of naming a proselyte connects the converttee with the founding Patriarch. Thus he or she becomes an integral part of the history of a people encompassing three millennia.

1.3.4.2 Severance with the past

Nock (1933:9) noted that the prophetic religions (Judaism, Christianity and Islam) require total repudiation, often complete abandonment of all other religious commitments.

This concept is expressed in the Talmud in a statement by R. Jose.

"One who has become a proselyte is like a child newly-born" (11)

For the most part, he or she is required to sever all connections with the past. In Rambo's model this detachment from the previous life is called "*surrender*" (1993:132) and he sees this as one of the most difficult in any lasting, pervasive sense. This aspect becomes even more burdensome when the conversion is not for the sake of heaven but rather for an ulterior motive. In any event, the convert may feel some resentment in fulfilling the complete ramifications of total severance from the past.

With regard to Judaism, Petsonk and Remsen (1988:48) make an important observation :

"But because Judaism comes in a complicated package where religious ideas and values are intertwined with family, culture and an almost tribal sense of identity, the Gentile partner may find himself pulled in two opposite directions – attracted to the ideas of the faith but shying away from the enveloping demands of culture and family identity. After all he has just succeeded in separating

from his own parents – why should he allow himself to be swallowed up by a new set of values.”

One subject at an interview felt that, despite his total commitment to Judaism and his break with the past he still felt that he was not fully accepted by Jewish peer groups.

Furthermore, it is not uncommon to hear the derogatory term “*shiksah*” applied even to a converted Jewess.

1.3.4.3 *The Inter-relationship crisis*

Severance with the past extends, too, to relationships forged by the convert prior to conversion. Acquiring a new religion also entails renunciation, not only of former beliefs but also the culture surrounding them. A convert to Judaism, for instance, is precluded from celebrating Christmas with his/her family, or for that matter any other type of religious-based festivity, even if it is at the core of family unity. Furthermore, even on a day-to-day basis, the social interaction between the Jewish convert and his/her parents and friends is subject to new pressures. Kashruth laws will prevent dining at their homes. Participating in a religious ceremony of a close relative or friend would be limited. These are all areas of potential conflict which face the relationship between the convert and the family of origin and constitute a crisis which could even affect the interaction of the Jewish grandchildren with the non-Jewish grandparents, since the holism of their relationship is unfulfilled. The grandparents are unable to share the full spectrum of a normal relationship with the grandchildren as the latter could become confused if exposed to two adverse sets of socio-religious cultures.

Parents of the convert could become resentful. A possible consequence is a feeling of estrangement with their offspring. Moreover, they could also sense

their own failure in raising their child in a way that resulted in the abandonment of the values and culture, which they hold dear.

1.3.4.4 *Dilemma of acceptance*

It has been seen how the convert to Judaism is likely to encounter certain crises in relation to the family of origin and its surrounding society. There is also the question of absorption into the newly acquired social environment. Where there is a conversionary marriage involved, this will involve the dynamic of acceptance by the spouse's family and peer groups. Thus the convert could well be gravitating between strained relationships with the family of origin and the coldness of the spouse's milieu.

The convert has thus to make a greater effort to keep the peace with his/her original family and peer group, on the one hand, whilst endearing himself/herself to the society of the spouse on the other.

In the Jewish home, there is a particular socio-religious culture which inevitably makes an impact that is retained by the Jewish spouse. To that standard, the convertee partner will be expected to aspire. Sometimes, however, support from the Jewish partner may not be forthcoming in assisting the convertee spouse to make the practical adjustment to the new way of life. Single convertees, too, may also experience difficulties in integrating into Jewish peer groups.

Thus the destination reached on the road to conversion may only be the beginning of another hard journey ahead.

1.3.5 The “landing” stage

I have used the term, “*the landing stage*”, to describe the post-conversion scenario, which will be tackled in greater detail in Chapter 5. This is the ultimate junction, where historical contact, Halakhic adherence and socio-cultural adaptation all meet.

1.3.5.1 Implementation stage

From the viewpoint of the Beth Din, the conversion programme is a preparation for the stage of implementation. Irrespective of the original motive, the accomplished proselyte is expected to put into practice the teachings acquired during the process and to honour the declaration to abide by Halakha.

Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein (1988:1) gives two levels for assessment of a conversion – *the ritual or behavioural dimension and the inner process*.

The first of these criteria is easily observed. Actual induction into the faith takes place by way of a ceremony that is witnessed. Behavioural patterns are discernible by outward conformity. It can be assessed how frequently the proselyte attends services or whether there is adherence to Sabbath and Kashrut. When it comes to the inner self, assessment becomes more complicated. No one can really comprehend whether attitudes expressed by the proselyte reflect sincerity. Nevertheless, the Beth Din hopes that the preparatory stages of the conversion experience have made a positive impression, such that will be internalised.

1.3.5.2 Support system

Success of the conversion depends not only on the convert *per se* but also where he or she lands. The environment has to be conducive towards religious

observance. This applies to both the geographical location in which the convert resides and the peer groups with whom he or she interacts. Even a proselyte intent in fulfilling the commandments accepted with sincerity, living in an atmosphere which does not uphold these values will place obstacles in the way of implementation.

A subject at an interview said that, during the programme and afterwards, he maintained the required observance. When he mingled with his newly acquired Jewish peers, who were non-observant, he felt uncomfortable as the exception in that regard. Thus he decided to adopt the “*norm*” of the home-born Jews with whom he socialised.

Then there is the Jewish spouse who may not have been raised in a religious home. Moreover, he did not aspire to the selfsame spiritual growth attained by the converttee through the programme. The converttee is unable to bring the Jewish partner to her level, which he may even resent. Invariably, she compromises.

1.3.5.3 Acquiring a new “*milieu*”

A further challenge facing the converttee, which will be felt when asked to sever relationship with the past, is the degree of influence exerted by the society of origin.

Kruger (1982:41) distinguishes between “*personal religion*” and “*religious milieu*”. The latter term he attributes to the society in which the adherent to a religion is born, rooted and ultimately appropriated. When it comes to conversion, religious *milieu* is replaced by an adopted “*personal religion*”. Whether the adopted personal religion can replace the original *milieu*, or whether it can become the *milieu* itself largely depends on how the proselyte is absorbed and supported.

He writes (1982:3),

“Each religious tradition may be seen as a dynamic whole in itself and yet the patterns of interaction between them and between each and its environment should not be overlooked.”

Relating Kruger’s remarks to the topic in question, the surrounding environment will be seen as a major role player affecting the interest of the potential proselyte in the undertaking as well as each stage of the conversion process and continues into the years following the conversion.

1.4 Conclusion

This model has looked largely at the hurdles and obstacles encountered by the prospective convert in the long road to the ultimate goal. Not all proselytes have necessarily experienced all of the selfsame challenges. As the forces of history, Halakha, socio-religious culture and post conversion interact, the manner in which one or more of them will affect the convertee will vary from case to case, from motive to motive, from society to society.

Judaism has been conscious of these hardships that have been experienced by the “ger” (stranger). The Torah repeats the injunction, “*Thou shalt love the stranger*” no less than 36 times. Moreover, *Encyclopaedia Talmudit* (278) brings down from the Talmud that Torah is not purely a genetic dispensation but there are 46 Biblical injunctions towards anyone who behaves improperly towards a convert.

1.5 Conversion : Role models

The model which was presented addresses the contemporary proselyte and the challenges encountered on the long road to conversion. A prospective convert

embarks on this course within the context of a development that has taken place through various stages of a protracted history encompassing millennia in the life of the Jewish people over numerous places in the world. Role models dating back to the Scriptures portray characteristics and motives which provide further insight into the process of conversion as it currently manifests itself.

1.5.1 Abraham and Sarah, the intellectual converts

The naming of a convert as “ben” or “bat” Avraham Avinu demonstrates the pivotal role of the Biblical figure, Abraham, in initiating the monotheistic *credo* from which Judaism is derived.

“Get thee out of thy country and from thy kindred and from thy father’s house, unto the land that I will show thee. And I will make of thee a great nation and I will bless thee and make thy name great; and be thou a blessing.”⁽¹²⁾

The Midrash presents Abraham as a conscientious thinker who challenges the idolatrous religious norms prevalent in ancient Mesopotamia, searching for a spiritual alternative. His findings point to monotheism.

For his convictions, he is prepared to suffer any amount of persecution. He is contacted by G-d whom he has sought. Step by step he is directed into a Covenant which is ultimately physically expressed by his circumcision. Abraham has been successfully instructed through the stages of conversion to the faith which became Judaism. There was never a question of ulterior motive. It is pure idealism, based on an intellectual search for the truth.⁽¹³⁾

The Midrash goes on to relate how Abraham’s wife Sarah undergoes a similar religious experience and is thus able to complement her husband’s transformation. As the founding patriarchal couple proceed in their divinely appointed route, they influence others to join them.⁽¹⁴⁾

Since the Torah was yet to be revealed, the type of conversion was limited to an acceptance of monotheism as opposed to idolatry and the fundamental morality contained in the 7 Noahide commandments. Nevertheless, the main elements of Jewish proselytisation as it is known in the five motifs are detected.

First, there was the discovery of his faith through intellectual inquiry, epitomising the ideal motive for conversion. Then, there was the resultant severance from the family of origin, which resulted in the leaving of his parental home. Thirdly, husband and wife converted as a unit. On the journey, as at the place which he left behind, there was conflict with the surrounding environment. Finally, the spiritual path taken by Abraham and Sarah impacts outwardly.

Of the modern day convert for conviction, one interesting case appearing in the Beth Din archives resembles the Abrahamic experience. After intensive research of the Scriptures and intellectual inquiry, the head of a large Afrikaans family opted for Judaism. Together with his wife and 5 children, they underwent conversion. This involved the selling of their farm so that they could be closer to a Jewish environment. Ultimately the family settled in Israel.

1.5.2 The conversion of Ruth : Decision influenced by association

In the case study, it was found that the most popular name chosen by proselytes to Judaism was Ruth because of the role of that Biblical personality as a prototype of the ideal convert. The magnetism of Ruth towards monotheism was not originally an Abrahamic type discovery but, like Abraham, she emanated from a pagan society in which she was a princess.

Ruth married a Jewish settler in her birthplace. On his death she insisted in accompanying her mother-in-law, Naomi, on her return to Israel. At first, her mother-in-law discouraged her but found Ruth to be adamant in her desire to

become part of her people. From this exchange between the two women, some of the principles of conversion are learned. Maimonides cites Ruth as the example of a sincere convert who demonstrates that the motivation is not for money, prestige, fear or for the love of a Jewish partner, but rather for the sublime concepts of the faith. ⁽¹⁵⁾

Although Ruth was originally inspired by her intimate association with her first husband and then her bonding with his mother, her experience adds a new dimension to that of Abraham – the acceptance of ethnicity as well as religion.

It has been seen in the cases that were studied that exposure to Jewish people and the formation of close association with them has inspired a decision to pursue conversion.

1.5.3 A modern Abraham

The information obtained from this remarkable case study emanates from the autobiography of *Abraham Isaac Carmel (formerly known as Charles Cox)* entitled, "*So strange my path*". The passages quoted here are extracted from the book "Becoming a Jew" by Maurice Lamm.

In 1943, he was ordained as *Father Cox* in the St. Mary's Catholic Seminary. After a short service in the priesthood, he entertained doubts about his own religion and relinquished his position. He then began to examine Judaism and decided to identify himself with the ancient faith that had miraculously survived the most powerful attempts to destroy it. Cox claims to have become the first fully ordained priest in almost 1000 years to be received into traditional Judaism.

But the transformation of *Father Cox* to *Abraham Isaac Carmel* exemplifies the arduous passage along the long road to conversion. Carmel draws a comparison between the attitudes towards conversion on the part of the Church

and that of Judaism. The former makes no secret of its readiness to convert 10,000 converts a year in Great Britain but Anglo-Jewry is “*scared to death*” to publicise even a single conversion. He appreciated, however, that their apprehension emanated from the psychology of living under the shadow of the dominant faith, the power of which Anglo-Jewry was desirous to placate. He writes,

“Whereas it had taken me five months to become a Catholic, it took me 5 years to become a Jew”.

Despite the ideal motive which Carmel had for conversion, his sincerity and devotion to pursue the course and his high standard of Judaic knowledge, he felt bitterly rejected by the society of his adoption. This he expresses in poignant terms.

“I doubt whether any human being since the dawn of recorded history has felt more isolated”.

Despite his bitterness he concludes,

“My discovery of Judaism and my almost superhuman efforts to become one with the Jewish people constitute the only really worthwhile achievement of my life. It is the only area in which I feel no regrets and, if I had a thousand lives to live, I would want to succeed in this one goal at the expense, if necessary, of all others”.

1.6 Chapter outline

This chapter has covered the distance between “Abraham” (the patriarch) and the modern “Abraham” (*Abraham Isaac Carmel*). In the *Ethics of the Fathers* it is said,

"With ten trials our father Abraham was tried and he stood firm in them all, to make known how great was the love of our father Abraham for G-d".⁽¹⁶⁾

Between the ancient and the modern Abraham stand the converts with their trials and challenges, commitments and achievements, which have varied in different personal and historical circumstances.

This introduction presented a model and a theory of conversion to Judaism. Its title, *"The long road to conversion"*, explained how a potential entrant to Judaism enters a non-evangelical system which does not readily open its doors and the reasons why. Stage by stage, this encounter is examined.

The following chapter traces the history of conversion from Biblical times and assembles fragmentary evidence available as to the Medieval periods bringing the reader to more recent times when the technology of recording data becomes more and more sophisticated, culminating in the history of the phenomenon on the South African scene.

Chapter 3 presents the principal Halakhic issues which will affect the central topic, drawing upon Talmudic and other classical sources and reflecting, too, the most up-to-date opinions which relate to its application. Certain case studies appear in this section.

Chapter 4 localises the topic, in terms of a statistical analysis and interpretation together with the development of policies held by the *Batei Dinim* in South Africa. This is where the Beth Din archives come to life.

Chapter 5 highlights Durban as a model, chiefly to observe post conversion. Statistics are drawn from a local questionnaire representing a sample of the

outlook of both convert and the surrounding community. A prime advantage of this model lies in the fact that the parties in question are known to me.

The final chapter is an attempt to present some conclusions and recommendations as well as the results of the questionnaire to the Rabbis. These findings will be presented to the Beth Din of South Africa for their perusal and, hopefully, their implementation.

CHAPTER 2

2.1 HISTORY OF CONVERSION

The subject expressly nominated is part and parcel of a parent topic. Its magnitude has been traced historically to Abraham who is referred to as the first patriarch. Geographically, the issue extends from its middle-eastern origin, across Biblical frontiers and, following the dispersion of the Jews, communities spring up in various places. Sometimes they persist. On other occasions they are transplanted elsewhere. It will be seen that there is hardly a time or place where proselytisation to Judaism does not manifest itself as a matter of import.

An aerial view of the study will reveal two principal but diverse areas where conversion has taken place. The first consists of the Biblical period and its immediate successor, the Talmudic Age. And the other is the modern era in which dimension falls the South African model.

There is also the chronology in between these major historical poles. Investigation of this time-span covering nearly 2 millennia, however, is far more complicated than the gathering of information from the scriptural accounts on the one hand and the contemporary inquiry period where data can be utilised.

Nevertheless, a synthesis of available information relating to these centuries in question will, together with the Bible and Talmud, provide an essential historical background to the central theme of this essay and the effect that the history has upon the convert in the model presented in the previous chapter.

2.1.1 *The conversion of the Israelites : A historical turning point*

Between Abraham, the progenitor of Torah based Judaism and Ruth, the epitome of the righteous proselyte, there has taken place a crucial event,

which resembles a national conversion. The parties involved are direct descendants of the founding patriarch. They are a branch of his family, which are clearly identifiable as Hebrews and Israelites.

Whilst in Egypt, prior to their enslavement, they dwell there as prominent affluent citizens though in several respects culturally different from their neighbours. In contrast to Egyptian polytheism, the Hebrews have inherited the monotheistic Abrahamic tradition, though they are not immune to surrounding heathenism, even less so during the bicentennial of their bondage.

Part of their subsequent adjustment to the acceptance of Torah following their emancipation is the rejection of all traces of Egyptian religion. Moreover, the governing monotheistic legacy is only the primary foundation of the total Torah lifestyle by which they are commissioned to live.

The Midrash ascribes to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob private revelation and acceptance of the entire Torah. It is predetermined that their offspring will do likewise and the liberation from serfdom becomes the appointed opportunity, setting a scenario for the transformation about to take place. Leadership falls upon Moses but his Israelite followers have felt the degradation of servitude and are now called upon to commit themselves to the role of *"a kingdom of priests and a holy nation"*.⁽¹⁾

Just as Abraham, their forefather, initiates the *"grass roots"* Judaism, so are the Israelites at Mount Sinai pioneering the practice of Torah. Whilst this founding conversion of 600 000 souls is hitherto unprecedented, their mixed emotions can be likened to the psycho-sociological interaction of subsequent proselytes to the undertaking. The plight of the ancient Israelites, both in the physical journey to Sinai and their subsequent passage to Canaan, characterised the long road to conversion. Although the appointees for the Sinaitic experience were already a composite national entity, the legacy of Torah was not to be limited exclusively to their descendants but to all who would acquire the values and principles of its teachings. That the heritage of

Torah was not a purely genetic phenomenon is brought down by Midrashic sources in a way explained by Rabbi Lamm (1991:104),

"It is said that all Jews were there – past, present and those yet unborn. Abraham's descendants were there, masses of Egyptians who fled with them and converted were there; Ruth, the convert, was there; Rabbi ben Bag Bag, the converted Talmudic sage of the 3rd century, was there; the king of the Khazars, who converted in the 8th century, was there; Obadiah, the noted convert of the 12th century, was there; a young woman, who converted in Los Angeles last year was there."

Ultimately, the Israelites are to possess the territory promised to Abraham. In ancient Israel, Jewish courts based on the application of Torah become functionally operative. The issue of intermarriage and conversion arise from their interaction with the neighbouring states.

During the monarchy of David and Solomon, a *moratorium* was placed on conversion to repel an overwhelming demand to partake of its advantages. There were, however, makeshift courts, which did admit a significant number of applicants. Legitimate courts, however, did not ostracize them but they did not endorse "pirate" conversions. Rather they gave them the opportunity to prove their sincerity over a period of time, before accepting them. It is recorded by Maimonides⁽²⁾ that the wives of Samson and Solomon were amongst those who sought proselytisation during this period but he ascribes to these women ulterior motives, as compared with Ruth who is the model for sincerity.

Already the distinction in the motivation of proselytes and the issue of outmarriage was beginning to influence the policies of the juridical authorities of the time. Another significant development in this area took place when the Israelites returned from the Babylonian captivity in 457 BCE under the leadership of Ezra, the scribe. Ezra, however, witnessed a low religious morale present in the area. One of the major crises, which he beheld, was

intermarriage. Amongst his reforms was his injunction to allow people to divorce their Gentile wives. He did not recommend conversion as a solution.

2.1.2 Conversion en masse

Although Judaism has established a culture of non-evangelism, the long and varied chronicle of the Jewish people has, on rare occasions, included extensions of its religious confines by mass conversion.

There is, too, a record of conversion by coercion, exercised during the period of Jewish sovereignty over the land of Israel, namely the proselytisation of the neighbouring Idumeans or Edomites. These were descendants of Esau, (alternatively called Edom), the twin brother of Jacob. Scripture demonstrates the arch-enmity that was to grow between the siblings, Jacob and Esau. Christian Hebraist, G.A. Smith (1941:128) writes (as quoted by Slotki),

"From the far days when their ancestors wrestled in the womb of Rebekah to the ... era when John Hyrcanus dragged the Idumeans beneath the yoke of the law, the two peoples scorned, hated and scourged each other with a relentlessness that finds no analogy between kindred and neighbour nations anywhere in history."

John Hyrcanus, third son of Simon the Maccabee, ascended the throne of Israel in 134 BCE. Halpern (1948:32) describes how this monarch marched against the sizeable Idumean community, compelling them either to convert to Judaism or be expelled from the country. They opted for proselytisation and from thence were regarded as Jews but, as Halpern points out, this forcible conversion was, at a later stage, to have fatal consequences for the Jews.

In the meantime, as demonstrated by Roth (1953:77) this policy of coercive conversion was still in vogue in the reign of Hyrcanus' successor, Aristobulus. When he enlarged the boundaries even further north, the rest of the Galileans who were vanquished were likewise subjected to a decree of proselytisation.

In describing the extent of the Jewish State, Roth (1953:77) continues:

“Other parts of the country became completely Judaised, their inhabitants being counted henceforth an integral part of the Jewish people. The Edomites, hereditary enemies for untold generations, came to exercise an important, and at time preponderant, influence upon external affairs.”

The outcome of this development is summed up by Max I. Dimont (1962:96),

“In 37 BCE ... the final twist of irony had occurred. The Idumeans who had forcibly converted to Judaism eighty years previously ... now ruled the people who had converted them.”

This was when Antipas, a descendant of the proselyte Idumeans, was appointed by the Romans as a potentate over Judea. His policy was to promote the Greek religious culture, Hellenism. This was received favourably by the Galilean converts who, in their ignorance, thought of it as part of Judaism.

Laytner (1996:189) gives, too, as a reason, the cosmopolitan nature of Hellenism, as a vehicle for receptivity of new religious concepts.

This trend is not difficult to understand in terms of an interesting development, which found place in the centuries at the dawn of the current era. Whilst these converts to Judaism, as well as home born Jews, were attracted to Hellenism, the converse was not untrue. Dimont describes the impression made by the Jewish lifestyle on hundreds and thousands of Greeks and Romans who opted for the non-sexualized symbols of Judaism and respected the dignity of the Jewish deity, as well as their scholastic ideals as compared with the paganistic materialism.

As Dimont (1962:113) writes,

"In the two century span between 100 BCE and 100 CE, thousands of Sabbath candles flickered in Grecian and Roman homes".

Estimated statistics supplied by Dimont reveal that, in the first century of the common era, more than a tenth of the Roman Empire was Jewish, amounting to 6 000 000 adherents to Judaism, of which only 4 000 000 emanated from a direct line of Jewish descent. He adds that conversions would have been even more popular but for the strict kashruth laws and the requirements of circumcision. These observances, in particular, were relinquished by the early Christians who attracted a vast number of potential Jewish converts along with numerous pagans to a religion which was generally less demanding than Judaism. Dimont (1962:115) also refers to the role of the Septuagint, the first translation of the Hebrew Bible into the Greek vernacular which is dated around the 3rd century BCE, and which allowed for conversions to be spread by the written word.

It was not long after that, that Jews suffered their most formidable calamity – the destruction of the Temple in the year 70. The final suppression of the Bar Kochba revolt in 135 brought with it the edict of Hadrian prohibiting the most cherished Jewish religious practices.

Roth explains that, several years later, the successor of Hadrian, Antoninus Pius restored freedom of religious conscience, but only to allow the Jews to practise their observances within their own boundaries whilst throughout the empire conversion was decreed a capital offense. As Roth (1953:114) states,

"From this enactment may be dated the close of missionary activities of Judaism on a large scale".

G. Foote Moore (1927:339) adds that this type of group conversion, imperialistically effected, would be regarded with disapproval by the Rabbis of the Tannaitic period

2.1.3 *The influence of the rise of the Christian Church upon conversion to Judaism*

Studies of the Biblical/Talmudic age reveal a time when autonomous Jewish Government could widely attract and, in some cases, even force proselytisation. As the people Israel became dispersed they lost not only their territory but a great deal of political influence. In many places they became a totally subjugated folk, struggling merely for the right to pursue their own religion. Even when freedom of worship was secured they encountered restrictions as to missionary activity, or even prohibitions on the acceptance of converts. Moreover Christianity was to gain considerable mileage as an evangelical force.

At times when Jews lived under enlightened circumstances, which allowed for free religious activity, the reaction of the Jews themselves to applicants for conversion became an essential factor in determining the history of the topic. It is interesting to reflect for a moment how the early conversions to Judaism, Christianity and later Islam met up with a metamorphosis of originally idolatrous cultures. In ancient times, religious systems were characterised by worship of heavenly bodies, nature or images, which were believed to have magical powers. Except for perpetually pre-literate societies, which have remained isolated these modes of worship tended to be overtaken by other religions with which they came in contact. Education, together with outreach, was to succeed in drawing away numerous peoples from their paganism.

An account has been given how a large number of former idolaters found themselves disenchanted with their tradition and turned their attention to the monotheism of their Jewish neighbours except for the demand for circumcision and dietary restrictions. For that category of convert, Christianity appeared with an ideal dispensation. It provided a monotheistic foundation

but absolved its adherents from obligations and prohibitions peculiar to Judaism. Failing to win over the Jews, Christianity preached its doctrine to the Gentile nations and gradually emerged as a movement separate from Judaism.

Lamm (1991:434) explains,

"The break with circumcision was a break with the peoplehood idea".

As Christianity began to gain popularity it had to deal with the current political system. Rosenbloom (1982:61) points out that Christianity had not been a threat to Judaism but its doctrine, coupled with its evangelical activity, was now confronting a traditional religious infrastructure upon which the welfare of Rome was dependent. Only the latter deigned to fragment itself. What was initially perceived as a threat soon gained recognition as an effective mechanism for unifying the vast expanse of territories. During the reign of Constantine (327-37) Christianity was instituted as the official religion of the Roman Empire, and anticipated to contain a compassionate morality which would appeal to the wide varying range of its subjects. By this time Judaism not only lost ground as a faith which enticed proselytes but had to contend with Christianity as a potent political force against which it had to struggle for its survival.

"The very missionary zeal", writes Rosenbloom (1982:61) "which Christianity learned from mother Judaism and which led to its growth, was made illegal for Jews"

By 339, marriages between Jews and Christians were prohibited. This was only the beginning of more severe legislation aimed at decimating the influence of Judaism and which persisted until the disappearance of the Inquisition in the 19th century. Nevertheless, with the epoch-making rise of Christianity and the emergence of Islam, Judaism was still able to obtain converts, though clearly within the strictest limitations.

A resume contained in *Encyclopaedia Judaica :1187* shows that the reduced number of proselytes in Christian countries had endangered their lives to the extent that they were forced to flee to lands outside the domain of the Church. The article goes on to explain how it was both legal and common to proselytise Christians living in Muslim-ruled countries, though there is no information that Muslims themselves converted to Judaism. These converts were mostly slaves whose owners felt directed by Jewish law to circumcise and immerse. It could be assumed that many of them were absorbed into Jewish communities. So, too, were the offspring of the female slaves in that category accepted as fully-fledged converts.

There are also records of isolated conversions during this era including Obadiah (formerly Johannes) who corresponded with Maimonides. The difficulty for the researcher arises in establishing the flow of historical continuity from the Biblical and Talmudic periods which, like the modern era, serves a lucid database. Scholars agree that information on conversions to Judaism from the post-talmudic period till almost the present century tends to be fragmentary.

2.1.4 *The Khazars*

Within the disarray of available information centering around mediaeval conversions there is an interesting milestone in the history of proselytisation which has succeeded in capturing scholastic attention and upon which substantial evidence has been gathered. The mass conversion of the Khazar people stands out as voluntary mass proselytisation to Judaism, the motives for which could be likened to an intellectual search for truth in religion.

Roth (1953:287) points out that Judaism had, at times, made an impression on some of the semi-barbaric tribes in Europe. The most notable were the Khazars, a people of mixed descent, mainly Mongolians, living in an area which is now the Ukraine. Roth is referring to the early 8th century when the Khazarian ruler, King Bulan, formally adopted Judaism and was emulated by

many of his aristocracy. His descendant, Obadiah, even more zealously propagated the faith, establishing Synagogues and attracting Jewish scholars from abroad to settle in his country. The entire governing class accepted Judaism and so did a substantial number of the Khazar people. Freedom of religious conscience, however, remained intact. In 965, when the Prince of Kiev conquered the territory, the Jewish Khazar kingdom ceased to exist. Their descendants were scattered but some of them remained devoutly Jewish and Roth (1953:288) concludes,

“... and, to the present, the Mongoloid features common among the Jews of Eastern Europe are, in all probability, a heritage from the ‘proselytes of righteousness’ ten centuries ago.”

Mediaeval Hebrew poet, Jehudah Halevi, compiled a philosophic work known as the Khuzari, written in the form of a discussion between the Khazarian king and representatives of the three major religions, which culminates in his decision to opt for Judaism. This discourse, compiled after the demise of the Khazar kingdom, is a poetic reconstruction of what is said to have actually taken place during one of the unusual instances when a conversion to Judaism took place on a communal basis.

2.1.5 *The position during the enlightened era*

Whereas the Western World of the mediaeval period was characterised by selective availability of inter-religious knowledge and control of its release, the Modern era is quite the antithesis. Between the earlier mediaeval period and the enlightenment era, which begins with 17th century intellectualism, restrictions against Jewish proselytisation intensify. There, too, evidence is scanty. Records of proselytisations, accusations and punishment are more palpable than conversionist prototypes. Consequently, the defensiveness on the part of Jewry in the Christian world increased, manifesting itself in a resistance to proselytisation, an attitude which persisted long after institutionalised prohibition against the practice had dwindled.

In the Encyclopaedia Judaica article (1190) it is demonstrated,

"It appears that most Jews not only refrained outwardly from engaging in proselytising activities as the result of external pressures and penalties but the attitude of Judaism itself in that period formed an important factor."

Although the general attitude of Judaism towards conversion was characterised by resistance and suspicion, there was, as shown by Rosenbloom (1982:74), a parallel development finding its roots.

"Increasingly, however, Jewish law and attitudes began to alter in response to the general hostility to Judaism. There remains some controversy concerning the pace and nature of the changes."

The ongoing paradox, however, always followed the issue of conversion. In the introductory chapter I drew attention to opposing and encouraging trends towards proselytisation to Judaism on the part of its foremost spokesmen and the following section, which looks into the Halakhic aspects, dramatises the conflict. There was never a unitary standpoint. Some welcomed them. Others regarded them with a measure of disdain even after they had converted.

Even in Talmudic times, however, attitudes towards receiving incoming members of the faith were swayed by accompanying historical circumstances of which the period ranging from the mediaeval era till the relatively modern times proved a classic example in that it presented a reticence towards proselytisation, such as that reflected in Jewish religious philosophy.

The most dominant stance against proselytisation was that of Rabbi Solomon Luria in the mid 16th century. Acknowledging the law that a persistent proselyte would have to be accepted, he said this referred to a different place and condition. That Jews were living in exile portended that conversion would jeopardise their already precarious position. Following on Luria's reasoning, the Jewish councils of Lithuania and Moravia warned of severe penalties for

attempts to proselytise or to protect converts. This was because they feared reprisals from the Gentile authorities who had frequently accused them of seeking proselytes.

2.1.6 *During the re-admission to England*

This fear thus engendered was to haunt attitudes towards the receiving of proselytes for some time, even when Jews began to enjoy a greater degree of liberty.

In 1656 during the reign of Cromwell Jews were re-admitted to England, three and a half centuries after their expulsion.

When the first community was founded in 1657 there were four converts in the congregation but its leaders feared that acceptance of proselytes was contrary to the conditions of the re-admission of Jews to England. Thus, the Anglo-Jewish community of the time took it upon themselves to enact an anti-conversionist constitution. Moreover, Jews felt that they might be included in the anti-Catholic agitation of the time. Amongst the rigid prohibitions promulgated by this community were the employment of a Christian domestic and the harbouring of a convert. As late as 1751, there was a refusal to recognise overseas conversions, for example in Holland, and expulsion by the community of anyone who aided and abetted such a conversion. Whilst this legislation continued into the 19th century Ashkenazi communities were beginning to accept converts. The first Sephardic conversion in England in 1877 opens the doors for further proselytisation.

This historical investigation will encounter further reluctance on the part of Sephardic communities to accept converts even as late as in present-day America and Argentina and Ashkenazi communities of the post mediaeval age did not appear much more compliant.

The mid 17th century will be seen as a crucial point in the chronology of global colonisation, including the Americas. As immigrant communities transplant

their respective cultures in new horizons, normative patterns are established and firmly cherished as traditional behaviour. This is what seems to have happened in the newly-formed Jewish communities in Cromwell's Britain, as expressed in the attitude towards converts and this will explain why England still stands as one of the most difficult places for conversion to Judaism. Its standard time-slot for the process can be up to five years.

Regarding English proselytisation there is one case in particular, which I should like to mention by quoting part of an article which I wrote in the local Synagogue bulletin (*Chadashot*). [Zekry (1992:8)]

"One of the stranger tales of conversion to Judaism which took place in England in the 18th century was that of an aristocrat named Lord George Gordon, a son of the Duke of Gordon, who was elected to Parliament and soon became embroiled in a controversy between Catholics and Protestants. His involvement in the bitter religious dispute led to his investigation of Judaism and eventually a decision to become Jewish. Rabbinical authorities in London – taught to accept only those converts who demonstrate a sincere belief in Judaism's teachings – tried to discourage him. But at the age of 30, George Gordon was circumcised and officially changed his name to Israel ben Abraham. He grew a long beard and became virtually fanatical about all religious observances, often rebuking fellow Jews who were not equally meticulous about rulings on religion. Within a year he was tried for libel against the British and French governments and was sentenced to house arrest in Newgate. In his home he surrounded himself with learned Jews from abroad, insisting that they too wear their beards long and maintain strict rules of Kashrut. He also organised a daily minyan in his apartment. Gordon was later imprisoned and died at 36."

2.1.7 *New worlds and new trends*

In what was called the “New World” many former European communities made their new home, some to escape various religious persecutions in the land of their birth and others to seek fresh economic opportunity. America enticed as a locality, where new freedom could be enjoyed.

Ausubel (1953:270) writes,

“From the day Columbus discovered the Western Hemisphere, Jews have been intimately bound up with its destiny. But it was not until 1654 that the first Jewish settlement in North America was established in the Dutch colony of Nieuw Amsterdam.”

This milestone demarcating the original American-Jewish domicile in a region, which was re-named New York, finds place within an interesting historical context, which was to radically affect the future of the world. At the dawn of the 17th century two major powers, Britain and the Netherlands, competed for trade with India and the Far East. One of the best known enterprises formed for this purpose was the British East India Company. Its powers far exceeded those of a mere trading concern.

“Charters granted by Charles II gave the company the right to coin money, raise armies, form alliances and exercise civil and criminal jurisdiction.”
(*Readers Digest*, 1978: 605)

Ultimately, the company engaged in joint control of India with the British Government until the latter absorbed all such administrative functions following the Indian mutiny in 1858. At the same time, its rival, the Dutch East India Company, held similar sway in the areas of its operation and this is where the early history of the Jews in America has bearing on that of South African Jewry. Having drawn attention to the first recorded Jewish person in the Cape, an unnamed interpreter for the English East India Company, Chief Rabbi Israel Abrahams (1955:2), explains,

“The rise of the Dutch East India Company in the 17th century helped to form another Jewish link with South Africa. By the time Van Riebeeck undertook his historic voyage to the Cape, the Jews of Holland held a considerable share of the Company’s stock.”

Abrahams points out that there was a striking difference between the respective religious policies of the Dutch East India Company and the Dutch West India Company. The latter encouraged Jews to settle in Brazil and live according to their religious tenets. Servants of the Dutch East India Company had to be Protestant. Thus in the 17th and 18th centuries, whilst the Dutch East India Company held sway in the Cape, only a trickle of baptised Jews were admissible in that region.

For the Jews who had found a home in 17th century Brazil, their welcome was short-lived. The overthrow of the Dutch regime by the Portuguese led to the institution of the Spanish Inquisition. It was from 23 refugees from the system that the founding Jewish congregation in Nieuw Amsterdam developed and grew. It is during the latter half of the 17th century that evidence is found of conversionist activity of the type that dates back to the Talmudic era, namely the conversion of slaves owned by Jews.

Encyclopaedia Judaica (1192) relates how “during the first quarter of the 18th century a community of German Baptists, in what is now Schaefferstown, Pennsylvania, voluntarily ‘Judaized’. They observed dietary laws and the Sabbath, built a ‘schul’ and a home for their Hazzan from rough logs and in 1732 laid out a cemetery. This lasted from about 1720 to 1745.”

When it comes, however, to conversion on the individual level, here, too, there is a lack of availability of records. Moreover, it appears that many congregations were bereft of authorised leadership and properly constituted conversion boards. Dana Evan Kaplan (1997:91) describes a typical position existing in the late 18th century:

“Yet, despite the independent nature of some American synagogue boards and congregations, volumes of queries were dispatched to European batei dinim. These usually focused on conversion, especially where conversion was linked to marriage, where it was essential that it be approved by a recognised authority”.

Kaplan relates the dilemma encountered by frontier congregations which had to acquire a self-reliant decision making process, as an alternative to protracted and uncertain delays awaiting response from the *Batei Dinim* of London and Amsterdam.

By the end of the 19th century, whilst the Orthodox appeared resistant to conversion, certain Reform Rabbis were looking to expand the boundaries of Judaism. According to Rosenbloom (1982:132) the Reform Central Conference of American Rabbis was not hostile to conversion, but only took minimal steps to encourage it and refers to a *“Manual for Proselytes”* published by Rabbi Joseph Rauch in 1927. From the account of Jewish missionary activities supplied by Rosenbloom (1982:133) these appear to be mostly the work of individual Reform Rabbis. In 1958, leading Conservative Rabbi, Robert Gordis, convened a conference of national Jewish religious bodies together with Rabbis, to discuss the subject of Jewish missionary activity. Gordis looked to Japan as a launching pad, his principal motivation being replenishment of the Jewish population, which was decimated by the Holocaust. Another such missionary society, *The Jewish Information Society of America*, was founded in Chicago in 1962 and was composed of many prominent Reform and Conservative Rabbis and laymen. It appeared to last 10 years after which, says Rosenbloom (1982:134),

“Like all such efforts, it floundered because of lack of general interest among Jews”.

Even this extent of Jewish missionary activity in the USA has been all but unknown elsewhere since the early Talmudic times and certainly non-existent in the South African model even in the Reform congregation. One may ask

to what extent have these overtures swelled its Jewish population and what percentage of the converts in the USA is drawn from this group.

As regards any calculations regarding conversion itself, Rosenbloom's answer (1982:136) does not shed much light when he says that,

"The absence of a central Jewish secular or religious organisation, and generally inadequate statistical record-keeping by the numerous national Jewish organisations of all kinds in this area, make an estimate of the number of converts to Judaism most tenuous".

2.1.8 A Sephardic ban on converts

It has been mentioned earlier that the first Jewish settlers in Cromwell's England and in America were Sephardim. In the former case these were of Spanish and Portuguese origin. The first American Jews were Dutch, originally also of Spanish-Portuguese origin but who had fled the Spanish Inquisition to Holland, where they were granted greater measures of religious freedom. There were also refugees from late 15th and early 16th century Spain who made their way to the Mediterranean belt of North Africa. Others went to the Near and Middle East and integrated with the Jews of these countries. In a general sense, Oriental Jews, too, have come to be regarded as Sephardim.

One such community migrated from Aleppo, Syria in the early part of this current century and settled in New York. Over the years they were joined by further members of their former countrymen, as well as Jews from Damascus, Egypt and Lebanon. In a series of articles entitled *"The Conversion Crisis, (1990:49)* the present Syrian-Sephardic Jewish community is described by S. Zevulun Lieberman as *"one of the strongest homogeneous non-Hassidic Orthodox Jewish communities in the United States."* Citing a figure of 50000 souls, situated currently in Flatbush, Brooklyn, Lieberman, writing in 1990, gives details of a close knit social pattern committed to Orthodoxy,

maintaining a wide range of Jewish religious families, including an independent Rabbinical Council.

In another Syrian community in Argentina a decision was taken in 1928, and approved by the Ashkenazi communities, of a totally “closed door” policy towards converts. This prohibition was supported by Rabbi A.I. Kook, the chief Rabbi of Palestine and is still upheld by the Orthodox of Argentina. In consequence of that decree, the Brooklyn Beth Din of the Syrian Jewish community issued its 1935 proclamation. Their Rabbinical proclamation of February 1935 did not repudiate the validity of any specific proselytisation. Only the convert and Sephardic spouse would not be able to qualify for membership in that community and their children would be precluded from marrying in their synagogues. The ban did not, however, apply retrospectively. In a document issued in 1946 and re-affirmed in 1971 entitled “*A subsequent clarification of the original proclamation*”, the premises of the Congregation were declared forbidden to any convert for religious or social uses and so, too, their cemetery for burial.

Authorisation for implementing these restrictions was claimed from Talmudic and subsequent Halakhic sources, together with the right of a community to enforce regional prohibitions. Lieberman (1990:50) demonstrates that the Sephardic community’s approach is proof of the power of a *kehilla* to protect its heritage and traditions, even though it may not be reproducible across all American Jewish communities.

2.2 The Israeli scene

In a publication which I distributed to the entire Jewish community of Durban - “*A Guide to the Perplexed : Orthodox or Reform*” (1994), I made the point that Orthodox converts, specifying my own conversion body, have international reciprocity, and are recognised locally, overseas and in Israel. I also stressed that for all religious purposes, of which one is marriage, the Orthodox Rabbinate of Israel is the sole governing power. Thus the Reform conversion is not recognised in Israel. The paradox that presents itself is that Reform

converts, as well as their children may, on the one hand, be eligible to enter Israel by virtue of "The Law of Return" but, on the other hand, their Jewish status is not recognised by the governing religious body which is Orthodox. Any attempt to survey historically the attitude to conversion in the USA revealed intense pro-activity on the part of the Reform and later the Conservative movements towards conversion, as well as their interest in missionary activity. Moreover, intermarriage figures amongst the US Jewish population have reached above and beyond the 50% mark, thus precipitating the demand for conversion, much of which is met by non-Orthodox authorities. And, in turn, the State of Israel is faced with a demand for their acknowledgement.

The resultant crisis is currently dominating Israel's politics. Prior to these developments there was always a tendency in Israel towards greater leniency than in the Diaspora, since the potential converts, most of whom are either partners or children of a mixed marriage, had greater scope for absorption into the Jewish faith. Normally there was the year's delay between the application and its consideration and the requirement of the candidate to observe the tenets of Orthodox conversion.

From information supplied by Rosenbloom (1982:131) between 1948 and 1968, 2288 proselytes were accepted by the religious courts of Israel out of a total of 4010 applicants. Beginning with 1970, greater leniency was exhibited due to both the increased immigration from Russia, where intermarriage is prevalent and the amended Law of Return. The Knesset adopted a clause to include in the Law of Return the partner's children and grandchildren of mixed marriages, though they were not Halakhically Jewish. A second provision of the amendment granted registration as Jews to Reform and Conservative conversions from abroad whilst those in Israel could only achieve Jewish status by Orthodox Halakhic conversion.

In 1971 the Ministry for Religious Affairs initiated instructional courses for prospective proselytes in Israel at Orthodox kibbutzim where candidates would receive an intensive course in Judaism. For those who did not

undertake an Orthodox conversion and wanted to marry in Israel there emerged a legal complication. The only type of marriage that can take place in Israel is of a religious nature. Thus the State will only issue a certificate in lieu of a ceremony performed by an Orthodox Rabbi, in the case of Jewish persons. Such endorsement is not forthcoming in the event of a marriage sanctioned by Conservative or Reform organisations and this is the position, which has been petitioned for revision. Earlier this year an attempt at resolution was proposed by the Ne'eman Commission. It follows on the 1971 plan for the schools for intending proselytes but does not restrict the education solely to an Orthodox conversion programme. The student may also choose a Conservative or Reform instructor.

This concept of a joint institute embracing the three major denominations of Judaism has government funding, as did the curriculum of 1971. The completion of the process, however, is an appearance before a conversion court which is all Orthodox in its composition. The Principal of the Institute, Professor Binyamin Ish-Shalom, is confident that these tribunals will treat graduates like any other conversion candidate.

Whilst relative leniency is expected, Conservative and Reform sources are not happy that the final decision is ultimately governed by a totally Orthodox panel. Moreover, the Chief Rabbinate itself is opposed to co-operation with non-Orthodox movements. Understandably, this crisis, which is still unresolved, stands as a highly emotional issue threatening to sever the bonds between the Diaspora and Israel, which have hitherto been of great strength and it remains a matter of high priority on the agenda of the Israeli Knesset.

2.3 The South African Scene

Contrasted with the assembling of previous chronological data appertaining to proselytisations in other parts of the world, the search for like information on the South African scene is facilitated by the relatively short time span in which the phenomenon finds place. At the same time, there is a dynamic ongoing

development dealing with history still to be made rather than that which has been and gone.

For this reason, my own involvement takes up a challenge. In time, another attempt may well be made to present this issue in like manner and updated. It is my intention that this contribution will serve as groundwork for such an endeavour. My prediction, however, is that forthcoming manifestations of the proselytisation process will be bound up with the future of South Africa. Conversions to Judaism do not occur in a vacuum. Invariably, the presence and/or consciousness of a virile Jewish community plays its essential part. In South Africa, this has undoubtedly been true.

There is no evidence of conversion to Judaism in South Africa prior to the arrival of Jews in this country, the first group being 1820 settlers. In fact, it is only in the mid-19th century that Jewish religious activity becomes palpable as the former scattered handful of Jews form themselves into congregations. Only then does the need for proselytisation present itself.

In his thesis on South African Jewry, Simon included a chapter entitled "*Proselysation in the South African Jewish Community*" in which he traces the history of the topic from its beginning till 1933. Simon writes (1996:135),

"By and large it seems that the Jewish attitude towards proselytism had always been inversely proportionate to prevailing feelings of comfort, security and self confidence. When the community felt itself under threat spiritually or physically it closed ranks and resisted the would be proselyte. A community sure of itself and its strength (even if mistakenly so) was more likely to be willing to receive new adherents. This phenomenon has been and continues to be precisely reproduced in microcosm in South Africa."

The late Professor Abrahams, former Chief Rabbi of the Cape Province and South West Africa (1955:49) recounts the earliest background of conversion in South Africa. By the mid 19th century the paucity of the Jewish community of South Africa, then concentrated in the Cape but scattered throughout the

length and breadth of the colony, created susceptibility towards intermarriage. The minute of the *Tikvath Israel* congregation in Cape Town considered conversion as a solution and wrote to the London Beth Din for a mandate to proceed in that direction. This suggestion met with strong rejection as it was felt that the already high outmarriage rate would only be aggravated by the application of such a proposal.

Twenty years later the congregation still opposed conversion, other than applicants expressly approved by the Chief Rabbi. Since the process could not be completed in the absence of a Mikvah, the three intending proselytes jointly paid the cost of erecting the ritual bath.

The writer is referring to the pioneering days of South African Jewry as a composite social group and congregation. Since then, the Jewish population of South Africa was significantly supplemented by subsequent immigration. In his contribution to the compilation "*The Jews in South Africa: A History*" Gershater (1955:59) writes,

"The Jewish community of South Africa as it exists today was largely fashioned by the immigration of Eastern European Jews between 1881 and 1910."

He goes on to describe how they changed the face of South African Jewry from loosely bound congregations to the infrastructure that has been maintained ever since. Therein is seen a pivotal historical phenomenon not only affecting formidably the context evident on the position described above by Abrahams but greatly influencing the development of attitudes and procedures with regard to future conversion to Judaism in South Africa. The sociological structure of South Africa was to take on an established shape, previously unknown in the region.

Whilst the influx of East European Jewry at the turn of the century has decidedly made its impact, subsequent immigrants from that part of the world were not as numerous, nor influential. Dana Evan Kaplan (1998:72) points

out that few Holocaust survivors of Orthodox persuasion arrived on the shores of South Africa. Australian Jews, for instance, were greatly augmented by immigrants from Nazi occupied territories. In comparison, Kaplan describes the South African Jewish community as *“much more South African born than the Australian Jewish community is Australian born.”*

Jews had entered the country in the 17th Century as servants of the Dutch East India Company but since they had adopted the Christian faith, their original identity was to disappear. So, too, was to be the fate of many of the Jewish settlers of the first half-century in South Africa since the 1820s. Here, the motivation was not one of outward conversion. Rather, the tendency to intermarry described by Abrahams was to gravely affect the continuity as Jews of the earliest Jewish families in the country. It is interesting that this inquiry examines two distinct periods where the rate of interfaith mate selection becomes an issue. The first is the mid 19th Century where the early South African Jews find themselves dispersed throughout the length and breadth of the country, experiencing considerable limitations in finding a co-religionist as a marriage partner. For them, the conversion of the Gentile spouse is not readily available as a solution. On the other hand, there is the increased rate of intermarriage characterising the present century, as it advances towards the close of the current millenium. The factors, which bring this about, are totally different to those affecting the pioneers. Facilities for Jewish ritual, education and social life are prevalent and so, too, opportunities for marrying within the faith. On the other hand, the South African Jewish population has dwindled largely due to emigration and this could conceivably precipitate further intermarriage. Clearly, however, there are other influences reflecting the greater complexity of social structures in modern-day South Africa.

Unlike the previous century, where conversionist activity is discouraged, the present aggressively addresses the issue in an analytical manner, striking a balance between initial resistance and ready acceptance and will be seen to be reflected in the shifts of emphasis in the policies of the governing Beth Din at various times. To conceptualise the processes of intermarriage, and the

demand for conversion to Judaism on the local scene, requires insight into South African Jewry itself, as it was developed from the impact of Eastern European immigration in the latter 19th Century. The influx of Jews from these countries was still to take place on a large scale through the first half of the 20th Century, although somewhat stifled by a quota system introduced by the South African Government during the Hitler era when the demand for entry into the country was overwhelming. Copious Jewish communities throughout Eastern Europe were affectionately known as "der Heim" (Yiddish for "the home"). This frame of reference is not unlike the tendency of many other cultures to talk of "the old country" where there is a richness of traditions and customs. Many of the Eastern European Jews had resided in small predominantly Jewish societies. Whether by edict, or by choice, they maintained distance from their Gentile neighbours, vigorously adhering to Jewish religious life and learning. As they made their way to new worlds they transplanted their socio-religious culture, not without some adaptation and modification.

They are described in the work by Pergola/Dubb (1988:59) "*A socio-demographic profile of South African Jewry*" as "*a relatively closed group maintaining strict social, cultural, linguistic and religious boundaries.*" The selfsame report goes on to say that "*the South African Jewish community is relatively homogeneous in respect to its origins, religious patterns and commitment to the Zionist cause and Israel.*" The report gives the two major metropolitan centres as the main concentration of the Jewish community. Internationally, the South African Jewish community is recognised as "*a model of effective and disciplined organisation.*" Almost all its endeavours, religious or secular, are co-ordinated within a framework of national bodies, one of which is the Beth Din.

It is within the framework of a little more than a century dating back to a significant settlement of Jews in this country to the position as described by Pergola and Dubb, that the history of conversion in South Africa is traced by this essay. The development of the position outlined in the Pergola/Dubb report is discernible in the treatise supplied by Simon. Although the cut-off

point of his historical survey, including the conversion chapter, is 1935 the work was published in 1996. His summary and conclusion present an overview containing significant information, which forms a background to the topic at hand.

Simon points out (1996:182) that whereas in the USA between 1965 and 1989 there have been no less than 1830 books on American Jewish history, less than 1% of that figure appears with regard to publication of the history of South African Jewry. Moreover, I found that, within the historical sources available, the information on conversions was almost negligible barring the thesis by Simon, which takes us as far as 1933. The vast majority of data obtained on the subject appeared in the archives of the Beth Din. Throughout Simon's chapter on conversion, all material appertaining to the South African scene is drawn either from minutes of meeting or reports by local Jewish bodies. Addressing the cohesiveness of the South African Jewish community, Simon (1996:182) tells us,

"The community was not large enough to permit of schisms or the emergence of different trends of observance or religious practice."

He admits to "*breakaway congregations and temporary secessions*" but in all instances the same type of religious Judaism and East European content was maintained. From here, we begin to understand how Orthodox Judaism derived its strength and how conversionist activity could be centrally controlled except for isolated "private" proselytisation. Reform only comes onto the scene at the end of Simon's essay.

Also noticeable is a strong sense of Jewish identity on the part of the South African Jews and the low rate of assimilation, which was nurtured by the socio-political climate of the apartheid era, when group identity was promoted as a concept.

It would seem that the respect in which the South African Jew was held by his Gentile neighbour was contingent more on his adherence to his own socio-

religious culture than a quest for intimate inclusion in their respective societies.

Moreover, the role of the religion itself as a binding factor and the Synagogue proved itself a fundamental factor in re-inforcing the South African Jewish identity through the central role which it played even to the present.

There is, however, an indication of a tendency on the part of the South African Jew, several generations removed from his Eastern European predecessors, to look beyond his socio-religious milieu and these attitudes have decidedly affected the rate of intermarriage and the demand for conversion to Judaism and changes in residential patterns have also played their role.

The concentration of Jews in Johannesburg and Cape Town, as given earlier by Pergola and Dubb, is the culmination of trends that have taken place over decades. There was a time when South African Jewry fell within the term "*frontier societies*" coined by Eleazar and Medding (1983:8) which aptly describes both the position prior to the Gold Rush of 1886 as well as the subsequent preference which the East European immigrants showed towards farming and settlement in rural areas.

Simon (1996:184) describes the gravitation of Jews from small agricultural towns to the major cities. His thesis tells us how a Jew travelling through the country on business once stood a good chance of finding a congregation even in remote districts. These country communities, however, were destined to disappear. Today, for the most part, they are remembrances of the previous generation. They do, however, feature prominently in the archives of the Beth Din and many applications for conversion emanated from there. Whereas, in their heyday, Jewish communities in the country districts of South Africa were cohesive socio-religious centres, the progressive diminution of the Jewish population in these areas has led to the relative isolation of Jews still remaining there.

South African society itself, over the past century or more, has created conditions for, *inter alia*, the Jew, which have widely differed from many other regions. In South Africa there has been a notable absence of religious persecution or discriminatory legislation against the Jews or any other religious groups. Rather, religious activity has been encouraged and mutual respect for differing denominations has enjoyed protection.

It must be understood, however, that this does not mean there has not been anti-semitism. The war years, for instance, were characterised by the activities of the neo-Nazi *Ossewa Brandwag* which, on occasions, actually physically targeted Jews. Though this period has been highlighted and long remembered by South African Jewry as the apex of right wing anti-semitism, Shain (1998:3) traces the roots to a "*a consistent and widely shared Jewish stereotypes ... deeply embedded in the South African experience*". Whilst, since then, on a political level it has hardly gone further than mere sophistry, propaganda machinery has helped to bolster commonly held attitudes towards Jews and these stereotypes are indeed nurtured on the social level. Moreover, they increase in their practical manifestations when it comes to the workplace and social clubs. There were certain well-established firms, both commercial and professional, that were known not to enroll Jews into their employment. Up till quite recently The Durban Country Club tacitly rejected applications by Jews for membership. Therein lay some of the potential challenges in the light of Jewish-Gentile courtship, both on the part of the individual partners and their respective families and peer groups.

A further factor, which emerges in the South African Jewish culture, is the relationship to Zionist ideology. Gideon Shimoni (1980:27) writes,

"In the comparative perspective of the English speaking countries there is no more distinct feature of the South African Jewry than its overwhelmingly Zionist connection".

It is not surprising therefore that Zionism has proved itself an important unifying factor in the annals of South African Jewry, bringing together both its

religious and secular components, thus making its impact on the Jewish identity.

The war years, too, made their mark, particularly as they were related to the formidable onslaughts upon Jews in Europe. Many South African Jewish families underwent the distress of knowing that their close relatives were amongst the victims. With the involvement of South Africa in World War II, a great deal of family life was temporarily disrupted, as scores of Jewish South Africans joined up to fight in far-off areas. Inevitably, a major war affects social morals and for the Jew there was the additional issue of the Holocaust which caused a questioning of previously held values, not the least of them attitude towards religion. In the case studies I encountered instances where certain Jews had married out of the faith as an act of anger in response to the Holocaust and, having second thoughts at a later stage, sought conversion of spouses and children.

At the same time Jewry saw achievement of a Zionist ideology shortly after the war. The emergence of the Israeli State has provided a stimulus for unity between both the religious and the secular Jew, reaffirming an already strong sense of ethnic identity. For many, however, the attachment to Judaism shifted from a religious sentiment to a Zionist one. Although separatist racial policies on the one hand strengthened ethnic affiliations, the political route pursued by the government of the day became open to a great deal of virile debate. Many, including Jews, were opposed to racial segregation, some to a greater extent than others. The very concept of socio-ethnic affiliation itself was thrown into question, giving rise to a variety of viewpoints which became accentuated as the Apartheid system began to give way to the present dispensation.

Gradual falling off in religious observance progressively weakened the ethnic fabric of Jewish life. To some extent religious outreach has acted as a counterbalancing factor. These movements reawakened religious consciousness and created a framework to which a number of modern-day

converts to Judaism, together with their respective partners, have successfully adapted.

Simon has pointed out that within the period covered by his essay Jewish religious standards were homogeneously accepted, if not practised, until the appearance of Reform on the South African scene. From the regions of its predominance, chiefly the USA, Reform was to spread its wings on a universal basis to all countries where there was a significant Jewish presence, including South Africa.

The training centre in the USA for the Reform clergy has been the Hebrew Union College. In an account given by Rabbi Sherman, Rabbi Emeritus of Cape Town Jewish Congregation in the *Jewish Affairs Autumn (1993:27)* one of its staff, A.Z. Idelsohn, a professor of Jewish Music and Liturgy, visited Johannesburg in the early 1930s. There he met Lili Montague from Great Britain, secretary for the World Union for Progressive Judaism, who approached Idelsohn for assistance in starting a Reform congregation in Johannesburg. Idelsohn contacted a senior class member of the Hebrew Union College named Moses Cyrus Weiler who followed up this overture by taking up the post as Chief Minister of the first Reform congregation in South Africa and who pioneered its establishment in this country.

Characteristic of Reform is its wide variation of format from centre to centre. Its scope of difference is far wider than that of Orthodox Synagogues in various parts of the world, even known, by different names such as Liberal and Progressive.

As to the way it expresses itself in South Africa, it is best described in the Saron and Hotz edition (1955:392) entitled, "*The Jews in South Africa – A History*",

"It is noteworthy that, despite its liberalism and innovations, Reform Judaism in this country follows a relatively conservative tendency, presumably in deference to local attitudes".

In his socio-demographic survey of the South African Jewish population, Allie Dubb (1991:114) presented a table (5.3) of Synagogue affiliation by religious orientation and Synagogue membership. 78.5% of the respondents gave their religious affiliations (not necessarily membership) as Orthodox.

Although, as Simon pointed out, Reform would never exceed 18% of the South African Jewish population, its influence on the South African scene must necessarily be included in the various factors that have affected the sociology of Jewry in this country with regard to, *inter alia*, the issues that are investigated by this inquiry.

From previous accounts in this survey it was seen that almost a century prior to its South African debut, Reform was an active force in America having found root in 18th century Germany. Previous investigation into this era revealed an emancipation of Jews in the European communities and their wider acceptance in Gentile circles. Moreover, there was a Jewish cultural enlightenment, which manifested itself in the growth of secular as opposed to religious literature.

The standpoint of Reform Judaism is expressed by Sherman (1993:27) in the *Jewish Affairs, Autumn*,

"There were many who, in their enthusiasm for the new freedom, began to distance themselves from the traditions of their faith ... The result was a wave of Jewish conversions to Christianity. There were others, however, who felt that the essential principles of Judaism were still valid and important, but should be presented in a more modern manner. 'Let us remove,' they said, 'trappings of mediaevalism and the excrescences of ghetto-thinking in order to make the synagogue more attractive to the educated Jew'".

What Rabbi Sherman has presented in this statement is the general trend of thought, which gave rise to the secession by Reform. It is not my intention in

this work to delve too deeply into the details of doctrinal differences between varying factions of Judaism i.e. Orthodox, Conservative and Reform, save where it has affected the conversion issue and also where its impact in the general background of Jewish life has given rise to the factors leading to outmarriage and proselytisation. Suffice it to say that these denominations are opposed to one another and that conversion outside Orthodox Judaism is not recognised by the latter.

Taking up once again an historical survey, which deals more specifically with conversion and tracing its route through Simon (1996:138) we find the subject raised in correspondence between Chief Rabbi Adler of the UK and the Kimberley Hebrew Congregation in 1897. The following year the subject was raised at a joint meeting of the committees of the Johannesburg Hebrew Congregation, the Witwatersrand Old Hebrew Congregation, the Orthodox Hebrew Congregation and the Jewish Helping Hand and Burial Society. Concern was expressed at the number of "pirate" conversions that were taking place. Nevertheless, the bodies represented at the meeting remained opposed to the acceptance of proselytes in Johannesburg. That this attitude was to continue for nearly a quarter of a century is borne out by my perusal of the Beth Din archives, which commence only in the 1920s. Prior to that, applications for proselytisation were still forwarded to the Chief Rabbinate in London, who had to refer back to their communities for information surrounding the candidate.

Despite the apparent unity of the three congregations in Johannesburg on the issue of conversion, which seemed to find place at the special meeting of 1898, in practice would-be proselytes would gravitate from one synagogue to another in order to find acceptability. In re-emphasising the need for the unity in this area, the South African Jewish Council also expressed concern at the increase in intermarriage on the one hand and the closed door towards the proselytes on the other.

Following a repetitive pattern of opposing and welcoming proselytisation, especially with regard to the marital motive, two camps were emerging. The

perennial debate manifested itself in the attitude on the one hand of Rabbi Hertz, Chief Rabbi of the British Empire, who adopted the stringent view and Chief Rabbi Landau of South Africa who was more accommodating towards the intending proselyte. Simon (1996:143) brings down the view of the latter,

"The one demands the admission of those would-be proselytes though suspect of insincerity; the other demands absolute rejection, regardless of any extenuating circumstances. Both sections are actuated by one and the same reason, the salvation of children. 'Admit the stranger', pleads the one 'in order to save my child.' 'Reject the stranger,' insists the other 'that this bad example may not affect my child.' Which course should the Rabbi, which the community, adopt."

This polemic could not keep pace with the growing demand for conversion. Against former prejudicial attitudes towards proselytisation in South Africa consideration had to be given to promises of commitment by the applicants and the fact that the offspring of subsequent marriage would be reared as Jews. This development, which has taken place well over half a century, was to advance slowly.

Landau noted in 1924 that the resistance towards conversion was creating certain defensive trends. Wealthier people would send intending proselytes in their family circle to overseas communities in order to achieve the undertaking and there was still the very real threat of unauthorised conversion. Desirous that congregations abroad should not perform conversions without the consent of the South African Jewish communities and that those unable to afford the journey should not be excluded from conversion, local acceptance of converts, although very selectively practised, was to find place. (*Minutes of Archives 1944*) It was, however, conditional upon favourable reports by an advisory board appointed for the purpose, a two-thirds majority vote by the Congregational Executive and satisfaction as to the character of the applicant.

In 1930, the South African Jewish Board of Deputies appointed a commission,

comprised of important communal leaders, to investigate the issue. From the report compiled it was clear that proselytes, even for marriage, were already being accepted by the authoritative religious bodies in South Africa. The trend that was evident even then was to continue its development, not the least of its influential factors being the willingness of the emergent Reform movement to accommodate quests for conversion.

This area of the study will also focus on the position in Durban. The data that will be supplied will also be constructed from minutes, as well as archives, since no published work on conversion in Durban is yet available.

I have drawn from a thesis by Dr. S. G. Cohen (1982) entitled, "*A history of the Jews of Durban 1919-1961*". Although the coverage of the period that Cohen has selected is thorough to the extent that he has included every known meeting or resolution on the communal level, no mention is made of the conversions. No evidence of a Conversion Committee is supplied. Although by 1961 intermarriage was already a long-standing phenomenon, there is no reference to any concern on the part of the community. Only a scanning of the work revealed information, which could supply background factors. As a congregational centre Durban Jewry dates back to the early 1880s. The Eastern European immigration, which took place at a much later stage, found an essentially Anglo-Jewish population. The DUHC Centenary Book (1984:591) records that the East European immigrants had been streaming into Durban from the Transvaal and were oriented to a ritual and observance differing in a number of ways from the anglicised version. They felt, too, many secular inclusions had infiltrated the ritual. Moreover, they felt a need for a more conscientious approach towards Hebrew education. Conflict in attitudes was to lead to a split in the congregation in the 1920s, which would persist for 20 years. The rift was not only of a religious nature. Miller (1981:74) recounts how earlier on in the century, the immigrants from Eastern Europe, which he describes as, "*the cradle of the Zionist movement*" found the existing Jewish population quite apathetic to the movement. The root cause given by Gitlin (1980:27) was the preference of Durban Jewry, then comprised of English, Dutch and German Jewry, to

identify rather with their Gentile neighbours rather than emulate the emphasis in distinctiveness which had been imported by their Eastern European co-religionists which Zionism served to do. Whereas the seeds of dissension could well have been sewn at this stage, Miller (*ibid*) notes that these attitudes were to change and the fervour for Zionism, which was apparent elsewhere was well represented in all sections of the Natal Jewish community, including the Reform.

It is noteworthy that Cohen (1982:691) writes,

"Durban Jewry, however, accepted the existence of Reform in the city with little outward manifestation of opposition."

But then it could be argued that the tolerance of Reform on the part of the rank and file Durban Jew was an extension of a socio-religious scene to which the Eastern European Jews had reacted by forming their own congregation and which itself played its role in developing various attitudes towards mate selection, such that became more widespread in the next generation. The establishment of Reform in Durban in 1948 must have immediately opened up an alternative road to conversion. Cohen makes no mention of this. Possibly by 1961, the crisis of reciprocity of Reform conversions in the Orthodox congregation was still to be felt.

Insofar as the socio-religious-cum-political life of Durban Jewry contributed to intermarriage and the demand for conversion, not all the factors are easily detectable. It is the internal factors which are palpable to my own observation and analysis and the time and place with which I feel conversant.

The breakdown is insidious rather than overt and it ought to be investigated as to its role in the psycho-sociological factors leading to intermarriage and conversion.

Trends in South African Jewry will become further discernible from the statistical analogies supplied in the section entitled "Major Socio-demographic Characteristics". From this survey, some important historical factors regarding South African Jewry have come to the fore – the socio-religious foundations laid by the early Eastern European immigrants, the cohesiveness in the Jewish communal structure, the strength of the local Zionist movement and the numerical predominance of Orthodox Jewish affiliation. The latter phenomenon, however, is not necessarily proportionate to Orthodox observances. It will be seen from the questionnaire herein presented that a large number of Orthodox members, or affiliates, were only minimally observant. With the increase in interfaith marriages in each successive generation, many families of the Jewish partner, as well as the partner, found themselves confronted with the religious demands upon the intending proselyte as prescribed by the Orthodoxy to which they had outwardly subscribed, but not pursued.

Having briefly touched on Jewish religious outreach earlier in this essay it is significant here to discuss the effect of the *Ba'al Teshuvah* movement which could be described as a Jewish religious renaissance which has successfully absorbed a number of Jews. Many of these have hailed from partially or minimally observant homes and some totally removed from the faith. Certain proselytes, too, have gravitated towards this movement which arrived on the South African scene in the 1970s.

Although the results of this trend have not dramatically affected the level of observance of the vast majority of South African Jewry, the normative influence is palpable.

Kaplan (1998:78) explains how the *Ba'al Teshuvah* movement has met up with a community with sympathy towards Orthodoxy despite its shortfall in practice or knowledge of it. Where family members have opted for the *Ba'al Teshuvah* movement they have found their peer groups to be quite encouraging.

Kaplan (1998:78) writes,

“Even those South African parents who practise virtually none of the Jewish law nonetheless generally accept the legitimacy and authenticity of Orthodox belief and practice.”

A further factor affecting South African Jewry has been the gradual increased influence of the Rabbinate and the Beth Din. This metamorphosis is demonstrated in greater depth in the section entitled “Development of Beth Din Policy in Johannesburg” as, too, its effect upon conversion to Judaism in South Africa.

Historical data which have been collected and assembled in this chapter serve the purpose of a background to the route of Jewish proselytisation from its Biblical context to the dawn of a modern conceptualisation of its application. The ultimate focus of this issue is its present manifestation in South Africa.

CHAPTER 3

CONVERSION - THE HALAKHIC POSITION

3. INTRODUCTION

Application of Halakha relating to conversion was traced from Talmudic times commencing with the diversity of the most virile scholars - Shammai and Hillel. It was demonstrated, however, that their differences were merely a matter of approach.

This section of the inquiry provides further insight into their seemingly opposed attitudes and so, too, those of many other scholars from thence till our day. We see, for instance, how the classic statement of Rabbi Eleazar, "*Evil after evil comes upon those who receive proselytes*" ⁽¹⁾ is subjected to further analysis, as part of an investigation into the adjacent part of the selfsame Talmudic Tractate which features as essential groundwork for the topic at hand.

Basic principles relating to the issue in question remain constant and universal but their development is interesting. Early in its career Judaism sheds missionary goals. It is the intending proselyte who has to approach the authorised Rabbinat of the day and place. And indeed, socio-political circumstances influence policy on the part of the celebrated leadership as became evident in our historical survey.

What emerges over the centuries are methodologies for relating to the Halakhic code, upon which the laws of conversion are based, which serves as a vehicle for case study. Indeed, there were circumstances both favourable to receiving converts and situations totally antagonistic to Judaism itself, let alone its outward

expansion. Parallel to an alternation between one or the other of these factors, arose various trends on the part of these luminaries, upon whose shoulders fell the decision to accept or reject proselytes. These tendencies fluctuated.

It could be said that Halakhic response to the issue of conversion was rather an outgrowth of history than adherence to a single clear-cut policy.

At the same time the approaches of the various conversion authorities were far from arbitrary. Well did they have their frames of reference. The contents of *Yebamoth 46a-47b* play their sterling role in shaping outlook in this field. And then there is Maimonides in two chapters of his work *Isurei Biah* which were mentioned earlier as standing almost alone as a classical source from which subsequent conversion authorities have compiled their agenda.

Despite the limited Halakhic material of the Post-Talmudic era relating to the Halakhic aspects of conversion, scholarship in the field has taken from that which was available and engaged in explanatory study resulting in countless books and published response. I shall certainly not be able to cover it all.

Rather this presentation will concentrate on the major theme of the topic "*Conversion in Halakha*", such that can be related to the present, in order to achieve for the reader the widest possible comprehension of the issues involved in the process, and their implications, as interpreted by contemporary authorities.

In the same way, a sequence is envisaged from Biblical and Talmudic origins to the time ahead when both here and abroad, whether in Israel or the Diaspora countries, conversion to Judaism will still occupy immense attention.

The following subjects will be examined in this investigation.

3.1 Attitudes towards conversion - An examination of conflicting statements

A superficial survey of preserved statements on the subject of conversion invariably diagnoses contradictions. Sometimes there even appears to be conflict within the same source. In this section of the work, a selection of these comments is examined with regard to the context in which these remarks were made.

There is one by R. Jose,

"In time to come, idol worshippers will come and offer themselves as proselytes.... Well, may they be self-made proselytes" (which are defined as a category of converts who proselytise en masse out of fear) "and will place phylacteries on their foreheads and on their arms, fringes on their garments and a Mezuzah on their doorposts, but when the battle of Gog and Magog will come about each will throw aside his religious tokens and get away."⁽²⁾

A modern investigator, Finkelstein (1994:137) quotes a view that says this was a prophecy for a future, which actually unfolded. This refers to the revolutions of the years 66 and 132 when Jews were betrayed to the Roman authorities by the *Mityahadim* (converts). In response to this incident the Talmud comments:

"They impede the arrival of Messiah." ⁽³⁾

Further evidence of wariness against converts during this period is illustrated by Rosenbloom, (*Against Apion* 2,123:42)

"Negative attitudes may also have been directed toward converts who did not wholly commit themselves to Judaism as well as those who slipped back to their

former pagan beliefs. Josephus takes note of the great number of Greeks who observed Jewish law but then departed from it."

Encyclopaedia Judaica: 1185 suggests that R. Eliezer had, from his contact with the first Christians, seen that many of them were proselytes who had relapsed.

As further statements are examined, the link between the Talmudic statements and the history of the times become more evident. R. Eliezer ben Hyrcanus is found on the one hand to assert, "*They revert to their evil ways*" ⁽⁴⁾ and on the other, "*When a person comes to you in sincerity to be converted, do not reject him but on the contrary encourage him.*" ⁽⁵⁾

Clearly, R. Eliezer was not totally opposed to proselytisation. A rationale is suggested for the first of these statements in *Encyclopaedia Judaica (1185)*,

"It is possible that R. Eliezer's negative attitude may have been influenced by his contact with the first Christians. He may have seen that many of the heretics were proselytes who had relapsed."

It would seem, therefore, that two apparently opposing statements by the selfsame spokesman were each looking at a different type of convert, contrasting sincerity with fickleness.

As this examination looks at further examples of well-known statements it will be seen that these are subject to interpretation.

One such instance is given in *Tractate Yebamoth* quoting R. Helbo as saying,

"Proselytes are as hard for Israel (to endure) as a sore." ⁽⁶⁾

The Hebrew word for "sore" used by R. Helbo is "*sapachaf*" which he extracts from *Lev. 13.2*, which is identical with the scab symptomatic of the disease

Tzara'at (which has been translated as "leprosy.") R. Helbo, however, takes up this analogy from a Scriptural verse which reads: "... *and the stranger (proselyte) shall join himself with them and they shall cleave to the House of Jacob.*" ⁽⁷⁾

He is linking the Hebrew word "*v'nispachti*" to "cleave" as derived from "*sapachat*". Since the context of the prophecy is a prediction of Israel's triumph, the cleavage of the proselyte may be seen as supportive.

The remaining question, which still bothered the sages, was as to how the proselyte would react when Israel was faced with calamity.

When the statement of R. Helbo re-appears in *Tractate Kiddushin* ⁽⁸⁾ Rashi takes it to mean that the laxity of observance on the part of converts sets a bad example to native Jews. But the Tosafist R. Isaac adopts a completely opposite view, namely that proselytes are more observant and expose the laxity of other Jews.

In *Yebamoth*, ⁽⁹⁾ R. Helbo's words are juxtaposed with another negativism, which was mentioned in the introductory chapter, "*Evil upon evil comes upon those who receive proselytes.*" Once again, the Tosafists come forth to explain that the Rabbi in question, R. Isaac of the Talmud, is pinpointing those who are not converting with the proper intent.

Each age has been characterised by contradictory overviews of conversion. Even the apparently disparaging remarks by the Talmudic sages herein quoted prove ambiguous and conditional. The paradox is borne out by Maimonides in his work *Isurei Biah* ⁽¹⁰⁾ where he sets out to offer explanations for the popular Talmudic statement.

He, too, sets off with a negative view, which he derives from a Biblical incident. The introductory chapter referred to "*certain Egyptians who joined the Exodus.*"

The Bible calls them "*a mixed multitude*".⁽¹¹⁾ Rashi comments that when the Israelites fashioned a Golden Calf it was this group that was the principal instigators. Maimonides in *Hilchot Isurei Biah*, already cited as one of the main works in this section, goes further to describe this category of persons as a prototype of the convert. Certainly the comments of the codifier Maimonides need to be examined in greater depth as he presents a treatment of the positive and negative attitudes towards conversion which have arisen in the Talmud and subsequent Rabbinical literature.

Maimonides attributes the unfavourable Rabbinic comments to the ulterior motives for conversion, which prevailed over any other rationale. The codifier went further to say they are causing confusion among the Jewish people and once absorbed it was hard to distinguish these elements from the rest of the Jewish people in the same way as "*the mixed multitude*" had successfully camouflaged themselves. And yet this is not a full reflection of his opinion, as in other instances he spoke of them favourably.

There is a record of correspondence between Maimonides and a proselyte named Obadiah who became an ardent Halakhic scholar. The latter consulted him on *Sh'eilot* (Halakhic queries). In his replies Maimonides addressed him as "*Master and teacher, the intelligent and enlightened Obadiah, the righteous proselyte.*" (*Judaica:1188*)

He makes the point:

"Anyone who has become a proselyte throughout the generations and anyone who unifies the Name of the Holy One as it is written in the Torah is a pupil of our father Abraham and all of them are members of our household."

Obadiah had encountered unkind remarks from certain Jews but Maimonides writes to him almost apologetically. He makes the further point that there is a

command to honour parents and obey prophets, but towards the proselyte one is commanded to have a great love from the depths of the heart, in view of the great sacrifices he has made.

Maimonides elaborates on the contents in another of his authoritative works entitled *Sefer Ha-Mitzvoth Asseh*.⁽¹²⁾ He comments on a Scriptural verse which commands, "*And you shall love the stranger.*"⁽¹³⁾ Over and above a general Torah instruction to love one's fellow person, the convert is especially singled out because the love of G-d for one who has voluntarily undertaken the burden of Torah is exceedingly great. Therefore, asserts Maimonides, the Torah ordered the love of the proselyte as a new and distinctive commandment. And he draws upon another Scriptural extract:

*"Neither let the alien,
That hath joined himself to the
Lord, speak, saying
'The Lord will surely separate
me from His people' ".*⁽¹⁴⁾

Rev. Dr. I. W. Slotki⁽¹⁵⁾ comments that the verse is referring to the "alien" who became a proselyte and observed the commandments enjoined upon Israel. Maimonides takes this to mean that, once a person has entered under the wings of Divine Guidance, he is no different from the Israelites by birth.

From the coverage of opinions on proselytes expressed by Maimonides it would seem that he, like many others, is struggling with the issue in question. On the one hand, the proselyte is once again viewed with suspicion, but from his encounter with Obadiah he is confronted with a sincere convert, to whom he feels he owes every encouragement. Indeed, it can be said, this is the perpetual dilemma which has reached the modern day *Batei Dinim*, namely the problem where to strike the balance between rejection and acceptance.

From my own experience, opposition and encouragement represent various stages in the interaction with the prospective convert. At the outset, I would feel resistance. When, however, sincerity manifests itself, my attitude will adjust itself accordingly. Once the conversion is actually completed, I feel admiration for the proselyte.

In a work entitled "*A Guide through Jewish life*" former Chief Rabbi of South Africa, the late Prof. Louis I. Rabinowitz (1990:192) writes:

"Once a convert is accepted, he or she is to be welcomed with open arms by all Jews and everything should be done to make him or her feel that they are members of the Jewish community. The convert is a Jew with every right and privilege appertaining to that status, with the one sole restriction that a Cohen is precluded from marrying a female convert."

There is a famous Talmudic statement that "*one who has become a proselyte is like a child newly-born*". ⁽¹⁶⁾

Bavah Metziah⁽¹⁷⁾ elaborates that the accomplished proselyte ought not to be reminded at all of his past when his actions as a Gentile were not in accordance with the Torah.

Re-examining R. Jose's maxim that "*one who has become a proselyte is like a child newly-born*", it is found that it is placed in a context where the opposite also appears to be true. Having drawn extensively from *Yebamoth* some pertinent themes attaching to conversion, the tractate digresses for a short while but later takes up the argument,

"It was taught: R. Hanania son of R. Simeon b. Gamaliel said: 'Why are proselytes at the present time oppressed and visited with afflictions? Because they had not observed the seven Noahide commandments.' R. Jose said: "One who has become a proselyte is like a child newly born. Why then are proselytes

oppressed? Because they are not so well acquainted with the details of the commandments as the Israelites." ⁽¹⁸⁾

They are handicapped, says the Sage, by lack of initial religious background and the history that has preceded the Jewish people. Perhaps it would have been better had they not converted at all since only a Jewish-born person is responsible for the observance of Torah. The convert has taken upon himself an additional burden. This, however, is not necessarily a negative statement but rather a warning to the prospective proselyte that once he or she voluntarily embarked on the commitment, it is an undertaking of severe gravity.

3.1.1 *Response to a non-Jewish interpretation of conversion*

The opening approach to the sub-section "*Attitude towards the convert*" has been to analyse certain oft-quoted sayings by the Sages. The purpose is for the student of the subject to gain understanding of a traditional outlook towards the phenomenon. In this way, guidelines are obtained for modern conversion authorities. It has to be asked, too, how is the Rabbinical attitude to conversion perceived outside the boundaries of Judaism. Non-Jewish commentators have also looked into the maxims of the Sages and evolved their impressions. How the spokesmen have responded to this external perception of conversion has provided further insight into the Halakhic approach to the topic.

Finkelstein (1994:134) quotes a 19th Century Christian who he said tried purposefully to represent the Talmud as anti-conversionist. He built up his argument from the negative statements that were analysed in the preceding sections, chiefly the views of R. Isaac of the Talmud and R. Helbo. The school of thought, to which Finkelstein refers, argued that Judaism does not welcome converts by pointing to the difference in the status of the Gentile to that of the home born Jew, asserting that the former was held to be inferior. Examples were quoted demonstrating restrictions on the convert. A female proselyte is

precluded from marrying a *Cohen*. Male converts are not eligible for the Kingship or to sit on the Sanhedrin.

Another statement, which was challenged, was that of R. Chiya:

"Do not believe a convert until 24 generations have elapsed because he may revert to his origins." ⁽¹⁹⁾

Against this approach, continues Finkelstein, many of the researchers confronted the issues. Acknowledging the existence of these comments, negativity towards proselytisation is not upheld by majority opinion in the Talmud and *Midrashim*.

The Christian scholars, said Finkelstein, did not follow for instance the second part of the statement of R. Chiya, which stressed,

"Once he had received upon himself the yoke of the A-mighty for love and fear of him for the sake of heaven then the A-mighty does not make him return to his people."

Rather the critic in question took these statements out of the context of the Tractate *in toto* and the historical setting in what they occurred. Finkelstein attributes this to the beginning of the 4th century and explains that R. Helbo was speaking at a time when it was dangerous to accept converts, under pain of severe penalties.

From the historical survey it is seen that it was not much different in medieval era which was covered quite comprehensively.

Changes in the attitudes of the Rabbis became evident as socio-political circumstances altered.

Encyclopaedia Judaica (1185) states,

"The differences in outlook found in Rabbinic sources can partly be explained by disparities in character and temperament. However, the deciding factors were usually contemporary conditions and the personal experiences of the Rabbis."

This is illustrated by a theme behind the Talmudic paradigm, which was referred to earlier. The argument between Hillel and Shammai cannot be held as proof for either the positive or negative approach to conversion. In fact, proselytisation *per se* is not the issue there at all. Rather, the incidents drawn from *Tractate Shabbat 31a* are a series of stories surrounding the strictness of Shammai as compared with the humility of Hillel. Although Shammai reacted aggressively to a seemingly provocative candidate, this does not mean his attitude towards conversion itself was negative. He had no patience for an applicant who demanded special treatment, or posed conditions for his conversion. It may well have been different had the party concerned refrained from ridiculous requests. He may well have found Shammai to be encouraging. Moreover, Hillel did not disagree with Shammai in principle but simply took up the challenge with a different approach.

Once again, here is proof that the classical statement of the Rabbi is subject to interpretation, depending on the opinion of the authority or the investigator.

3.1.2 *Arguments for welcoming converts*

Up to this point, most of the statements that have been quoted have reflected a negative approach to the convert, notwithstanding the fact that alternative explanations have been found. The investigation now turns to those writings which expose an encouraging trend.

There is a Biblical comment,

"Thou shalt blot out the remembrance of Amalek from under heaven. Thou shalt not forget." ⁽²⁰⁾

It is stated in *Exodus* ⁽²¹⁾ that this ruthless warlike tribe confronted Israel on their way out of Egypt, taking advantage of their weariness. Later King Saul is commanded to utterly decimate the Amalekites.

In as much as Amalek is held to be the spiritual as well as the national archetype of evil and enmity to Israel, the Talmud brings down a *Midrash*,

"Timna was a royal princess. Desiring to become a proselyte, she went to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, but they did not accept her. So she went and became a concubine to Eliphaz, the son of Esau, saying, 'I had rather be a servant to this people than a mistress of another nation.' From her Amalek was descended who afflicted Israel. Why so? Because they should not have repulsed her." ⁽²²⁾

A further Talmudic account ⁽²³⁾ relates how Rabbi Shimon bar Jochai was pursued by the Romans and actually had to hide from them in a cave for 13 years. A certain Jehudah ben Gerim had passed on to the Romans harsh words that Rabbi Shimon had expressed against them. Despite his plight, he nevertheless expounded upon the superiority of the convert than over a Jew by birth.

Finkelstein (1994:137) brings down a similar statement made in the name of Resh Lakhish,

"Beloved is the convert over and above Israel when they stood at Mount Sinai because if they had not witnessed all the miracles that were revealed, they would not have accepted the Torah. This person (the convert) who has not seen any of

that brought himself to the A-mighty and accepted the yoke upon himself. Do you have more beloved (a person) than that?" (24)

A non-Orthodox view for welcoming converts is provided by Lawrence J. Epstein (1992:217),

"There are many arguments for welcoming converts, often couched in the language of practicality. Some focus on conversion as a way to increase the Jewish population or as a defense against intermarriage. While such arguments are valuable, they are not the primary reason why converts should be welcome."

Epstein expounds the concept of Judaism as a universal religion.

Having made this clear Epstein goes to see the furtherance of what he describes as "*the Jewish religious vocation*" by "*making Judaism available to all people and by welcoming converts*", and secondly "*Judaism must see welcoming converts as an acceptable means of transmitting its message.*"

And he refers, *inter alia*, to a Talmudic statement, which was presented in the introductory chapter, in the name of R. Eleazar.

"The Holy-one-Blessed-be-He did not exile Israel among the nations save in order that proselytes might join them." (25)

There has always been the question of the extent of Jewish outreach to the Gentile world, whether it is sufficient to promote the Noahide laws among the Gentiles or whether one should go further to convert others to Judaism.

In Epstein's view (1992:223)

"Formal conversion to Judaism is ideal but not the requirement. It should be offered but not forced available but not mandated. The Jewish mission

because of historical circumstances remains unfulfilled. Education, not coercion, is the method for reaching out a goal."

Prager (1990:4) writes that Judaism ought to be actually offered to unaffiliated non-Jews. He goes on to explain how, besides increasing the Jewish population, conversion to Judaism would both edify the religion itself and make for a better world.

In contrast to the most commonly held beliefs, Rabbi David Max Eichhorn (1965:3) asserts that Judaism is by nature a missionary religion manifesting itself in the rescue of mankind from material quicksand if the conflict between the Christian and Communist world continues. To forestall this danger, he goes on to say that Jews should form a "third force" together with peace loving members of other religions.

Having looked at conversion in the light of rejection and acceptance, the concept of outreach introduces a further element in the spectrum of the discussion. Generally outreach is not the approach of Orthodox Jewry which feels that the complicated demands of Judaism would constitute an unnecessary burden on the Gentile. Rather the issue at point is reaching equilibrium between total rejection of prospective proselytes and outward evangelisation. This balance is achieved by sympathetic consideration of the petition of a Gentile who, of his/her own accord, seeks conversion to Judaism.

3.1.3 *Acceptance / Rejection - The differing fundamental viewpoints of Maimonides and Halevi*

Another article which points to encouragement of the convert was submitted by Baruch Frydman-Kohl entitled "*Covenant, conversion and Chosenness - Maimonides and Halevi on "Who is a Jew?" (1970)*"

The author is a Rabbi of a conservative congregation in America and his concern flows from the current crisis, which is finding place in Israel and which was reviewed in the introductory chapter. From his affiliations, which are non-Orthodox, it follows that he would like to see conservative candidates for conversion receive international reciprocity. This would mean the inclusion of a larger number of people in the conversion process.

Frydman-Kohl's approach is drawn on Maimonides and Yehudah Halevi whom he describes as "*archetypes for different approaches to critical problems in Jewish religious thought*" (1970:65) and sets out to examine their differences regarding the nature of the Jewish people and its formative history. Maimonides has featured extensively in this essay, both as a codifier and a foremost authority on conversion and so, too, did this work introduce Yehudah Halevi as the composer of *Khuzari*, a dramatisation of the events leading up to the national conversion of the Khazars to Judaism.

Yehuda Halevi, the Spanish poet and philosopher of the 11th and 12th centuries, enjoys esteem as one of most extremely cited Jewish thinkers of his era. The comprehensive nature of the *Khuzari* was founded upon his passion for his faith, his people and the land of Israel. In a chapter of his work entitled "*The Book of Refutation and Proof in defense of the Despised Faith*" Halevi defended Judaism against the assertion of the other major religions - Christianity and Islam, as well as Aristotelian philosophy.

Having achieved political dominance over Judaism these religions had amassed theological propaganda which justified the fact that the Jews were a people without power. Christianity contended it was successor to Biblical Israel, whilst Islam claimed itself to be the authentic bearer of the Divine legacy, the prophecy of Muhammed being superior to its predecessor's.

Against the argument by Christianity that Judaism's biological heritage was secondary to its own spiritual heritage, Halevi claimed this biological heritage has given the Jews a historical uniqueness.

Frydman-Kohl (1970:68) explains:

"Halevi's defense of Judaism claimed that spiritual and intellectual truths were intertwined with genealogy. The covenant, which involves belief and behaviour, was maintained by an unbroken genetic linkage to Abraham and Adam. Thus physical and spiritual Israel were to be considered one phenomenon."

Frydman-Kohl (1970:70) compares Halevi's view with Maimonides:

"In contrast Rabbi Moshe ben Maimon, who achieved fame as a physician, communal leader and philosopher, emphasises the covenantal exclusiveness of the Jews in the context of a universal awareness of one G-d. His 'passionate love of G-d' recognises a role for Christianity and Islam in bringing the world closer to G-d."

The author interpolates with a footnote to support his argument:

"11. Lawrence Kaplan, 'Maimonides on the Singularity of the Jewish People' Daat (1984): v-xxvii, argues that Maimonides sees two stages in religion: monotheism, which is universal and attainable by speculation, and revelation, which is exclusive and reserved for the People of Israel. Thus, the initial chapters of the Mishneh Torah, which are metaphysical in content, do not speak of Israel. Only when discussing the particular forms of human expression of love for G-d, does Maimonides mention the People of Israel. For Maimonides, one's religious and human status is not dependent on biology, but on the truth of one's actions and beliefs."

Frydman-Kohl (1970:70) thus deduces,

"From all of the above, it has been shown that Halevi's biological-national orientation to Judaism distinguishes between the human relationship with G-d of those in the community of the covenant, and others. Although Halevi does posit a messianic preparatory role for Christians and Moslems, they are still hierarchically of an inferior status to Jews. Even when allowing for conversion to Judaism, Halevi limits converts to a non-prophetic status. Halevi is the first medieval thinker to attempt to differentiate Jew and Gentile on the basis of metaphysical criteria in addition to historical experience."

In studying this comparison between the views of Maimonides and Halevi, it ought to be asked to what extent this divergence echoed the Talmudic passages, which were investigated. It will be remembered, too, that some of the exponents expressed what appeared racial approaches. And yet further inquiry into such statements revealed quite the opposite. Only it was postulated that genuineness of motivation had to be taken into account and so, too, the prevailing historic circumstances.

Frydman-Kohl represents Halevi as anti-conversionist by virtue of an outlook that there is a biological difference between Jew and Gentile. In the author's interpretation of Halevi's theory, he has demarcated him as unique in the thinking of his times. Thus according to this deduction, Halevi differs from the classical predecessors whose ultimate conclusion pointed to the acceptance of the convert as being no different from the home-born Jew, save certain legal distinctions which will be raised in the actual Halakhic section.

But as to how accurate are Frydman-Kohl's perception of Yehuda Halevi, here I advance my own thoughts. Earlier I quoted possible misconceptions arising out of a reading of the Hillel-Shammai polemic. Here I feel the author in question is following the self-same route and has taken Halevi at face value. It was not, I assert, that Halevi totally opposed conversion, nor regarded the ethnic Jew as

genetically superior over the one who had adopted his religion. Rather he was arguing for the superiority of Torah. For that purpose, he features strong terminology to emphasise the difference between Judaism and other religions. Proof that this was not a biological issue was his model of the Khazars who embraced Judaism having interviewed representatives of Christianity and Islam as well. Halevi did, however, resort to biological argument, but he did so only to bring the issue into line with the method of debate adopted by the other religions. Genetics, in other words, were not the yardstick but an analogy in order to achieve comprehensibility. He was a poet using metaphor. Moreover, Halevi was a passionate Zionist. His longing for Israel was also expressed as a physical phenomenon and ultimately he undertook the perilous journey there. For him, Judaism was a concrete reality. In that selfsame frame of mind, he approached the issue of conversion and in fact I do not really see a clear-cut difference between Maimonides and himself.

A further rejection of genetic theories relating to converts gains support in a contemporary statement by Rabbi J. David Blech, Rosh Yeshiva at Yeshiva University New York, [The Conversion Crisis (1990:19)]

"Yet the peoplehood of Israel is not founded upon racist attitudes nor has Judaism suffered from the maladies of xenophobia. Jewish identity has always been a matter of membership in a specific and unique faith – community. As such Judaism has always welcomed all individuals seeking to embrace the tenets of the Torah. Indeed, the ger zedek (righteous proselyte) is extolled in Rabbinic literature and depicted as being the recipient of an extraordinary degree of Divine favour."

3.1.4 Conclusion

Derenbourg (*Finkelstein 1994:135*) demarcates three stages of development in the attitudes of the Sages towards conversion.

Up to the first century of the current era, proselytes were welcomed, even sought, and thus viewed in a favourable light.

After the destruction of the Second Temple, when especially during the Hadrianic persecution, receiving converts became perilous, severe caution had to be exercised in the acceptance of proselytes. The latter needed to be warned of the consequences if the conversion was discovered by the Roman authorities.

When the Sages saw many of the converts revert to Christianity they tended to follow Rabbi Helbo's concept of "*sapachat*".

From where Derenbourg's analysis leaves off, one can continue to trace the outlook of the Rabbis and commentators towards conversion over centuries in various parts of the world, reaching the present when we are living in an age when the conversion issue becomes a matter of great momentum.

There has never again been an era like the one preceding the 1st century when the acceptance of converts enjoyed the quality of approval by the Rabbis. Viewed from the Historical survey, as also from the view of Epstein, an interest in extending the boundaries of the Jewish people is evident from the evangelical overtures by certain American Reform spokesmen.

From the post-Talmudic era till the enlightenment following the Middle Ages, the attitude towards conversion was not unlike that of the Hadrianic era. And when legal restrictions were removed against conversion to Judaism, many communities practised their own censorship of the phenomenon adopting a viewpoint similar to Rabbi Helbo's "*sapachat*" theory.

Then there is the present. It is certainly not an age of Jewish missionaries outside the faith. Caution is still exercised by the conversion authorities, not

because of the fear, which characterised the Hadrianic and Medieval models, but rather due to a general need for discretion. Moreover, it is a studied discretion. It begins to approach the subject of conversion as a science. Data relating to the attitudes of the Sages are collected, assembled and examined. Results reveal that there never was an inflexible policy. A basis can be found for strictness and likewise leniency. Agreement between various authorities is attainable on certain aspects. The motive for conversion is of utmost importance. Circumstances of the age and background history play their part in formulating opinions. Up to our days, the sources continue to support individual views of Rabbis and the Beth Din, as to strictness or leniency.

Progressing further with this inquiry it will be seen that, even within the relatively short time span of 50 years or less, various approaches to conversion were adopted by the authoritative bodies in the South African Jewish community.

3.2 Motives for conversion

Having reviewed a variety of statements, some favouring, some opposing the concept of conversion, it ought to be asked to what extent is the motive of the prospective candidate a factor that will influence the authorities involved. In the conclusion of the last section it was stressed that there was a certain thread running through the debate between the various exponents, namely the importance of the motive.

Where proselytisation was welcomed it pointed to a desire on the part of the applicant to convert "*for the sake of heaven*". This argument was slightly detectable even amongst the opponents. Thus the absence of ulterior motive is held to characterise the *ger tzedek*, the term used for a righteous convert.

In the perusal of Talmudic statements, references were made to various types of ulterior motives. Rather than analyse the Talmudic opinions on this subject, this

inquiry focuses on the most relevant issue of the present time - conversion for the sake of marriage.

Having assumed that the widest spectrum of authorities on this subject agree that *ab initio* the motive for conversion ought to be "*for the sake of heaven*", validity is sought that can be attached to one for the purpose of marriage or any other ulterior motive. At best it has to be borne in mind that this is a *post factum* situation. Confronted with such an application, a Beth Din has at the outset to object.

Moreover, the Talmud brings down the words of R.Nehemya that "*a man who became a proselyte for 'inter alia' the sake of a woman'... and vice versa 'are no proper proselytes.'*"⁽²⁶⁾

Likewise the Jerusalem Talmud⁽²⁷⁾ echoes the opinion of R. Nehemya but at the same time it advances the view of Rav that such proselytes ought to be rejected. Rather he says they should be accepted with the intention of drawing them into closer involvement with the religion that they may in the end achieve the objective of conversion "*for the sake of heaven*". This is what Hillel had in mind when approached by the heathen who intended to proselytise and so, too, did R. Chiya. Both encouraged the party, even when an ulterior motive was clearly announced.

Looking, too, to the centuries at the turn of the first millennium of the current era when the authoritative sources were known as the *Geonim*, whose function it was, as principals of the leading Talmudic academies, to disseminate their Talmudic knowledge and to expound on its application in daily life. During this period, many expositors held there was no need for the Beth Din to interrogate the applicant for conversion, as to the motive. Maimonides⁽²⁸⁾ argued that if an ulterior motive was found by the Beth Din, the candidature ought to be rejected but he further stated, however, that if this were a *post factum* discovery after

circumcision had been effected, as well as immersion in the ritual bath before three witnesses, the conversion be regarded as valid.

Another *responsa* by Maimonides dealt with the case of a Jew who cohabited with a female slave. Maimonides made it quite clear that he ought not to have done so in the first place. Knowing, however, that the relationship would invariably persist, the situation ought to be facilitated by her conversion. This ruling was derived from a well-known *dictum*,⁽²⁹⁾ *"This is a time to work for the L-rd because they have made void my law"*.

In the commentary supplied by the Rev. Dr. A. Cohen (1950:41), it is stated

"A special application was given to this verse by the Rabbis who read into the words the meaning, 'At a time of working for the L-rd, they violated Thy Torah', to justify the temporary abrogation of a commandment in an emergency when the purpose is to maintain the general integrity of the Torah."

Nevertheless, Maimonides' opinion was to encounter opposition. Those who disagreed with him asserted that such a ruling would encourage interfaith relationships, followed by a demand for conversion, which would certainly then be for the ulterior motive.

It was then posed as to which was the least of two evils - whether to admit a convert with an ulterior motive or to allow the Jewish partner to continue living in sin. A possible solution to both these views, one that is currently held, is for the conversion authority to base itself on the anticipated final result of a motive which was initially ulterior, but showed itself capable of transforming into one *"for the sake of heaven"*.

Avi Sagi and Zvi Zohar (1994:45) referred to a response by Rabbi Kluger (1785-1869). The case cited was that of a Jewish soldier in Western Europe who fell in

love with a Gentile woman. On completion of his service, he brought her to his parents. There was absolutely no doubt that her desire for conversion related solely to her relationship with her Jewish partner rather than any concern for Judaism itself. Rabbi Kluger allowed the conversion. He felt the sense of religious commitment on the part of the Jewish spouse was weak and if his lover were not converted there was a good chance he himself would defect to her religion.

From this example, a trend can be traced which takes into account not only whether the applicant has ulterior motives, but consideration for the position of the Jewish partner as well. In this connection, an incident is brought down relating how a certain woman came to the *Yeshiva* of Rev. Hiyya, approaching the latter with a request, "*Master, give instructions about me that they make me a proselyte.*" R. Hiyya replied, "*My daughter, perhaps you have set your eyes on one of the disciples.*" When she indicated the affirmative, he said, "*Go and enjoy your acquisition.*" ⁽³⁰⁾

Rabbi Hiyya's acceptance of a convert for the sake of marriage is somewhat different from that of Rabbi Kluger. Whereas the latter felt the proselytisation experience would strengthen the religiosity of the parties, particularly the Jewish partner, here the Jewish partner provided an ideal environment for Judaic growth of the other.

In contrast with these lenient opinions, Rabbi Hildesheimer (1820-1899) came up with an attack on the Beth Din. He went as far as to say that if a Beth Din converts one whom they know at the outset has an ulterior motive, it stands responsible for any future transgressions on the part of the candidate, because it knows these are likely to occur.

Mostly, it was felt that a Beth Din countenancing an ulterior motive as a ground for conversion would bring about a lesser sin, as compared with the greater trespass on the part of a Jewish person living conjugally with a Gentile.

It would seem that a dominating factor influencing a Beth Din, which is friendly to an obviously ulterior motive for conversion, is their optimistic expectation of observance in the post conversion stages. To adopt such a view, however, surrounding circumstances and environmental factors have to be looked at.

In this regard, Zvi Zohar (1994:84) brings an interesting response from the former Chief Rabbi of Israel, Rabbi Herzog, which deals with the couple which petitions for conversion in the Diaspora, with the intention of emigrating to Israel. This, I might add, was a scenario which emerged frequently in the case studies, as well as in my own community.

Rabbi Herzog reasoned that, if the proselyte and partner wished to leave their home and settle in Israel, this itself demonstrated a motive for the sake of heaven and therefore the conversion ought to be encouraged. It is also found that if the conversion took place in Israel itself greater leniency was exercised, since the probability was that the couple would continue to live there and that motives originally ulterior would materialise as "*for the sake of heaven*".

A strong protagonist of this viewpoint was Rabbi Unterman. On this basis, mixed marriages amongst the tide of Russian Jews migrating to Israel were given special consideration for conversion.

Dealing with conversion for the sake of marriage in the present generation, Finkelstein (1994:139) makes the point that this question was raised consistently from the days of emancipation in 19th century Europe and he gives four main reasons for the frequency of the issue.

- (i) With the lifting of State prohibitions against proselytising Gentiles to Judaism, the demand increased for such conversions.
- (ii) A greater social status was enjoyed by the Jew. This led to a high rate of association with Gentiles resulting in civil intermarriages.
- (iii) Secularity rather than religious observance was playing a more important role in the lives of Jews.
- (iv) The rise of the Reform movement provided an alternative route for intending converts, in the absence of leniency on the part of Orthodox authorities.

The latter feared that not only would more and more intermarried couples look to Reform and Conservative institutions to solve their dilemma but, having obtained validation of Jewishness from a non-Orthodox movement, their circulation within the broadest perimeter of Jewish communal life would lead to social problems. In fact, the present situation confirms that this phenomenon is taking place on a large scale.

Much of modern-day literature on "conversions" addresses a crisis of recognition as to the validity of proselytisations conducted beyond the bounds of an Orthodox Beth Din. A great deal of trauma has been experienced by converts who had completed the process in the Conservative or Reform movements only to find rejection by the Orthodox.

Many of the cases that appeared in Beth Din archives represented applicants who believed themselves to be fully fledged Jews by virtue of non-Orthodox conversion.

The way in which the Beth Din dealt with such issues is a section on its own, which merits fuller treatment further in this study. Suffice it to say, it was a significant factor influencing attitudes towards the acceptance of converts, despite the motives involved, bearing in mind marriage to a Jewish partner features as a major reason for seeking proselytisation. This is not to say that the concept of conversion "*for the sake of heaven*" be underplayed. That potential converts do in fact fulfil this ideal is still the end goal in the minds of the conversion authorities and it is towards that objective that ulterior motive is entertained in the earlier stages of the process.

Moreover, conversion bodies are well aware of the inherent dangers to which Hildesheimer refers, and do see this as an Halakhic challenge. This, the construction of their approach takes into account. It is for that reason that the applicant is required to engage in a lengthy course of study, within an in-depth programme of involvement in Halakhic Judaism, the instructional value of which is aimed to produce a conversion "*for the sake of heaven*".

3.3 The role of the Beth Din

Within a protracted history of Judaism, the admission of proselytes into its ranks has been approached both positively and negatively. Governing both these schools of thought, each of which made its impact, were differing perceptions as to the validity of the motives on the part of the applicants, whether expressly declared, or detected. In all instances, decisions had to be made one way or another, by a recognised authority set up for that purpose.

This sub-section of the Halakhic inquiry into conversion to Judaism concentrates on the role of the designated body which spelled out policies in, *inter alia*, that particular area and likewise delivered verdicts concerning applications by proselytes. Throughout the Historical survey, the functionality of the Beth Din was palpable. So, too, in the preceding Halakhic sections the Jewish

Ecclesiastical Court was seen to be a major player. Inasmuch as this essay delved into the opinions of Sages and spokesmen, so, too, is this an essential preoccupation of the Beth Din. In Europe until the close of the 18th Century, close-knit Jewish communities enjoyed a great deal of autonomy, such that was sanctioned by the State. Under those circumstances, the Beth Din wielded immense temporal power as a locally based court.

In an entry into the *Universal Jewish Encyclopaedia* (1939 Vol.2:250) Raphael Mahler tells us,

"When the various states abolished Jewish autonomy at the end of the 18th Century they at the same time took away the power of the Jewish courts. State courts were made obligatory upon all citizens. However, the Beth Din courts still survived, but only as courts for decision in ritual matters, and as courts of arbitration. In the latter role the Beth Din has continued to function, both in Eastern Europe and the United States, wherever large numbers of Jews are to be found in a community"

At no time, however, did the Beth Din exist in a state of insularity. Surrounding socio-political factors always had their influence. Neither, by the same token, were their sets of ideologies irrevocably stayed. Obviously the fundamental religious framework had to be consistent but the same rock-bound system allowed for a flexibility, which the Beth Din decidedly employed. Apart from the fact that this religious judicial structure had to operate from region to region constantly touched by external political developments, the institution dates back to Biblical times.

Originally Moses was the sole adjudicator but he was later persuaded to delegate responsibility.⁽³¹⁾ His consequent establishment of a composite network of judges and assistant judges was to lay the foundation of the Jewish ecclesiastical judiciary to come.

The appointment of a Beth Din on a localised basis owes its origin to a Scriptural injunction:

"Judges and officers doth thou appoint in all thy gates." ⁽³²⁾

Characterising Temple times was a hierarchy of the Sanhedrin functioning as the highest council of State and administering justice according to the law of the Torah. After the destruction of the Second Temple in the year 70, the Sanhedrin ceased as a political entity and remained as an advisory organ for the interpretation of the Jewish Mosaic Code. By the end of the 2nd Century the Sanhedrin had all but faded into oblivion and its work fell upon the Beth Din. In fact in the Talmud the Sanhedrin is often referred to by the name *Beth Din Gadol* (the Great Beth Din).

With the establishment of the State of Israel, the wider legislative powers enjoyed by the Beth Din in 18th Century Europe were somewhat revived and gained governmental recognition. In the Diaspora, they have no state-enforced jurisdiction. For the Jewish community over which each Beth Din presides, *responsa* are delivered on religious matters. Apart from ritual and arbitration so, too, do the mechanisms of Jewish marriage and divorce, as well as the maintenance of the dietary laws, fall within its bounds. Amongst the matters that come before a Beth Din are those appertaining to conversions.

The leader of the Jewish Ecclesiastical Court is called Rosh (leader of) Beth Din and where the latter also happens to hold the office of Chief Rabbi he is known as *Av* (father of) *Beth Din*. In South Africa, however, at present these two positions are distinct. The National Chief Minister is Chief Rabbi Cyril Harris and the *Rosh Beth Din* is Rabbi M. Kurtstag. I shall be presenting my interview with the current *Rosh Beth Din* in this country, as this will prove relevant to the ultimate focus of this work. To understand, however, how the Beth Din

expresses itself in a South African context, the operative precepts upon which a Beth Din is constructed and how it works have to be examined.

Once again, the ancient sources come to the fore and begin with the question posed by the Rabbinical authorities: *"Who is qualified to admit the proselyte?"*

First we look at the three major facets of the conversion -

- (i) acceptance of the commandments;
- (ii) circumcision in the case of a male;
- (iii) immersion in the *Mikvah* (the Ritual Bath).

The debate in which the Talmud, and subsequently our Sages, engages centres around the issue, *"Is it necessary for the Beth Din to preside over the fulfillment of all three of these requirements, or only one aspect?"* Circumcision for the male can be classed alongside the immersion as the physical side of the act of conversion, whilst acceptance of the commandments is an abstract phenomenon. It will be seen from the ensuing discussion how the necessity for the presence of a Beth Din at one or all of these acts of conversion is bound up with the issue of the number of witnesses/judges required for each of the individual parts of the process.

There is a statement appearing under the name of Rabbi Hiyya ben Abba which reads,

"Our Rabbis taught: 'And judge righteously between a man and his brother and the proselyte that is with him' (Deut. 1:16). From this text did R. Judah deduce that a man who becomes a proselyte in the presence of a Beth Din is deemed to be a proper proselyte; but he who does so privately is no proselyte." ⁽³³⁾

From thence it is derived that the use of the word "*proselyte*" in the same context as "*judge*" deems the proselytisation "*mishpat*" - a judicial matter - thus requiring a Beth Din.

Rabbi Hiyya ben Abba states earlier that the process of conversion needs to be overseen by three witnesses as this is the minimum membership of a Beth Din, but the question remained as to the level of expertise which would qualify a party to sit on the tribunal.

Ab initio, it can be assumed that the optimum is a high standard of the appropriate learning on the part of all three. In order to answer the question "*What qualifications were required for the individual members*", the opinion is sought of a modern authority, the late Rabbi Moshe Feinstein ⁽³⁴⁾ who held any three Jewish people can serve on the panel as long as they know how to convert correctly. He concluded, however, that one of the Dayanim ought to be learned and thoroughly versed in the process so that he is able to instruct his colleagues accordingly. Once again, however, the issue is intertwined with another, namely as to which part or parts of the initiation the full three witnesses are required. Tosafistic comment on *Yebamoth Yerushalmi* ⁽³⁵⁾ is of the opinion that the three are required to witness the immersion, whilst the commentator, the Rosh, says that it is to the acceptance of the commandments that this procedure applies. On the one hand Maimonides ⁽³⁶⁾ asserts that a proselyte who immersed before two is not a proselyte, thus establishing that three have to supervise the physical act. On the other, the *Shulkhan Arukh* ⁽³⁷⁾ insists on all three steps - acceptance of the commandments, circumcision of the male and immersion to be conducted by three appropriate *dayanim*.

This leads us to a discussion as to which is considered the essence of conversion - acceptance in principle or the actual act of immersion, which represents a corporal transformation from a previous status to the current one? But then it is posed, which is the transforming act and therefore which is the

actual legal matter referred to as "*mishpat*". In other words, what is the essence of conversion - the acceptance of commandments or the immersion? And of these, who say it is the former, some say the convert ought actually to signify his acceptance and others that the Beth Din instruct the proselyte in some of the laws, before the finalisation of the process.

In the course of the debate, which has extended from Talmudic times and through the post-Talmudic era, a further controversy arose - how to deal with conversions that were not carried out according to the prescribed formula for physical and abstract acceptance. What, for instance, would be the position if it were subsequently discovered that the immersion took place at night or on the Sabbath? These were occasions when *mishpat* (judgment) could not be given. Thus if the essential aspect of conversion was the immersion, the attestation of which is prohibited at night or on the Sabbath, it is invalid and the conversion is thus null and void. If, on the other hand, acceptance of the commandments was held to be the main concern, then the conversion could *post factum* be validated.

Zvi Zohar (1994:69) brings down the debate of two leading Rabbis - Posner and Lipschitz. The latter held that not only is acceptance of the commandments a condition of the conversion, it is the most meaningful type of transformation because it represents internal change in identity. His opponent, however, saw the completion of the major aspect of conversion in the holy action of the body.

The analysis of the foregoing interaction between the authorities provides a background to the central issue, which is the South African model. For the purpose of this study, one had to look at the principles involved when the Beth Din in South Africa does actually conduct the conversion.

In the first instance, they hold according to the optimum opinion i.e. all three stages of the process are witnessed by three expert judges (or a panel on the basis advanced by Rabbi Feinstein mentioned above). The controversial points

raised in the previous debate are drawn up when confronted with a *post factum* situation.

3.4 Kabbalat Mitzvot (Acceptance of the commandments)

In order to understand that aspect of the conversion process which involves commitment to the doctrine of the religion thus adopted, the significance of the Hebrew word "*Mitzvah*" has to be considered. Literally it means "a *commandment*". Initially, it refers to any of the 613 commandments contained in the text of the Torah but in practice covers all *Halakha* that flows from the Mosaic Code as recognised and endorsed by the authoritative spokesmen for Judaism.

Thus it can be seen that the act of acceptance by the proselyte of what are termed the commandments signifies a great deal more than a general acceptance of Judaism. The entrant into the faith is taking upon himself or herself a great number of specific observances.

In the words of Finkelstein (1994), in his abstract, "*the change in the proselyte's status has a profound effect both on the proselyte himself and his relationship to the environment that surrounds him.*"

Kabbalat Mitvot differs from the other components of the entire process. Whereas circumcision of the male and immersion constitute one-time single activities, the acceptance of the set of commandments that make up the Jewish faith is to bind oneself to a future lifestyle. The introductory chapter looked at the socio-psychological mechanics of advancing from one particular background and its attaching culture to become part of the holistic structure called Judaism. Suffice to say the change is formidable and the candidate has to understand the enormity of the undertaking as borne out in the way in which the Rabbis approach this juncture of the conversion process.

Three major elements have to be involved. The Beth Din has to inform the candidate of the *Mitzvoth*. A potential convert has to be aware of the consequences of the proselytisation. Moreover, there has to be an inner acceptance of the commandments. The sources deal with the way in which these objectives are achieved.

The Talmud says, "*He is given instruction in some of the minor and some of the major commandments*" ⁽³⁸⁾ and this instruction is repeated a little further down in 47b in respect of a female proselyte. This is followed by a principle that the proselyte "*... is not, however, to be persuaded or dissuaded too much.*" In other words, not all the details of the obligations are passed on.

Maimonides ⁽³⁹⁾ says that, when the Gentile wants to take upon himself the yoke of Torah, he is informed of the heavy burden of Torah and the discomfort in fulfilling it.

Further on he writes that he is informed of some of the lenient *Mitzvoth* and then some of the stricter ones. Moreover, he says this instruction ought not to be prolonged, as he might be discouraged from the finer path and revert to his former ways. This view is upheld by the *Shulchan Arukh*. ⁽⁴⁰⁾

The question has to be asked to what extent is the conversion contingent upon the process of informing the candidate of the *Mitzvoth* and how much of it is the proselyte required to accept. In principle, if the informing is inadequate, this does not invalidate the conversion as long as he agrees to accept in principle all of the *Mitzvoth* which had been commanded upon Israel - those that he knows and those that he will be told later.

This is to resolve a basic maxim that there is no partial conversion as it is brought down in *Tractate Behoroth*,

"If a heathen is prepared to accept the Torah except one religious law, we must not receive him (as an Israelite) even if the exception be one minutiae of the Scribes' enactments." ⁽⁴¹⁾

Therein lies a view of the *Mitzvoth* as a full entity and thus the acceptance of Judaism is an acceptance of the yoke of the A-mighty which includes the full 613 commandments and their ramifications. Many times, it is raised as to the position when the Beth Din knows in advance that the candidate will be unable to fulfil most or some of the *Mitzvoth*. Is there, it may be asked, a basis to admit the proselyte according to an acceptance of the code in principle?

Here a distinction is drawn between one who says "*I do not accept a particular Mitzvah*" and one who says he is unable to do so. Some lenient opinions base themselves on the incident of the Gentile who came to Hillel with the request to learn only the written Torah to the exclusion of the Oral Code and he nevertheless converted him.

The *Responsa Achi-ezer* ⁽⁴²⁾ of this contemporary century, rules that, since the proselyte is accepting upon himself all the *Mitzvoth*, even though his intention is to transgress some of them for his pleasure, it is nevertheless not regarded as if he has rejected the commandments, and the acceptance may be deemed valid. If, however, it is certain that at the very outset he will default, for instance with regard to the Sabbath or the Dietary Laws, and if, therefore, it is felt the conversion to be only superficial then it is clear the heart is not in it and that when he says he accepts the *Mitzvoth*, he does not really mean it. This must in fact be regarded as a lack of acceptance of the *Mitzvoth* since that is a condition for conversion. Here, motive is taken into account.

Though most of the opinions hold for the validity of a conversion even if not "*for the sake of heaven*", they equally hold for *Kabbalat Mitzvoth* - acceptance of the commandments - as a pre-condition for the conversion.

Drawing once again from the current procedures for conversion, as in the previous sub-sections, the comprehensive programme for intending proselytes and its duration aims at his maximum acquisition of knowledge and even the experiencing of observance for that period of time.

There is seen an application of the principle of informing the proselyte and the acceptance of the Mitzvoth in the presence of the Beth Din at the stage of immersion. There are, however, cases which will appear further on where the Beth Din relied on the view of *Achi-ezer*.

In an essay featured in a compilation entitled "*The Conversion Crisis*" (1990) contributed by a contemporary New Yorker, Marc D. Angel, Vice President of the Rabbinical Council of America, a case is cited which was referred to Rabbi Uziel in 1951. This concerned the application for conversion of the Gentile wife and child of a Jewish partner who had little intention of being observant. The gist of Rabbi Uziel's response was contained in his conclusion:

"And I fear that if we push them (the children) away completely by not accepting their parents for conversion, we shall be brought to judgment and they shall say to us: 'You did not bring back those that were driven away, and those who were lost you did not seek.' " (43)

Commenting on the decision of Rabbi Uziel, Angel (*The Conversion Crisis* 1990:53) writes:

"From these responsa it is clear that Rabbi Uziel offers a Halakhic perspective which reflects a profoundly sympathetic and understanding spirit. Recognising the practical realities of our world, it is essential that Halakhic authorities courageously respond to the needs."

Thus in the view of Angel, whilst every effort ought to be made to instruct the proselyte in observance of *Mitzvoth*, the conversion authorities should not adopt an elitist attitude towards prospective converts. Rather, they should put their trust in human reason and compassion.

Whilst appreciation of the deduction of Angel and accepting that Rabbi Uziel's decision was valid in the particular case cited, my own feeling points to the danger of adopting such leniencies as a matter of policy will open the doors to further intermarriage, as the requirement for conversion will be minimal on the part of the Jewish spouse. Rather, the initial approach ought to be based on expectation of optimum observance but in certain cases where this is unable to be achieved, one can rely on the reasoning of Rabbi Uziel.

3.5 Conversion of children

In view of the essentiality of *Kabbalat Mitzvoth* as part and parcel of the conversion process, consideration has to be given as to its application when the party in question is unable to make his or her own decision in that regard. *Tractate Ketuboth* ⁽⁴⁴⁾ quotes Rabbi Huna as saying a child, referred to as *Ger Kattan* (a minor convert), is immersed *Al Da'at Beth Din* - on the consent of the Beth Din, and the Talmud explains that this is in accordance with a rule in Halakha that the transfer of a benefit, even in the absence of a recipient, is allowed. We find this rationale applicable, too, in the case of a Canaanite slave who does not require his own consent for conversion. His owner can make the decision on behalf of the slave who is deemed to be receiving *zechiya* (privilege). And so, too, is conversion considered an advantage for a minor child who is not yet mature enough to decide for himself. It will be seen, however, that upon attaining adulthood, the selfsame party acquires the power to reverse the proselytisation.

Since it has been established that it is not the practice of Judaism to seek out converts, obviously the same must apply in the case of children. The issue of converting minors arises in particularised situations.

One such occasion that arose with great frequency throughout the case study occurs when the applicant is a parent and the intention is therefore that the children will convert as well, or when a Jewish family adopts a non-Jewish child. Although the above is the most common instance of the phenomenon, cases will be noted where proselytisation has taken place without the parents and on the authority of the Beth Din who act as a proxy.

In either event and in our days, the Beth Din would require the assurance that these children will be raised in a Jewish religious environment. Otherwise the benefit arising out of conversion would be lost. Rather it would be unfavourable for a child to be received as a convert and then find itself in a position where it is unable to fulfil the minimum, which is the very object of the proselytisation.

Although it has been said that a party converted in infancy has the option of invalidation of the proselytisation, the actual right to do so is analysed in the *responsa*. There is a general rule that if no move is made to invalidate the conversion on achieving maturity, the proselytisation automatically holds and becomes like any other conversion.

A distinction, however, has been made between the child who was raised in a religious home and one who was not. Another differentiation appears in the work of Chatam Sofer.⁽⁴⁵⁾ Rabbi Moshe Sofer (1762-1839) of Hungary who compares the conversion by virtue of parental decision with that which is *Al Da'at Beth Din* - by the consent of the Beth Din, without parents. He asserts only the latter has the right to invalidation, since the enforcement of a conversion by the parents is favourable for the child. The *Shulkhan Arukh*, however, rules that the right of invalidation applies to both.

Finkelstein concludes that when a converted minor was not educated up to the observance of *Mitzvoth*, the proselytisation was not beneficial and holds that even in the opinion of the Chatam Sofer, the option of invalidation may be exercised.

Since the ultimate objective of this study is to unfold the practical manifestation of the issue I advance my own observation extracted from case study. Statistically, it will be revealed that a substantial percentage of those converted were in fact minor children. Where I had information available as to the post-conversion stages, I did indeed find many of the subjects grew up in a non-religious home. I did not, however, come across a single case of subsequent renunciation of the conversion.

Before ending off this section I shall briefly refer to conversions performed *Al Da'at Beth Din* - by the consent of the Beth Din, without the parents. These did happen and will feature in the case studies. Mainly, they were residents of Arcadia Jewish Orphanage and, for certain reasons, the mother either was not forthcoming or was unable to be converted herself.

3.6 The convert and the Cohen

Leviticus ⁽⁴⁶⁾ sets forth the regulations by which a *Cohen* is bound. This precludes their marriage to certain categories of women and the Rabbis apply this as well to a converted Jewess.

In the event of a proselyte signifying intention to marry a *Cohen*, an immediate Halakhic dilemma is created. Once converted, her marriage to a *Cohen* is a transgression and as has already been learned from *Tractate Behoroth* ⁽⁴⁷⁾ that a non-Jew who accepts all the commandments, except for even one minutiae of the Scribes' enactments, is liable for rejection.

Some argue as to whether the injunction to rejection holds as a Biblical commandment for post-Temple times. Most opinions of the day do uphold the applicability of the Biblical command and would not officiate at the wedding of a Cohen and a converted Jewess.

As a current topic, the Halakhic problems involved surface on a regular basis. In the local case file, too, many instances are encountered where an intending proselyte either intends to wed a Cohen or is already civilly married to him, bringing their plight face to face with the restriction stated in *Behoroth* to the extent that it refers to "*one point of the special minutiae of the Scribes' enactments*". These words of the exponent sage, Rabbi Jose ben Rabbi Yehudah, refer therefore even if the prohibition in this and others is Rabbinic.

Once when confronted with such a case of the issue in question I referred to my teacher, the late Rabbi Yitzchak Chazan of blessed memory, who was a member of the High Court of Jerusalem. My question which was quoted in his book *Y'Chavei Da'at* ⁽⁴⁸⁾ was the case of a Cohen who married a Gentile, who was accepted as a convert by the Reform and married by them. Neither act was recognisable by the Orthodox. Was there any basis, I asked, upon which we could convert her and the children that were born to her to Orthodoxy, bearing in mind she had every intention of remaining with her husband. This my teacher also saw as coming into conflict with the maxim of Rabbi Jose ben Jehuda and in his reply he quoted, too, Maimonides ⁽⁴⁹⁾

Amongst his intensive delving into the sources he brought forth a lengthy responsa from the late Chief Rabbi Herzog. The latter acknowledged that a Beth Din may be lenient in certain cases, where they know the candidate would be unable to meet all the *Mitzvot*. But this scenario was different. At the outset, the convert married to a *Cohen* was in violation. Moreover, the Beth Din would be in a position that by converting her they would be encouraging her to live with her

husband in an Halakhically non-marital state, one which they could never consecrate by Jewish marital rites.

Rabbi Chazan concluded that unfortunately such a conversion could not be allowed. Nevertheless, the mother ought to be encouraged to observe the commandments even though she is not converted, as this would create an ideal situation to at least convert the children. Once again, it is seen that the anticipation that the children would be raised in a religious Jewish environment, is a strong case for the conversion of the children without the mother.

It is important, too, to note there were opinions, although not the majority, which would hold for conversion, even if the proselyte is living with a *Cohen*. Zvi Zohar (1994:70) quotes a response by Rabbi Hoffman concerning a *Cohen* married civilly to a Gentile. The Rabbi held that she could convert in order to rectify the position of the *Cohen* and her children so that he would not be lost to the people Israel. At the same time, Rabbi Hoffman stresses that the couple would not be able to marry according to Jewish rites.

In the perusal of the Beth Din archives there have been some cases where the lenient opinion has been upheld. Mostly, however, such a petition is rejected.

3.7 Act of conversion

As stated previously there are certain conditions in order to proceed with the conversion, the principal stages being *Kabbalat Mitzvoth*, immersion and circumcision of the male and only by finalisation of this process the party became a convert. In a case where a male proselyte is already circumcised there is a procedure called *Hatafat dam*, the drawing of blood from the area of the circumcision by the prick of a needle and then he is immersed.

In the time of the Temple, there was an additional step to be taken and that was the bringing of a sacrifice. Maimonides ⁽⁵⁰⁾ held that, by bringing the sacrifice, his entrance into the Jewish religion is completed and he becomes like all Israelites. In the present day when the Temple is no longer in evidence this requirement has fallen away. The Talmud ⁽⁵¹⁾ states that Jochanan ben Zakkai, the head of the Sanhedrin at Yavneh in the 1st Century, had already ruled that the proselyte's burnt offering of cattle or two young pigeons ceased to be an obligation.

These times have seen a standardisation of the conversion procedure. The Chief Rabbi of Cairo (1891-1921) describes an actual conversion process. ⁽⁵²⁾

He demonstrates how the three judges immerse the convert. This ceremony has to take place during the day. Whilst the candidate is still in the water the judges inform the party a second time as to the obligations of the conversion. This they do by repeating some of the lenient and some of the stricter *Mitzvoth*. While still standing in the water, they ask, "*Do you enter into the Jewish religion with all your heart?*" The answer is "Yes". This exchange is followed by a series of questions. "*Are you converting for an ulterior motive or for 'the sake of heaven' "*". "*Do you accept upon yourself willingly the punishment upon transgression of the lenient and stricter Mitzvoth as explained to you upon your acceptance of the Jewish religion?*" And then they instruct the convert, "*When you will immerse, intend that this immersion will be for the sake of the conversion, so you will enter by it to the Jewish religion together with the circumcision which was performed. By this immersion you finalise your entrance into the Jewish religion.*" Then the party will immerse accordingly in front of the *dayanim*. Once having emerged, the proselyte is regarded as any other Jew in every other respect.

3.8 Cancellation of conversion

The convert acquires a status equal to that of a home-born Jew, which is permanent. Rabbinic literature has, however, raised the question as to the possibility of retrospective cancellation of the conversion.

One instance that is quoted is fraudulent intention on the part of the candidate if it were discovered that there was no genuineness to accept the Mitzvoth at the outset.

Once again, it is cited that once the conversion is finalised, the proselyte is in the same position as an unobservant Jew. *Yebamoth* ⁽⁵³⁾ adds that even if the convert reverted to former religious behaviour patterns, invalidation is not possible because he would be regarded then as a Jew that transgressed.

In general, conversions are not subject to cancellation with the exception of a subsequent discovery that the conversion was not properly performed. This is a Halakhic facility applied for the purpose of resolving complications.

There have occurred certain cases of this nature encountered in case study and the well publicised "*Mamzer*" case in Israel in the 1970s. The word "*Mamzer*" refers to an illegitimate child. Halakhically, this designation applies to an adulterous or an incestuous offspring. If a Jewish woman becomes separated from her Jewish spouse and fails to obtain the *Get*, she is still married in the eyes of Halakha. An Orthodox Rabbi would not then officiate at a subsequent marriage but she may well marry civilly or approach Reform. In either event, her co-habitation becomes adultery and any child born to that marriage is a *Mamzer*. Moreover, any future issue of the marriage of a *Mamzer* to a Jewish person perpetuates this status.

On the whole Rabbinical authorities, although unable to change a law of Torah, have attempted to find Halakhic legal mechanisms in order to relieve the *Mamzer* of his disability.

Had the Jewish spouse been a proselyte, the Beth Din seeks out evidence as to her non-observance or reversion to her former religion. They will examine the actual conversion procedure for flaws. If such evidence is found, the Beth Din will annul the original conversion. Thus it will be considered she was never Jewish in the first place, which in turn, will mean there is no need for her to obtain the *Gef*. Following this the status of the child will alter from *Mamzer* to Gentile, placing him or her in a position soluble by late conversion. This is a classical example of a conversion, which may be invalidated.

3.9 Conclusion

This chapter has served as a guideline to the Halakhic legal aspects of conversion. In compiling this section principal issues have been selected. The main purpose of this study is to obtain a comprehensive understanding as to the practicalities of proselytisation in the present days. As a preface to the juridical material, the development of attitudes towards conversion were traced arriving at the policies of the modern Beth Din and the motive of the convert was looked at as a central concern. Actual Halakhot were stated but the destination was their contemporary application by the Beth Din and the investigator looked at the work of the Beth Din in that area. Some of the phenomena which confront the Beth Din are legion but unusual cases also emerged.

Focussing, too, on the actual procedure by which a proselyte is admitted to Judaism it was seen how the Talmudic model has held for perpetuity. What will be of particular interest are the forthcoming chapters in the current programme that is practised by the Beth Din in response to requests for conversion.

CHAPTER 4

JOHANNESBURG BETH DIN ARCHIVES

4.1 INTRODUCTION

The preceding inquiry into the theory, history and Halakha attaching to the subject of conversion to Judaism, more specifically in a local setting, now sets forth to cover the actual realities of the phenomenon in question.

Data relating to the subject were collected from the archives of the Johannesburg Beth Din and analysed in various relevant categories. The information thus assembled was represented in statistical tables and interpreted by samples of cases, which appeared in the archived files and supplemented by responses to the interviews which were conducted.

I felt that the objectives of this work would be better achieved if we had an opportunity to view the subject "Conversion in South Africa" on a holistic basis. Thus it was important, too, that the situation would be better appreciated if it included insight into Reform conversions as well. Unfortunately, attempts to obtain such information did not meet with success.

I was, however, able to obtain a recent report (1997) from the South African Jewish Board of Deputies on demographic trends in South Africa, which states:

"A total of 39 conversions took place in Johannesburg and Cape Town under Orthodox auspices in 1997. By comparison, Orthodox conversions in the years 1992-1994 averaged 52. The Orthodox annual conversion figure contrasts markedly with that of the Progressive movement. Adding the Johannesburg figure (43, not including Temple Israel) to the estimated combined total of Cape Town and Port Elizabeth (an average of 41 for the period January 1995-June 1997) reveals that over two-thirds of conversions are taking place under Progressive auspices. Moreover, these figures exclude the progressive congregations in Pretoria, Durban and East London. Since the Progressive

community makes up at most around 13% of religiously affiliated Jews, this figure is highly disproportionate. It is not known what proportion of conversions are linked to marriages with a Jewish partner."

Thus in the absence of further information obtainable from the Reform, this chapter will concentrate on Orthodox conversion.

Before proceeding to quote relevant statistical data relating to the subject of conversion in South Africa and examining those in various socio-demographic categories, it is important to look at the functioning of the Beth Din itself because of the role of the Beth Din archives as a source for this information.

The section in the preceding chapter "*The Halakhic Position*" traced the origin of the system of the Beth Din and described its role in the conversion process. The facts therein presented effectively serve as a background to our study of the actual *modus operandi* of *Batei Dinim* in the localised perspective of this essay. As adjudicating courts, the *Batei Dinim* in this country constitute the ultimate determining factor as to the rate of conversion in South Africa as examined both from the historical and geographical point of view. It has to be taken into account that this inquiry deals with a period spanning some seven decades, during which time the Beth Din in South Africa enjoyed autonomy from its counterpart in London who had, up till then, been the authority which was invariably drawn upon for Halakhic rulings on various issues, including conversions. During this time, when local *Batei Dinim* have been operative, the outlook on proselytisation has been far from static. We shall see in fact how their policies have evolved and how certain issues have undergone a shift of emphasis. By examining these factors the rather mundane study of figures takes on a connotation which becomes comprehensible.

4.2 Methodology

Case study has been described by Robert K Yin (1990:13) *“as a research strategy ... used in many settings including ... the conduct of a large proportion of dissertations and theses in the social sciences”*

Yin (1990:23) defines case study as *“an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real life context when the boundaries between the phenomenon and context are not clearly evident and in which multiple sources of evidence are used”*.

The localised perspective of this study establishes that *“conversions to Judaism”* have been investigated in the context of reality. Moreover, the study of the various cases extracted from the archives of the Johannesburg Beth Din bring into focus various patterns, which hitherto lacked clarity owing to the various popular attitudes held regarding conversion, as also the volatility in the development of policies held by the Johannesburg Beth Din.

Although the cases themselves were utilised as a principal source for this study, their interpretation was also influenced by interviews and the agenda of various meetings and discussions which took place between myself and the personnel of the Johannesburg Beth Din who were involved with the procedure. The contents of the files themselves served, too, as a multiple source of evidence. The results obtained from the study of the information contained in these cases are responses to the basic types of research questions *“who, what, where, how and why”*. Each case reveals a personality and from the perusal of the files tables are drawn up to show the frequency of conversions with respect to gender, age, marital status, previously held religious affiliations as well as educational and occupational backgrounds of the subjects. A picture is thus obtained as to *“who”* the convertees are.

The *“what”* aspect would refer to the goal which is sought by the prospective converts which is the proselytisation itself and the cases bring out the intensity of their striving for the objective. Also brought out are the locations within the South

African scene where conversions did, in fact, take place. Actual procedures come to the fore as, too, the manner in which they were affected by fluctuating policies of the Beth Din during various periods. The “*why*” aspect is seen in the reasons for conversion that have been supplied. Thus, the patterns which have become perceptible from the case study approach, together with the other strategies – interviews and questionnaires – have been instrumental in obtaining an in-depth understanding of the issue at hand so that these findings may apply by way of recommendation.

The archives of the Johannesburg Beth Din contain a wealth of material, which relates to stories behind actual cases of conversion. Since I was allowed the privilege of access to personal and highly confidential information, I was able, from the correspondence that appeared in the files, to gain insight into the emotions of those embarking on this major transformation in their lives. Through the files there were many moving circumstances, some of them tragic, and the aftermath of the Holocaust also made its impact. There were other cases depicting immense enthusiasm and sublime idealism.

In these files, the history of conversion in South Africa unfolds Halakhic principles, which are applied to meet some of the most complicated and delicate circumstances in some of the most curious of cases. Policies of the Beth Din at various times and in a number of places are seen in action. There is a great deal of interaction between the applicant and the Beth Din, and the lay committee in between, and also between the different *Batei Dinim*.

The selected cases which are integrated into this work represent both recurrent trends and extraordinary phenomena demonstrating that behind the statistical data presented in this chapter, there are very real stories. These files were made available to me for perusal. Obviously this privilege was contingent upon an assurance of confidentiality. Following upon this principle, names and personal details appertaining to candidates for proselytisation will certainly not be revealed in this work. For reference purposes, however, all files were numbered and I am thus able to trace back any such numerical reference to an actual case. This is

the first time in the history of South Africa that access has been permitted to these archives for the purposes of compiling records for publication.

4.3 DEVELOPMENT OF BETH DIN POLICY IN JOHANNESBURG

4.3.1 Relationship between Ecclesiastical and Lay Committee

In tracing the development and *modus operandi* of conversion activities in South Africa I discovered two significant documents in the archives of the Beth Din (*Appendix 1*). These were the minutes of two major meetings between the Rabbinate and the lay conversion committee of the Federation of Synagogue in the Transvaal, one in 1956 and the second in 1972. The substance of the proceedings was to formulate guidelines to deal with applications for conversion to Judaism. In the course of the intensive discussions, which took place, crucial developments ensued with regard to the policy of the Beth Din towards conversion.

In order to gain further insight into this evolvement I have drawn, too, on interviews with members of the Committee and Rabbis who have participated in great measure in procedures for proselytisation to Judaism.

From these documents, it is seen that there were two principal functionaries involved in the local conversion process.

- (i) The Beth Din enforcing the relevant Halakha and making final decisions.
- (ii) The lay committee acting as an auxiliary to the Rabbinical authorities.

From the minutes of the 1956 meeting it is clear that the Conversion Committee, comprised of lay office bearers of the Federation of Synagogues, is already an operative body. Prior to 1952, however, there was no clear direction as to the allocation of roles for the parties responsible for dealing with conversions.

The historical chapter dates back a century before this time presenting insights as to the administrative aspects involved when cases for conversion had come before the Jewish community of South Africa. In the section on "pirate" conversions it was seen how some prospective converts were absorbed by situations set up by individual ministers outside the precincts of recognised authoritative bodies and how the latter reacted. Even as late as 1952 "pirate" conversions were still an issue and a proclamation was issued against them by the Johannesburg Beth Din.

The introductory chapter referred to "pirate" conversions that had taken place even in Biblical times and the historical survey gave account how this type of conversionist activity found place in the pioneering days of the Jewish communities of South Africa. When there has been a lack of centralisation of an established Jewish ecclesiastical jurisdiction, the doors have been opened for unauthorised parties, some of them ordained Rabbis, to conduct conversions independently.

In present day South Africa, because of the strength of the Beth Din, this problem has been eliminated locally. There are, however, instances where prospective converts have gone abroad to seek their objectives. They reason that they can avert the length and demands of the Johannesburg Beth Din by finding a Rabbi in the U.S.A., Israel or elsewhere who will perform a quick conversion for a fee. Mostly, these conversions are not recognised by the Beth Din and have featured quite prominently in the Beth Din files.

Of the "pirate" conversions, those that mainly appear were locally conducted between 1921 and 1952, to which the Beth Din reacted most vehemently, as demonstrated in the cases, which have been selected.

(Cases 20, 21, 22, 23, 24)

As is evident from the historical survey, prior to the 1920s, the jurisdiction of the London Beth Din was invariably drawn upon, in the event of an application for conversion. It was shown, too, that information was sought from the local communities as to the suitability of the candidate. Thus, even then, a mechanism

for the screening of the prospective convert was already in vogue. It is interesting that in an interview with Rabbi Dr. D Isaacs, a Beth Din Dayan, he stated (21.9.98)

"In fact procedures in our Beth Din were largely based on London and we very often consulted with them with regard to standards and policy in most matters which affected our work. Until this day the relationship with London is a close one and we are very often in contact."

Since 1924, however, when the first data relating to conversions became accessible by way of the filing system introduced by the Johannesburg Beth Din, the South African operation was well on its way to its autonomy in matters of conversions. Procedures to handle conversion applications had yet to be standardised.

It was seen how feedback from the congregations themselves had played its part in considering such petitions. Simon (1996:148) reports,

"As early as 1905 the SAJC wrote in an editorial: 'There are three recognised congregations who for all purposes of ecclesiastical control and conduct are entirely independent and autonomous. Each Rabbi can decide for himself who to admit as a convert subject only to the control of his own committee. Attempts are being made to form a unified central body on conversions.'"

Whilst it would be some time before the concept of a "unified central body on conversions" would be realised, it is seen from this editorial the mechanism involving the consultations between the ecclesiastical and the lay authorities. There, too, a stabilised relationship between these two allied functionaries had to be established.

By 1956, when a special meeting was convened in Johannesburg of the Federation of Synagogues and the Beth Din (*Document 1*) to discuss the issue of conversion, an effective machinery had been set up for the pivotal involvement of the lay committee in the process. A system had been devised where the applicants would first appear before the committee and the latter would decide whether or not to

recommend them to the Beth Din. There were usually several meetings with the candidate before the committee made any decision in this regard. During these discussions they would advise, too, what interim steps could be taken by the prospective convert to prepare himself/herself for this objective.

The purpose of the committee was to screen the party and to relieve pressure on the Beth Din. Moreover, it would obviate the danger of placing a Rabbi in a compromising situation. In this way, the lay committee served as a barricade between the applicant and the Beth Din.

It was noticeable from the study of the files in the Beth Din archives how many a time a candidate would press the committee for a meeting, often receiving the reply that they had a congested roll. Judging from the fact that many of the interviews of the prospective candidates by the committee took place well into the night, their claim was well founded, reflecting that there must have indeed been a high demand for conversion in Johannesburg.

Steering the committee was the executive director of the Federation of Synagogues, Mr I J Kagan, whose name featured prominently in nearly all the cases which came before this body during its lifetime. His qualifications to rise to the momentous task involved appear in the profile extracted from a yearbook entitled *South African Jewry 1965* (1965:293). He received his education at leading Yeshivot in Lithuania and practised as an attorney in South Africa, also holding leading positions both in the Synagogue and in Jewish communal life. Hailing from the "old school" and in the light of his experience Mr Kagan possessed the versatility to consider both the religious and secular aspects of his undertaking. Unfortunately, Mr Kagan has since passed on. Certainly, I should like to have interviewed him as I did two other former members of the Conversion Committee, Mr Ivan Sackheim and Mr Arthur Ginsberg.

At the meeting of the 2nd February 1956, Professor L I Rabinowitz, the Chief Rabbi of the Federation of Synagogues, described the relationship between the lay committee and the Beth Din as "*a healthy one... the investigations have been very thorough and cover practically every point that the Beth Din wishes to know.*"

The Chief Rabbi outlined the regulations by which the committee ought to be guided when considering an application. He emphasised that conversions for the sake of marriage were prohibited by Jewish law, as are other ulterior motives and the same applied to conversions immediately after marriage.

A classic case for conversion was the child of a mixed marriage who had been raised to consider himself or herself as Jewish and if the mother was a suitable candidate she, too, could be converted together with the child. Rabbi Rabinowitz felt the correct age for the conversion of a child was just before the Barmitzvah in the case of a male and prior to the marriage in that of a female of marriageable age. The logic behind the latter instance lay in the fact that the party would be separated from her non-Jewish mother and able to start a home on a Kosher basis, thus in a position to fulfil the requirements of Torah. This applied if the mother was not herself included in the conversion. Frequently cases appeared in the files where the female candidate had offered to leave home and immediately set up a *kosher* kitchen. The committee, however, would reply it was not its policy to countenance the splitting up of a family.

With regard to the younger children in the family of a mixed marriage that were seeking conversion, Chief Rabbi Rabinowitz stated they be placed in a school where they would receive a Jewish education. He addresses, too, a rumour that members of the lay committee had co-opted an additional party who had a personal case to consider and this had to be strictly avoided as it was essential that their objectivity ought to be beyond reproach.

Another issue that arose was the monitoring of successful candidates in the post conversion stages. At this stage, it was mooted only in principle but as the study of conversions develops it will be seen how investigation into the stages following the conversion was actually put into effect. This practice was heartily endorsed by Rabbi Rapoport whom I interviewed and there is evidence in the Beth Din files, particularly in the latter years, of reports from Congregational Rabbis on the converts after the proselytisation as to whether they were still adhering to their undertaking.

These files from the mid 80s till now contained warnings by the Beth Din that the conversion is subject to cancellation in the event of non-observance or the discovery of false information supplied by the candidate. The successful convert had actually to sign an agreement authorising the Beth Din to do so, if necessary. As seen, however, from the Halakhic chapter, cancellation of a conversion cannot be easily executed. This admonition was mainly to emphasise the seriousness of the undertaking. In Durban, being the small community it is, I find it relatively easy to keep a vigil on the post-conversion stages. With the immense interest in Torah Judaism in the larger centres stimulated by various outreaches, the maintenance of required religious standards after conversion is facilitated. Potential converts are encouraged at the outset to orientate themselves in these circles.

Reiterating that the general wider involvement in Torah Judaism has opened the doors for socio-religious absorption of the convert, it will be seen how this phenomenon affected the policies of the Beth Din towards acceptance of conversions, as well as its relationship with its lay auxiliaries.

First, however, Document 2 will be looked at, which demonstrates another significant stage in the history germane to this particular section. This was compiled following the agenda of a Special Conference on conversion in Johannesburg, which took place in 1972.

It should be noted here that in-between these two historic meetings certain events brought the lay committee into confrontation with the Beth Din indicating potential friction between the two bodies. In 1960, Rabbi Aloy, who held the position of a *Dayan* at the Beth Din for many years, wrote to Mr Kagan asking him to explain why certain applicants had been placed on a year's probation by the lay committee. Mr Kagan replied that this practice had been known for some time. The object of the probation was to allow a lapse of time before the sub-committee reached a definite decision, in cases where outright rejection was not appropriate. When a candidate was placed on probation possibly up to 18 months he was to call on Mr Kagan who would explain the position. The applicant would be advised to give the matter mature consideration but in the interim to familiarise himself or herself with

Judaism without receiving formal religious instruction that would be authorised by the Beth Din in the event of acceptance for the programme. Also the candidate should study Hebrew and, if the husband was Jewish, to join a Synagogue. Although Mr Kagan submitted to the decision of the Beth Din as to the finality of the conversion, he felt the practice of a probationary period was worthwhile.

Late in 1961 Mr Kagan wrote to Rabbi Aloy indicating that his committee was gravely concerned regarding the length of time before applications were dealt with by the Beth Din. In many cases a year would elapse between recommendation by the committee and the attention of the Beth Din. He added that many congregational leaders felt likewise and that the undue delay was causing unnecessary embarrassment and hardship for the candidate. Moreover, he felt candidates should be advised from time to time regarding the stage of their applications. This appeal, he said, had been conveyed to the Beth Din on many occasions and that if no heed were paid to the contents of his letter his committee would refuse to handle any further applications and that these would be referred directly to the Beth Din.

Rabbi Aloy replied that the Beth Din agreed that everything be done to avoid conflict between itself and its auxiliary and agreed to read every recommendation upon its receipt giving priority to urgent cases whilst other applications would be dealt with in order of their submission. Also undue delay would be eliminated. The Beth Din did not, however, agree to periodic updates to the candidate as to how the application was progressing and advised against corresponding with the party concerned until a decision had been reached by the Beth Din. It is interesting to note that, at that stage, the Beth Din was anxious to retain the input of the lay committee in the conversion process, almost a quarter of a century before a totally opposite attitude led to the abolition of the body.

In 1971, Chief Rabbi Casper wrote to Mr Kagan stating that where the lay committee was reasonably satisfied as to a good expectation that the candidate would maintain religious standards after the conversion and that the circumstances of the applicant's family life would be conducive to these post conversion stages, the committee should feel entitled to refer the case to the Beth Din for

consideration, together with a strong written recommendation from a congregational Rabbi, who knew the family well. At this stage, it can be seen that a foundation was laid for the involvement of the Rabbis on the earlier stages of conversion.

Late in 1971, Rabbi Dr D. Isaacs, received a response from the London Beth Din stating that prospective converts must satisfy the Beth Din that they believe in the fundamentals of Judaism and are willing to observe its laws. Sincerity and conviction followed by a period of time, variable in each case, during which the candidate is actually observant and an example of an Orthodox Jewish life, was acceptable as proof that the convert would continue in the same manner after completion of the course.

It further stressed that the applicant be interviewed by a member of the Beth Din at an initial stage who would assess the potentialities and, when ready, refer them to a teacher. In this regard, the London Beth Din felt that an intermediary committee, lay or Rabbinical, would be of little assistance. Moreover, it commented that, even if a conversion is initially sought for the purpose of marriage, if both parties demonstrate conviction by their observance, their case should not be precluded from consideration.

From the 1972 meeting it is seen how the Beth Din's attitude to conversion for the purpose of marriage was to change, in a manner suggested by the *responsa*. Significant too, was the fact that the London Beth Din had recommended a manner for dealing with applications for conversion, which would be put into effect in South Africa some 15 years later. At the stage of the 1972 meeting Chief Rabbi Rabinowitz had retired from his post, which was subsequently filled by Chief Rabbi Bernard M Casper who was noted for his active involvement in the conversion process and fulfilled the role of liaison between the Beth Din and the conversion committee.

Whereas the 1956 meeting had ruled out conversion for the sake of marriage or any other ulterior motive, the 1972 guidelines were to pose the question as to whether the motives were solely ulterior, or were there other factors that could be

taken into consideration such as character, intelligence, family background of the applicant and, more particularly, the level of Jewishness in the spouse's family. Other considerations were the chance of the marriage lasting and, if it did not, what were the prospects of the converttee remarrying a non-Jew or reverting to the former faith. Here it was felt the committee could play a sterling investigative role whilst the ultimate decision to convert or not be the prerogative of the Beth Din.

It is interesting to note here that whereas Rabbi Rabinowitz had taken a stance, which rejected marriage as a motivation for conversion on the grounds of Halakha, Rabbi Casper had found a way where it was possible. From the wording of Document 2 Point 3, Rabbi Casper is seen to be circumspect not to contradict the ruling of his predecessor. This I found to be Rabbi Casper's approach to other delicate Halakhic issues. One incident that I should like to quote was that of using a microphone on the Sabbath in the Synagogue. It was known that he himself had a microphone in the Great Synagogue at Wolmarans Street, Johannesburg. On his last visit to Durban I took the opportunity to seek his advice on this issue. Chief Rabbi Casper discouraged the installation of a microphone in a Synagogue and explained that the only reason he retained the device in his Synagogue was because it had already been authorised by his predecessor, Rabbi Rabinowitz. In order not to cast aspersions on the former Chief Rabbi, he did not remove it.

In the same spirit, Rabbi Casper chivalrously stated at the 1972 meeting that "*there is no Halakhic departure in what follows from the rules recorded in the minutes of the meeting between the Federation of Synagogues Executive Council and the Beth Din on the 2nd February 1956*". (Document. 2) As the document is perused even further it is evident, however, that a major change was brought about by an interpretative technicality in the former minutes which stated, "*if there is an ulterior motive, or if the motive is particularly for the purpose of marriage, then no conversion can be granted*." Rabbi Casper stated, "*In this context, the word 'particularly' is of special significance*". The Halakhic chapter, in the section on motives for conversion, reviewed this very subject, presenting opinions on both sides of the debate. This very discussion expresses itself as a practical phenomenon in the local environs.

In the case of a child from a mixed marriage, encouraged to regard himself as Jewish, Rabbi Casper said the Committee ought to perform a screening of the same nature as the previous case and unless there were any serious grounds for rejection, of which the Beth Din should be informed, the case be immediately referred to them. Where both parents were non-Jewish, the case should be referred to the Beth Din with the lay committee's observations and recommendations after a year from the original application, in order to test the candidate's sincerity. The initial rejection would be in the discretion of the Committee. On the subject of applications on behalf of minors, the case should be immediately referred to the Beth Din. A candidate ought not to be advised to marry and have children in order to facilitate the conversion. It should be explained that the previous tendency for one desirous of conversion to marry first and bear children had placed the motive for conversion in a category that would be more sympathetically considered by the Beth Din. When the Beth Din adopted a "closed door" policy to conversion for the sake of marriage, the only acceptable motive for proselytisation was that of a child from a mixed marriage. If the conversion of the child was approved, the Beth Din would consider converting the mother as well. Thus the practice of marrying first, bearing children and then applying for conversion became a tactic to circumvent the prohibition imposed by the Beth Din of the day.

For the post conversion, Rabbi Casper encouraged the lay committee to keep contact with the converts and to offer assistance in the maintenance of their Judaism. It would seem that in the main the difference in the guidelines of 1956 and 1972, apart from the more lenient view on the ulterior motive, was the increased involvement of the Beth Din in the various stages of the process. This was a trend that was to undergo even more dramatic developments. It has been mentioned that there were movements aimed at bringing about more widespread observance of Judaism. It was at this time that there was a growing amount of criticism of the fact that many members of the lay committee did not maintain the level of observance, which they demanded of the candidate. Mr Sackheim recalls that when this issue was raised in the Council of the Federation of Synagogues, he approached Rabbi Casper who replied, "*Don't try for the impossible ... bring more people on your committee who are observant ... do it gradually.*" The attempts to

find observant persons to serve on the Committee met with little success. Moreover, the Beth Din was demanding higher standards of observance on the part of the candidate, ultimately even to the extent that the partner/spouse be equally observant. As the demands upon the candidate became stricter, so the non-observant members of the lay committee found themselves in a weaker position to enforce them. At the same time, the composition of the Beth Din was growing stronger and had the personnel who could replace the conversion committee.

A leading figure who brought about a revolution in the entire conversion process was Rabbi Kurtstag who was subsequently to rise to the office of *Rosh Beth Din*. He felt the involvement of the Committee in the initial stages of the conversion process was looked upon as a powerful tool affecting the destiny of the people whom they accepted or rejected. Rabbi Kurtstag attacked this concept at the Federation of Synagogues conference taking into account the very fact of the inadequate level of observance of many of its members. As a result, there were resignations by Committee members and finally the lay committee was abolished. The same happened in Durban when I was confronted with the selfsame issue. In 1988 I dissolved the local conversion committee.

In its place a system was established where the prospective convert would be interviewed by the Registrar of Conversions. In 1986, Rabbi Bender was appointed to that office and still holds the position. The Registrar monitors the progress of the prospective convert, decides when he or she is ready for formal study and reports to the Beth Din, with recommendation and/or reservations. In my interviews with Rabbis Kurtstag, Bender and Rapoport, as well as Rabbi Dr Isaacs, all agreed the present arrangement to be more satisfactory. For the most part, they were not *ab initio* pro-conversion. Further they felt Jewish people should be encouraged to move in circles which would not tend to lead to intermarriage. Where, however, there was a request for conversion for the sake of marriage, the upgraded programme that demanded total observance from both parties would be beneficial to the continuity of Jewishness. This view has been promoted by Rabbi Kurtstag who feels that one cannot escape the realities of intimate Jewish – Gentile relationships. The practical solution advanced by Rabbi Kurtstag was to compile a

programme, which would bring about a high success rate for conversions, and the prospects of continuity in the post conversion stages.

During the interviews, the Rabbis stated they did not feel leniency or strictness was necessarily the issue. Sympathy, however, was admissible, especially where the applicant was one who was brought up to believe he or she was Jewish. There was room for compromise insofar as the time factor was concerned but not in the principles involved. It was felt that the greater the involvement in the actual content of the demands, the greater the chance of success. Rabbi Bender predicted the number of conversions would decrease but the knowledge and quality of observance would spiral. The availability of Rabbinical functionaries to manage the conversion process points to the achievement of this objective. Moreover, it has relieved the Chief Rabbi of intimate involvement in the procedure, since the role of Chief Rabbi Harris has been extended to cover a multitude of spheres previously unencountered by his predecessors.

4.4 STATISTICAL ANALYSIS – CASE STUDY

4.4.1 Composition of Sources

The archives of the Johannesburg Beth Din contain 1331 cases arranged in alphabetical order dating back to 1924. As stated in the historical section, some conversions did find place prior to that date. The year 1924, however, represents the earliest record appearing in the archives of the Johannesburg Beth Din. Contained in the files are letters of application by the prospective convert as well as the reactions of the conversion committee and the minutes of the interviews of the candidates and closed meetings. Invariably these are followed by remarks and rulings by the Rabbinic authorities. In some cases, the local Rabbinate consults with their counterparts outside the country. There is a great deal of correspondence, too, between the applicant and the conversion authorities, whilst their personal circumstances and background all feature in the files.

Mostly, the files supplied full information creating an excellent basis for case study. In the earlier years, however, the contents were scanty and it took some time for the development of a comprehensive filing system. Later, filing procedures became even more sophisticated to the extent of including a photograph of the candidate. This technique corresponds to Rabbi Bender's service as Registrar for conversions.

In all, 1275 cases were checked for the purposes of this inquiry. This does indicate some 121 missing cases. Many of those fall within the period from 1996 to 1997 representing conversions which were not yet completed or files which had not yet been totally processed. There were also others, which were not in the archives at the time.

Relevant Data

The information extracted as a result of this project related in the first instance to the identity of the candidates in question which as I mentioned is confidential. So, too, their addresses. But the location from which they emanated and where the programme was conducted will feature as a section on its own. Gender, age and marital status of the applicants have all been recorded for statistical purposes as, too, have their respective educational backgrounds and occupations. From these factors, patterns and trends could be established. Previous religious affiliations and attitudes were also investigated.

A major issue arising from the study of the archives was the reason for application. Of rationale supplied by the candidates there are five principal categories.

- (i) Conversion for the sake of marriage.
- (ii) Conversion by conviction i.e. the total absence of ulterior motives.
- (iii) The influence of a Jewish father.
- (iv) Previous Reform conversion requiring Orthodox regularisation.
- (v) Conversion by the Beth Din on the ground of compassion.

Apart from the details relating to the convert himself or herself, those of the partner or spouse were also examined, as well as the reactions of the parents and the Hebrew name chosen by the proselyte.

When it came, however, to the post conversion stages there was very little information available in Johannesburg and, in most cases, not much was known about the parties concerned following the conversion. There was, too, a tendency in the latter cases for the Beth Din to delay granting of the conversion certificate so that the congregational Rabbis could give a report as to whether converts were adhering to a *bona fide* Jewish religious lifestyle. Mostly, however, the files ended with the record of their actual conversion process. As for the Durban conversions, however, I found myself in a far stronger position to report on their progress after the transformation.

Geographical Distribution - Choice of Centres

The analysis concentrates on three major centres – Johannesburg, Cape Town and Durban. For the purpose of this study these selected regions serve as a sample of the total South African Jewish population. The figures appertaining to Johannesburg include other districts under the authority of the Johannesburg Beth Din. Here Johannesburg is seen as the main centre in the Transvaal dominant in all Jewish aspects.

Cape Town was chosen for comparative purposes because it ranks as having the second largest Jewish population. According to the table compiled by Dubb (1994:38) its 1991 figures rates 23477 Jewish souls whilst Johannesburg numbered 63344, the third being Durban with 5184 Jewish persons. Moreover, as a religious oriented centre, Cape Town enjoyed a great deal of autonomy. The Cape Beth Din ran its affairs independently from that of Johannesburg. Up till quite recently it resented the prospect of a take-over by the Johannesburg Beth Din. Firstly, the Cape Town Jewish community was the first organised religious Jewry in South Africa as brought out by the historical chapter. This gave them a feeling of prominence and self-sufficiency. The vast distance between Cape Town and Johannesburg also played a major role in effecting this division and so, too, the

clashes in the personalities of the leading Rabbis in the two centres. Their independence also extended to other religious venues such as managing their own Kashrut operations, marriages and divorces.

Because of their policy not to be directed by the Johannesburg Beth Din it is important to single out Cape Town as a model for statistical analysis, notwithstanding the fact that the wealth of information was not delved in such as had been extracted from the Johannesburg archives, which themselves were sufficiently comprehensive. In the past decade or so this political division between these two regional Jewish Ecclesiastical courts was to give way to a unified situation. Along with the Johannesburg Beth Din so, too, was the Cape counterpart to recognise Rabbi Kurtstag as *Rosh Beth Din*. There is now no longer a Chief Rabbi of Cape Town. The Cape Province falls, too, under the Chief Rabbi of Johannesburg, namely Chief Rabbi Harris.

There are various reasons why Durban was included in this comparative statistical analysis. As a small community it represents the challenges facing all communities of its size, and smaller. In studying the Durban Jewish community, a prime advantage was my own position in this city, together with the experience as its spiritual leader and the ready access to relevant data relating to conversions. Moreover, I have the actual opportunity to witness the post conversion stages. This is an aspect of the conversion, which cannot be effectively studied from a practical point of view in other centres.

Looking at the properties of Durban, they are seen to be in relative isolation from the major centres of Johannesburg and Cape Town. In this sense Durban differs from Pretoria and other towns in the Witwatersrand which, although small, are closer to Johannesburg and thus have a greater access to Jewish religious facilities such as exist in the larger communities.

It can be assumed that the greater the Jewish population in a particular location, the higher the level of religious observance and this, too, could be computed to apply as a characteristic of smaller centres in close proximity to the larger ones. In accordance with this principle it may be postulated that the rate of conversion is

similarly affected. There are, however, other contributory factors. One is the make-up of the population in question.

The study of Durban in the historical section revealed a strong Anglo-Jewish presence dating back to the earliest years in the growth of the community. This is also true of Cape Town, although the later years were to absorb a sizeable Eastern European immigration.

The city of Johannesburg itself was an outgrowth of the 1886 Gold Rush, which attracted the first major Jewish influx from Eastern Europe. Thus the presence of influences from religious orientated Jewish communities was virtually simultaneous with the pioneering of Johannesburg. The Durban Jewish community, on the other hand, continued to feel the effects of an English Jewish population that had originally trickled into its environs from its inception and augmented itself with its growth.

Although many of the Jews from the United Kingdom had grown up in religious surroundings, this factor did not prove as strong as that of the Eastern European Jewish culture. Moreover, English Jews became more easily assimilable into the wider community, giving rise from an early time to increased social contact between Jew and Gentile, thus resulting in a higher rate of interfaith marriage and consequently the demand for conversion.

4.4.2 Quantum of Conversion

Table 1.1 - TOTAL NUMBER OF COMPLETED CONVERTS IN SOUTH AFRICA

Location	No. of converts	Percentage
JHB	1220	55%
C.T.	818	37%
DBN	176	8%
TOTAL	2214	100%

- Remarks :
1. JHB includes country districts
 2. The numbers for Cape Town and Durban as from 1947

TABLE 1.2 – DISTRIBUTION OF CONVERSIONS BY GEOGRAPHICAL LOCATION

Area	No. of converts	Percentage
Johannesburg ⁽¹⁾	881	40%
Pretoria	38	1.7%
Transvaal	140	6.3%
Kimberley	6	0.3%
Other ⁽²⁾	111	5%
Zimbabwe	44	2%
Durban	176	7.9%
Cape Town	818	36.9%
TOTAL	2214	100%

Remarks :

- (1) This figure includes 133 cases where no location was given
- (2) Country districts

A popular perception has been prevalent in the Jewish community that a great number of Orthodox conversions are taking place in South Africa. In my work I was made well aware of this fallacy by both local people and outsiders who believed the quantum of proselytisations far exceeded those that actually took place. I found this view quite widespread in the interviews conducted even with parties directly involved in the conversion process as well as members of the Beth Din and conversion authorities. In response figures are presented relating to the number of completed conversions in South Africa, which are here released for the first time.

From the study of the Beth Din archives, the Durban archives and the list of Cape Town conversions, it was calculated that 2214 conversions took place from the time these were recorded. This total comprises 1396 conversions under the jurisdiction of the Johannesburg Beth Din which includes all centres within its ambit including Durban and 818 by the Cape Beth Din, including, too, districts which it governs. Extracting the figure for Durban shows 176 conversions. The Johannesburg total incorporates conversions from 1924-1997, whilst in Cape Town and Durban there is no information prior to 1947. It is important to note that the comprehensive filing system in Johannesburg also begins in the 1940s. Conversions between 1924 and the 40s were recorded in a memorandum compiled by Rabbi I. Aloy, extracted from various documents in the possession of the Beth Din. Thus the figure of 2214 conversions covers approximately 7 decades.

Another observation is made. The Cape Town figures are more accurate than those of Johannesburg. This is because the Cape Beth Din had, in addition to its files, a centralised recording system in which they entered every conversion in every year. The Johannesburg Beth Din did not have this methodology, thus all the information was based on their files rather than a central list and some of the files were incomplete. It follows that, when assessing the total number of conversions in Johannesburg a certain margin of error has to be allowed.

It has been shown that the Johannesburg figure of 1396 represents both the city of Johannesburg itself as well as the regions, which fall under the jurisdiction of its Beth Din. Out of the total of 1396, 881 converts emanated from Johannesburg

itself. (This figure includes 133 cases where no location was given), Pretoria showed a figure of 38, outlying Transvaal districts 40, Kimberley 6, other country districts 111, Zimbabwe/Rhodesia 44 and Durban 176. All these were conducted by the Johannesburg Beth Din. Those conversions which fell under the auspices of the Cape Beth Din numbered 818 bringing the total number of conversions in South Africa to 2214. (Table 1.2)

Children converted with parents

Johannesburg	918 children
Cape Town	211 children
Durban	101 children
Total	1230 children

These figures represent minor dependants. Their acceptance of conversion was automatically dependent upon that of the converting parent. In the Johannesburg files most of the families had between 1 and 3 children whilst in 2 families there were as many as 7 children.

There appears to be a wide disparity between the ratio of children to the total number of cases converted in Cape Town and Durban as compared with Johannesburg where out of 1275 cases, 918 children were converted with their parents. In the Cape Town sample, only 211 children were found in proportion to the 818 cases. The Durban model showed 101 out of 176 cases.

In order to explain this discrepancy two possibilities may be suggested. Firstly, the fact that the Johannesburg files go back as far as 1924 whereas the Cape Town records begin in 1947. Secondly, because of the leniency of the Cape Town conversion authorities, the vast majority of conversions would have been completed prior to the marriage while in Johannesburg close to 50% of the conversions took place after marriage because of the length and demands of the process.

Moreover, because of the “closed door” policy of the Beth Din towards conversion, many couples applied to the conversion committee once the children were born, as they knew that the partner would evoke a more favourable consideration for conversion. This would place the children in the category of offspring of a mixed marriage, which in Beth Din terms, was then the main acceptable candidacy. Under such circumstances, the mother, too, could be considered for conversion for the sake of the children.

For the purpose of this study only 1275 cases out of 1396 in Johannesburg have been investigated for statistical analysis. The balance of the cases did not provide sufficient information for this purpose.

Conversion of adopted children

A group of converttees categorised separately was that of non-Jewish children adopted by Jewish parents. Though the Beth Din has always been sympathetic to the conversion of adopted children it has been concerned that these children be brought up in a Jewish environment. To achieve this, the obligation has fallen upon the Jewish parents to adjust the level of commitment to Judaism accordingly.

From the year 1951 to the present day, 413 adopted children who had undergone conversion were registered by the Johannesburg Beth Din. Prior to 1951, conversions of adopted children appeared in the archives of the Beth Din along with other conversions. Thereafter such information was entered into a separate register.

It should be noted that conversion of adopted children is a highly emotional issue and the requirement for Jewish parents to raise levels of observance has often been resented.

The project, which became known as Arcadia was launched in 1906 as a home for orphans and displaced children of the Jewish faith. Central to this concept was the provision for its inmates to enjoy the full benefit of a Jewish environment together with its religious facilities.

(Cases 26, 27, 28, 29)

4.4.3 ANALYSIS

In order to explain the factors relating to conversions in South Africa by way of statistical analysis, the following factors were examined.

4.4.3.1 Relation of Conversion to Population Differentials

TABLE 1.3 - FLUCTUATION OF CONVERSIONS PER DECADE

Year	No. of conversions	Growth per decade
1924-1940	40	
1941-1950	86	115%
1951-1960	159	84.9%
1961-1970	228	43.3%
1971-1980	325	43%
1981-1990	250	-22.3%
1991-1997	187	-25.2%
TOTAL	1275	

TABLE 1.4 - JEWISH POPULATION IN SOUTH AFRICA AND JOHANNESBURG

Year/Decade	Total Jewish Population S.A.	Growth	Jewish population Johannesburg	Growth
1920s	62103	46%	22335	74.3%
1930s	90645	15%	38939	29.4%
1940s	104156	4.1%	50371	6%
1950s	108497	5.8%	53423	8.2%
1960s	114767	3%	57806	6.1%
1970s	118200	-0.2%	61325	7%
1980s	117963	-10.4%	65846	-3.8%
1990s	105711 (estimate)		63344	

Remarks : Extract from The Jewish Population of South Africa, The 1991 Sociodemographic Survey, (Allie Dubb)

The report by Allie Dubb (1994:38) gives Jewish population figures. Extracted from this survey is information relating to the total Jewish population of South Africa and that of Johannesburg and these comparative statistics have been arranged, too, on the basis of the decade in question. (*Table 1.4*)

As one can observe from this table, the largest all-time growth rate (46%) took place in the 1920s, largely due to an influx of refugees from Germany and Eastern European countries, who sensed the impending threat of Nazism. At the same time one is able to observe from the selfsame table that a major proportion of this immigration gravitated towards Johannesburg. Thus the Jewish population of Johannesburg in that same period experienced a 74.3% growth.

The second largest growth of the Jewish population was in the 40s (15%) whilst Johannesburg in the same decade had a growth of 29.4%. From the 50s until the 60s there was a growth of 3.3% leading a decline in the 80s and 90s of the Jewish population. Looking, however, at Table 1.3, at the number of conversions that took place in the same decades, we likewise see an increase up to the 80s and a corresponding decline thereafter. The only striking difference lies in the ratio of increase in conversions to population growth. Whilst in the 50s there was an increase in the population in Johannesburg by 6%, at the same time the growth in conversions was 84.9%. (*Table 1.3*) The same trend of discrepancy between the growth of population can be detected up to the 80s. And in the 90s when the decline of the Jewish population is recorded (3.8%) regarding Johannesburg, there is a drop of 22.3% in conversions.

To recapitulate for the purpose of emphasis from the above analysis, the number of conversions did increase and decline, as did the Jewish population of South Africa, but not proportionately. The difference between the rate of population increase/decline and that of conversions was quite extreme.

It is true that the Beth Din files were not restricted to Johannesburg but covered other areas under the jurisdiction of the Johannesburg Beth Din including other Transvaal centres, as well as Rhodesia, Zimbabwe and Durban. Nevertheless, the gulf between conversion figures and population differentials applied throughout and this tendency will emerge further as the individual locations are examined. Variables other than population growth had to be sought.

4.4.3.2 *Development in the policies of the Beth Din.*

In the historical survey tendencies were noticed even in relatively modern times towards negativism on the part of conversion authorities. It was mentioned how this is still the case in the United Kingdom and also that there was a time when conversions in South Africa were conducted under the auspices of the London Beth Din. At the commencement of the period covered by the Beth Din, namely 1924, the local Beth Din had already acquired its autonomy in this regard but the influence of a restrictive policy towards conversions had undoubtedly left its mark.

It can be seen, however, from the 1940s figures and subsequent increases in conversions, that the “closed door” policy was to undergo a gradual lifting and a moving away from the policies of the London Beth Din. At one stage, for instance, application for conversion for the sake of marriage was subject to rejection. In later years it was seen how the Johannesburg Beth Din was to revise its guidelines.

4.4.3.3 *Changed Social Attitudes*

South Africa was affected, too, by a global trend, which saw increased social contact between Jew and Gentile, precipitating a higher rate of interfaith marriages. As a result, the attitude of Jewry changed drastically towards the acceptance of converts. In what may be called the “old days”, Jewish parents of a partner to a mixed marriage were known to engage in ritualistic mourning practices as if they had actually physically lost the child in question. Today, this is almost unknown. In a history of Durban there have been very few cases of this practice, even in previous generations.

It is true that, almost without exception, a Jewish parent will react adversely to a conjugal relationship of a child with a Gentile party but it is almost equally true that the initial upset is counterbalanced by rapid adjustment to the situation and even cheerful approval of the non-Jewish partner opting for conversion.

It becomes understandable, therefore, that a demand for conversion would increase and so, too, the compliance of the conversion authorities.

4.4.3.4 Conversion demands by the Beth Din

Thus far this inquiry has looked at a rising rate of conversions as against a disproportionate rise in population, but nevertheless an upward trend. The last two decades, however, show a decline in both instances. One influential factor is the political situation in South Africa, which led to a substantial emigration. Another is the policy of the Beth Din itself. Though, on the one hand, it became more tolerant to the concept of proselytisation, even where marriage was an indisputable motive, its demands for the prospective convert and the programme became effectively upgraded. It could be assumed that this development caused a number of potential converts to regard Orthodox proselytisation as unattainable and too demanding. Consequently, they would seek out Reform or even settle to retain the *status quo* of a mixed marriage and possibly assimilate.

4.5 Comparative Analysis between the three Centres

TABLE 1.5 - CONVERSIONS TABLE – PERCENTAGE BY YEARS IN EACH CENTRE

Year	1951-60	1961-70	1971-80	1981-90	1991-97	TOTAL
JHB	159 13.8%	228 19.8%	326 28.3%	250 21.7%	187 16.3%	1150 100%
C.T.	157 20.3%	178 23%	186 24.1%	192 24.8%	60 7.8%	773 100%
DBN	10 6.2%	41 25.3%	64 39.5%	32 19.8%	15 9.3%	162 100%

2085 conversions were analysed in respect of the three centres between the years 1951 and 1997. This total excluded conversions up to 1950 and missing cases. Whilst there is data from Johannesburg going back to 1924, the relevant data from Cape Town and Durban only became available in 1947. Thus, for the purpose of this comparative study, the decade 1951-60 was selected as a starting point. The figure was made up of 1150 conversions in the Johannesburg area of ecclesiastical jurisdiction, 773 in Cape Town and 162 in Durban. Then followed a breakdown of

these numbers decade by decade. Table 1.5 shows the percentage of conversions in each decade related to the total number of conversions in each particular centre for the period under review.

4.5.1 Johannesburg

It has been stated that an important consideration to be taken into account in this comparative study is a substantial margin of error in the figures relating to conversions conducted in Johannesburg due to the filing system which had not been adequate in all the years. Moreover, the keeping of records was not always accurate. On the other hand, areas were included which did not physically fall in the actual Johannesburg area but were nevertheless conducted under the jurisdiction of the Johannesburg Beth Din. The purpose of this approach was to draw a distinction from and make a comparison between conversions conducted under the Johannesburg Beth Din and that of the Cape Beth Din.

4.5.2 Cape Town

Cape Town conducted 773 conversions between the years 1951 to 1997. (Table 1.5) Of the figures drawn up, the most consistent on the decade to decade basis in South Africa were those of Cape Town between the years 1951-1990, ranging from 20.3% to 24.8%. It is interesting that during those years Cape Town did not experience emigration, as did Johannesburg where the figures show greater volatility. In the period 1991-1997, however, the number of conversions fell to 7.8% of the total conversions performed in that city. Several possibilities may be suggested.

- (i) The decade in question has not yet run its full course as the available data has only reached 1997 but, unless the number of conversions in its ensuing years exceed estimated calculation, it can be expected that by the year 2000 the rate of conversions in Cape Town will reach 12% of the total expected number of conversions in the region, which is still in sharp contrast to and lower than the steady percentages of the past four decades.

- (ii) A general decline in the percentage of conversions. In the other centres, too, the percentage of conversions in comparison with the total number of conversions from 1991-1997 has been less in the latest period but not to the extent of Cape Town.
- (iii) The closer co-operation between the Cape Town and Johannesburg *Batei Dinim* has brought candidates from Cape Town into contact with the policies of the Johannesburg Beth Din. Stricter standards and more intensive programmes for the admission of proselytes could be a reason for reduction in the number of complete conversions in the latest decade.
- (iv) An availability of more religious facilities. With the influx of Jews to Cape Town there has been a growth in Jewish religious activities, for example the setting up of a Yeshiva, the opening up of more *kosher* restaurants and, in general, the extended use of existing facilities, showing a growth of Judaism, both religious and social. A social climate has been created which may have reduced the factors leading to intermarriage and the demand for conversions.

4.5.3 Durban

In Durban, the third largest community in South Africa, 162 conversions have been conducted during the years 1951 to 1997. Of the total number of conversions performed in Durban, the decade 1951-60 showed the lowest percentage in the region (6.2%) which numbered 10 actual completed cases. By the end of the following decade Durban had performed 25.3% of its total conversions. The increase demonstrates a greater acceptability of the concept. In the next decade (1971-1980) the centre was to reach its peak of 39.51%. (*Table 1.5*)

Several interrelated factors may have brought this about. With each generation social contact between Jew and Gentile had steadily increased in acceptability on the part of the Jewish peer group. Parental disapproval of intermarriage had diminished in its forcefulness resulting in a demand for conversion. The leniency

of the Rabbis also played its part and it will be seen, too, how emigration was to be a boosting factor on the number of conversions. Johannesburg, too, appeared affected in the same way – 28.3% of its conversions performed during that period was likewise its highest in the total period under review. Cape Town, however, increased only slightly from 23.4% in the previous decade to 24.1% in the 1970-1980 period and this was only part of a process of increase in the number of conversions, which was to continue into the next decade.

There is also the attraction in the larger centres because of the size of the community and wider opportunities for active Jewish cultural and social life. This too applies to the religious aspect and in subsequent decades Johannesburg and Cape Town became centres where Jewish religious outreach experienced revived vibrancy. Added to the decline of youth, religious orientated young people, too, tended to gravitate to Johannesburg and also to Israel. In the past few years Cape Town also became a centre of intake for Jewish youth from the smaller centres because of the perception of less crime in Cape Town than Johannesburg. An estimated figure of 60% of students who matriculated at the Jewish Day School, Carmel Crawford, left Durban to pursue their studies elsewhere. This is based on data obtained for the past five years in the records of Carmel Crawford.

For Durban 1981-1990 showed a drop to 19.8% and the latest decade 9.3%. A revision of conversion procedures could well have put off a number of prospective converts. This does not necessarily indicate that conversion authorities had revived a negative approach to the concept itself. In fact provision had been made for the anticipation of a demand for conversion even for the sake of marriage. Demands for commitment on the part of the candidate and the partner were made more stringent and the curriculum of the programme more intensive.

4.5.4 Comparative Study of Conversions by decade between the 3 centres

TABLE 1.6 - COMPARATIVE TABLE - PERCENTAGE OF CONVERSIONS COMPLETED BY DECADES BETWEEN THE 3 CENTRES

Year	1951-60	1961-70	1971-80	1981-90	1991-97
JHB	48.8%	51%	56.6%	52.7%	71.4%
C.T.	48.2%	39.8%	32.3%	40.5%	22.9%
DBN	3.1%	9.2%	11.1%	6.7%	5.7%
TOTAL	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

TABLE 1.7 - JEWISH POPULATION OF METROPOLITAN AREAS 1946-1991

A.

Metropolitan Area	1946	1951	1960	1970	1980	1991
Total South Africa	104156	108497	114762	118200	117963	91925
Johannesburg	50371	53423	57806	61325	65846	56135
Cape Town	19589	20446	22716	25650	26977	19454
Durban	4132	4482	5353	5990	5930	4883

B. Percentage

Metropolitan Area	1946	1951	1960	1970	1980	1991
Total South Africa	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Johannesburg	48.4	49.2	50.4	51.9	55.8	61.1
Cape Town	18.8	18.8	19.8	21.7	22.9	21.2
Durban	4.0	4.1	4.7	5.1	5.0	5.3

Sources: CSS census reports 1918-1991

Extract from The Jewish Population of South Africa, The 1991 Sociodemographic Survey, (Allie Dubb p. 38 and 39)

Another comparison using the same decades and centres looked at the percentage of conversions in each centre in relation to the total number of conversions on a national basis. In each of these decades Johannesburg represented the highest at all times.

In the first period, however, (1951-1960) the difference between Johannesburg and Cape Town was only 0.6% which represented 2 conversions. Almost the same number of conversions took place in Johannesburg (159) and in Cape Town (157)

during the said period, (*Table 1.6*) despite the fact that the Jewish population of Johannesburg was 57806 and Cape Town 22716 by the end of 1960. (*Table 1.7A*)

As the percentage of conversions is compared to the distribution of the Jewish population between 1951-1990 in the three major centres some interesting discrepancies are noted. Only in Johannesburg is the percentage of its conversions in relation to the total number performed in South Africa found to reflect closely the ratio of its Jewish population to the total number of Jews in South Africa.

Taking into account that the Johannesburg conversion figures include outlying districts and other areas falling under the jurisdiction of the Johannesburg Beth Din, the average figure of conversions of approximately 50% becomes even lower. For instance, between 1951-1960 the Jewish population of Johannesburg was 57806 souls out of a national figure of 114762, which represented 50.1% of the total Jewish population and the conversions 48.8% of the total number in South Africa. Cape Town had a Jewish population of 22716 in the 1960s representing 19.8% of the total South African Jewish population, and converted 48.2% of the national total in the same decade. At that stage Durban numbered 5353 Jews *in toto*, which represents 4.7% of South African Jewry and converted 3.1% of the total conversions in that decade. (*Tables 1.6, 1.7A, 1.7B*)

From 1980-1991 begins a leveling out of the number of conversions in each centre in line with the size of the population. Though increased Jewish religious facilities in Cape Town may have led to a stemming of the factors leading to conversion, Johannesburg, which has an abundance of such advantages, in fact shows an excessive rate of conversions. In the latter case, the size and spread of the population over wide areas could well lead to increased interfaith social contact. Thus a sizeable number of intermarriages could be expected to find place in Johannesburg.

Although the conversion procedures have become progressively stricter, the religious facilities available in Johannesburg are advantageous and encouraging to those embarking on a conversion programme. This is also because Johannesburg

as the seat of the Beth Din serves as the source, making contact between the conversion authorities and the candidate more intimate. In regions that are far removed from the main centre a less direct relationship is capable of having an off-putting effect for a prospective convert.

There are three possible factors that may throw further light on the discrepancy in the ratio of population to conversion in the three centres. The discrepancy between Cape Town and Johannesburg can be explained thus.

- (i) The leniency of the Cape Town Beth Din during its years of authority which contributed to the increase of conversions in proportion to their population.

(Case 30)

- (ii) The records of Cape Town are more accurate than those of the Johannesburg Beth Din as they run a book of records in which every conversion has been entered from 1947, whilst in the Johannesburg archives, the filing system, although efficient, does not have a central book of records which lists all the conversions by year or by names. Therefore, of the number of conversions listed in Johannesburg there may be cases where the information relating to conversions has not been filed but exists elsewhere in the records of the Beth Din.

This certainly has been true with the number of cases recorded in Durban, which did not find their way to files of the Johannesburg Beth Din. Whilst 176 conversions were recorded in the archives of Durban only 116 have been found in the Johannesburg counterpart.

4.5.5 Higher rate of conversion in small centres

TABLE 1.8 - GIVEN REASONS FOR CONVERSION BY LOCATION

	Large	Medium	Small	Row Total
Marriage	396 56.6%	96 66.7%	193 69.9%	685 61.2%
Conviction	74 10.6%	17 11.8%	20 7.2%	111 9.9%
Father Jewish	163 23.3%	17 11.8%	38 13.8%	218 19.5%
Prev. Reform	44 6.3%	12 8.3%	17 6.2%	73 6.5%
Beth Din	23 3.3%	2 1.4%	8 2.9%	33 2.9%
Column Total	700 69.5%	144 12.9%	276 24.6%	1120 100%

It could be supposed that a smaller community would have fewer conversions. This hypothesis only holds good insofar as conversion is proportionate to population differentials and, as already shown, there are other variables involved which affect the rate of conversions.

Table 1.8 looks at centres categorised according to their size and the rate of conversion in each division for the purpose of marriage. From these figures a clear trend can be observed. The smaller the centre, the larger the number of conversions for the sake of marriage. Whilst in the large centre 56.6% of the conversions were for marital purposes, the medium centre indicates 66.7% and the small centre 69.9% of the total conversions were for marriage. This reinforces the theory that in a smaller centre there are less potential Jewish marital partners and thus the demand for conversions will increase in proportion to that of larger centres.

Moreover, the attitude of a community facing the loss of its members could well alter the outlook on conversions.

Dubb (1994:31) advances an interesting comment,

"What are the effects of migration? Emigration is a disturbing and disruptive experience not only for the emigrant but also for those who remain behind. At the individual level, emigration of family members, fellow members of a community, colleagues or friends is perceived and felt as a personal loss. At the community level, emigration of members – both rank-and-file as well as leaders – could significantly weaken communal institutions and create an impression of decline in size and vitality. The most common expression of this sense of loss, among South African Jews, has been an exaggerated perception of declining numbers."

An urgency to retain the existing population, both numerically and qualitatively, from a Jewish point of view leads to a reconsidered approach to conversion which is to be added to those caused by declining choice of marital partners within the faith.

Whilst this principle seems to be true of all the centres, Durban may be singled out as an illustration of this dilemma.

The exodus of young adults from Durban was not necessarily due to political trends in the country. A great deal of this migration took place, within South Africa itself, to Johannesburg and Cape Town which offered more exciting career opportunities and more popular facilities for higher academic learning.

4.6 MAJOR SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS

4.6.1 Gender of converts

TABLE 2.1 - GENDER OF CONVERTS BY LOCATION

Location	Male	Percentage	Female	Percentage	Total
JHB	278	22%	988	78%	1266
C.T.	136	19%	578	81%	714
DBN	40	22.7%	136	77.3%	176

Throughout the research, it was not surprising that the dominant gender of the converts was female.

Reasons which may explain this distribution:

- (i) Traditionally the male initiates the proposal of marriage. To fulfil this role he finds himself exposed to a general public from which he will select his mate. The female will experience this selfsame exposure but to a lesser extent. It should also be noted that, in general, a female (even an adult) is more submissive to the influences and direction of the parental peer group, whilst the male tends to act more independently. Jewish males are thus more likely to move in wider social circles, which will take them out of their immediate society and bring them into contact with potential marriage partners of another religion.

A further factor is brought out by Davidman and Greil (1994:83-100). Females are expected to develop mechanisms which will develop a nurturing home environment, as opposed to the male roles in the wider context of society. It follows, therefore, that the pressure on the female spouse to convert is greater than that of the male.

- (ii) Studying parental reaction to mixed marriages, a greater negative reaction is seen on the part of Jewish parents as opposed to non-Jewish parents. This explains, too, that in the greater majority of interfaith marriages the tendency is rather for conversion to Judaism of the non-Jewish spouse than *vice versa*. Seldom did a Jewish partner convert into the religion of his spouse. Either the non-Jewish spouse adopted Judaism or both partners retained their respective religious affiliation. The dominance of the male partner in a relationship could extend to its religious normativity. A Jewish party is more intensely bound up with his socio-religious culture than the Gentile counterpart and, therefore, will tend to insist on the conversion to Judaism on the part of the non-Jewish spouse.
- (iii) Where the Jewish partner to intermarriage is a female, there is not the urgency for the male spouse to convert as there is in the opposite case. This is because children of a Jewish mother, even if outmarried, are automatically Jewish. If a Jewish male does not convert his Gentile spouse, his children will be non-Jewish. This then is a possible contributory factor for the preponderance of female rather than male converts to Judaism. It should be noted also that there are no exact statistics of Jewish females who have married non-Jewish partners.

TABLE 2.2 - REASONS FOR CONVERSION BY GENDER

	Male	Female	Row Total
Marriage	107 43.1%	606 66.3%	713 61.4%
Conviction	31 12.5%	84 9.2%	115 9.9%
Father Jewish	87 35.1%	142 15.5%	229 19.7%
Prev. Reform	15 6.0%	57 6.2%	72 6.2%
Beth Din	8 3.2%	25 2.7%	33 2.8%
Column Total	248 21.3%	914 78.7%	1162 100%

- (iv) In another observation, of the male converts only a low percentage took place for the purpose of marriage. 43.1% of the males converted for the sake of marriage, whilst the female figure was 66.3%. Many of these male converts were either Arcadia orphans or Reform conversions, which sought regularisation of their Jewish status. Of conversions for conviction many more candidates were males. The ratio of males to females in that category is 12.5% male as opposed to 9.2% female. Of the total male conversions 35.1% converted because of a Jewish father as against only 15.5% of the total female conversions. (Table 2.2)

TABLE 2.3 - GENDER OF CONVERTS BY LOCATION

	Large	Medium	Small	Row Total
Male	177 24.0%	32 20.9%	55 18.4%	264 22.2%
Female	562 76.0%	121 79.1%	244 81.6%	927 77.8%
Column Total	739 62.0%	153 12.8%	299 25.1%	1191 100%

(v) Dividing the centres into large, medium and small the ratio of females to males was, in the larger centres 76% female compared to 24% male, in the medium centres 79.1% female as against 20.9% male whilst in the smaller centres 81.6% female as against 18.4% male. From this table it would seem that the smaller the centre, the higher the percentage of female converts. This is possibly due to the closer intimacy within the Jewish social structure in such regions. Jewish males and females who comprise such a small population invariably socialise from an early age. The relationship which they develop is similar to those of siblings or close family members. They will therefore tend not to look at each other as potential marriage partners. This, in turn, will encourage the Jewish male to look beyond the horizons of his immediate local region. (Table 2.3)

(vi) Male-female rates

TABLE 2.4 - MASCULINITY RATES BY AGE AND CITY OF RESIDENCE 1980-1991

A. Totals

	Males per 100 females by age					
	Total	0-14	15-29	30-44	45-64	65 +
1980 – Jews	95	107	106	93	85	83
1991 – Jews	97	113	109	106	88	70
1980 – Whites	99	103	104	105	97	69
1991 – Whites	99	104	102	103	100	70

B. City – Jews 1991

	Males per 100 females by age					
	Total	0-14	15-29	30-44	45-64	65 +
Johannesburg	95	109	106	103	86	68
Cape Town	99	125	103	114	88	73
Pretoria (a)	118	113	146	136	114	73
Durban (a)	102	106	157	104	84	79
Port Elizabeth (a)	104	144	117	77	101	63

SOURCES: Calculated from CSS data 1980 and 1991 for whites
For Jews CSS data for 1980 and multi-source estimate for 1991

NOTES: Ratios for Pretoria, Durban and Port Elizabeth are based on small samples and have a wide margin of error.

Extract from *The South African Population of South Africa, The 1991 Sociodemographic Survey*
(Allie Dubb, p.68)

Dubb (1994:45) supplies an historical reason, which serves as a partial explanation as to why the Jewish male figure is predominant in the outmarriage scenario.

"By 1904, the large influx from abroad of young working-age men into the gold and diamond fields of South Africa had created a marked imbalance in the sex ratio of white, with 132 males to every 100 females. Among the Jews, where the immigrants had rapidly outnumbered the existing community, the proportion of males had reached 211:100. These rates gradually decreased as immigrant women began to arrive in greater numbers and as the proportion of local-born whites – and Jews – increased."

Nevertheless, as Dubb shows, the Jewish male continued to outnumber the Jewish female.

Furthermore, looking into the various ages another factor that could have affected the higher percentage of female converts over and above the males is that, as can be seen from the figures compiled, the ratio of males to females (especially between 15 and 29 years, the marriageable age) is higher. In 1980 the proportion was 106 males per 100 females and, in 1991, 109 males per 100 females. (Table 2.4A)

Furthermore Table 2.4B - Masculinity rates by city of residence (Dubb 1994:68) - shows that, out of marriageable age 15-29 in the 1990s, Johannesburg had 106 Jewish males for every 100 Jewish females and Cape Town 103 Jewish males for every 100 Jewish females while Durban had a striking discrepancy of 157 Jewish males for every 100 Jewish females.

Here is an additional statistical conjecture as to why Jewish males will tend to gravitate towards non-Jewish females for the purpose of marriage.

4.6.2 Age of Converts

TABLE 3.1 - AGE OF CONVERTS

Age	Count	Percentage
1-17	70	8.1%
18-32	563	64.8%
33-40	128	14.7%
41-50	78	9.0%
51-60	19	2.2%
61-65	11	1.3%

Of the 849 cases in which the age of the converts is given it was not surprising to find that 64.8% of the converts fall in the 18 to 32 year old bracket, since this is the major marriageable age and marriage has been shown to be the principal motivation for conversion.

TABLE 3.2 - AGE DISTRIBUTION BY DECADES

Age	1924-30	1931-40	1941-50	1951-60	1961-70	1971-80	1981-97
1-17	100%	100%	35.7%	27.5%	12.1%	4.3%	5.0%
18-32			57.1%	54.9%	59.2%	69.7%	65.7%
33-40			7.1%	17.6%	14.0%	14.3%	15.2%
41-50					10.2%	8.3%	10.3%
51-60					2.5%	2.0%	2.6%
61-65					1.9%	1.3%	1.2%

In this table representing age distribution by decades, the figures relating to the age group 1 to 17 years progressively dropped.

The reasons for these trends are quite clear. During the 1940s the Beth Din maintained a “closed door” policy to conversions. One of the few motivations that was accepted was in the case of children from a mixed marriage. With the gradual changes that were to take place within the Beth Din policies the number of minors converted was to occupy a smaller place in the total quantum of conversion.

TABLE 3.3 - AGE BY GENDER – TOTAL CONVERSIONS IN EACH AGE GROUP

Age	Male	%	Female	%	Total	%
1-17	40	58%	29	42%	69	8%
18-32	124	22.1%	438	77.9%	562	64.8%
33-40	23	18.0%	105	82.0%	128	14.8%
41-50	19	24.4%	59	75.6%	78	9.0%
51-60	5	26.3%	14	73.7%	19	2.2%
61-65	5	45.5%	6	54.5%	11	1.3%
TOTAL	216		651		867	100%

From the above table it is seen that, at the age of conversion (1 –17 years old) the rate of male converts as against females was higher (58% males as to 42% females), a trend which changed drastically at the age bracket 18 – 32 years old where the ratio was 77.9% females as to 22.1% males.

This tendency of a higher female number of converts as opposed to males becomes evident as higher age groups are examined. Only at the over 60 age group is a balancing of the ratio of the genders (54.5% female, 45.5% male). Thus the only age bracket in which the male figure is in the lead is the pre-marital 1-17 age group.

Possible explanation for this phenomenon lies in the fact that during the years up to the age of 17 there are two significant events in the Jewish lifestyle of the male –

namely circumcision and Barmitzvah. From perusal of the Beth Din files these factors were found to precipitate a desire on the part of the parents in a mixed marriage to regularise the Jewish status of their male children. When it comes to the case of the female approaching Batmitzvah there is not the same urgency for conversion. Whereas the Barmitzvah of a Jewish male cannot be performed ritually, without his conversion, because of its implication of further participation in the ritual of the Synagogue, which happens to be purely a male prerogative, this is not the case with the female. Moreover, most Jewish parents feel socially obliged to hold a Barmitzvah ceremony for their sons. A Batmitzvah ceremony on the other hand is a relatively modern innovation, both socially and ritually. Therefore, there were even cases in Orthodox Synagogues, in which it was possible to accommodate the Batmitzvah of a party that was still in the process of conversion. The real confrontation of a female with her religious status will be for the purpose of marriage.

4.6.3 Marital Status of Converts

TABLE 4.1 - MARITAL STATUS OF CONVERTS

Marital Status	No. of cases	Percentage
Married	548	46.6%
Single	590	60.2%
Married through process	37	3.2%
TOTAL	1175	100%

The purpose of this aspect of the study was to try to determine how marriage, both prospective and already civilly contracted, acted as an incentive for conversion. One difficulty, however, in gathering the relevant data lay in the protraction of the process. For instance, there were many cases where a candidate would apply as a single person (though at that stage for marriage purposes) but by the time the conversion was completed had already married civilly. In such cases, a religious

marriage ceremony would invariably follow the proselytisation. The above table shows 590 were single at conversion and 548 already married. One should not, however, be misled into thinking that the number of converts who were single was about equal to the married candidates. Many of these listed as married had begun the process as single. Often, the conversions were expedited by the Beth Din, in the event of a pregnancy during the marriage in order to ensure the child would be born with a Jewish status. Only 37 cases stated clearly that the marriage took place during the process of conversion. The figure of 548, as quoted, was compiled from reading of the files in question and should be considered as an assumption.

TABLE 4.2 - AGE BY MARITAL STATUS

Year	Married	%	Single	%	Married through process	%	Row Total	%
1-17	1	1.6%	60	98.4%	-		61	7.2%
18-32	159	28.6%	365	65.8%	31	5.6%	555	65.3%
33-40	94	74.0%	32	25.2%	1	0.8%	127	14.9%
41-50	59	75.6%	19	24.4%	--	---	78	9.2%
51-60	11	57.9%	8	42.1%	--	---	19	2.2%
61-65	6	60.0%	4	40.0%	--	---	10	1.2%
TOTAL	330	38.8%	488	57.4%	32	3.8%	850	100%

In the 0-17 age bracket only one of the 61 that fell into this division was married. This being a category, which is in general a pre-marital sample, the figure needs no further interpretation. In the 18-32 age bracket, which comprises the majority of the converts, 65.3% of the total cases recorded showed more realistic proportions. 28.6% converted when married, 65.8% were single and 5.6% were shown to have married during the process. This breakdown emerges logically in line with the present position regarding the marital status of the converts, demonstrating that a

great majority of the candidates who are converting for marital reasons are single at the time.

This trend takes a complete turn when approaching the next age bracket, 33-40. Those married numbered 74% of the total cases and those single 25.3%. This preponderance of married candidates over the single ones continues as the age groups advance. In this sample which represents an age of marriage, most candidates are already married and seek to regularise their status according to Jewish law.

TABLE 4.3 - MARITAL STATUS BY DECADES

Age	1924-30	1931-40	1941-50	1951-60	1961-70	1971-80	1981-97
Married	76.9%	62.5%	64.1%	55.6%	50.7%	46.1%	35.8%
Single	23.1%	37.5%	35.9%	43.0%	47.8%	49.8%	59.9%
Married through Process				1.3%	1.8%	4.1%	4.3%

The above table shows the highest figure of married converts (76.9%) to be in the 1920s. Subsequently there is a decline culminating with the 1980s where the figure is 35.8% of the total conversions for that decade. As seen from the section dealing with the policies of the Beth Din, there was a time when the applicant stood a better chance of conversion after the marriage and they did in fact resort to the tactics of marrying and then applying for conversion. As the years progressed and the Beth Din's policies underwent adjustment, conversion after marriage ceased to be a credit to facilitate proselytisation.

(Cases 31, 32)

4.6.4 Length of Conversion

TABLE 5.1 - LENGTH OF CONVERSION – JOHANNESBURG FILES

	No. of converts	% of total
Less than 1 year	136	13.2%
1 yr up to 2 yrs	309	29.9%
2 yrs up to 3 yrs	351	33.9%
3 yrs up to 4 yrs	153	14.8%
4 yrs and more	85	8.2%
TOTAL	1034	100%

As a Rabbi, one of the most frequent questions that is asked of me by prospective converts is *“How long will it take to complete the process?”* In actual fact, there are no Halakhic rules regarding the required length of the process. Halakha only stipulates the conditions that have to be met.

In the historical section some examples were given of current average length of process in various countries, ranging from 1 to 5 years. Bringing it into the South African context and having extracted relevant information from the Johannesburg Beth Din a localised pattern becomes discernible.

In the majority of cases - almost 34% of the total - the procedure lasted 2 to 3 years. The 13.2% that were completed in less than 1 year were mainly children, many of whom were either Arcadia orphans or adopted. There are also the compassionate conversions of adults by the Beth Din, which will be discussed at a later stage. In both cases the candidates are largely exempted from study on the promise that they will live in an environment governed by the Jewish lifestyle.

The 1–2 year category is not necessarily what could be termed “a *quick conversion*”. It is more rapid than the average and leans more towards 2 years. The figure is not much different from the 2-3 year figure.

Factors which may have brought a 1–2 year procedure, rather than a 2–3 year length, can be attributed to

- (i) exceptional progress of candidate;
- (ii) leniency of the Rabbis under certain circumstances in response to a specific request by the candidate to expedite the conversion.

A case in point is the candidate who is close to finalisation and has fallen pregnant. In such instances the Beth Din will allow the conversion to take place at an earlier stage.

(Cases 33, 34, 35, 36,37,38,39)

Where cases exceed the average 2–3 years, there is usually an interruption of the smooth running of the procedure by the candidate or slow progress or difficulties in complying with the observances that are required i.e. the inability to refrain from working on Sabbath. The Beth Din generally waits until these problems are resolved.

(Case 41)

TABLE 5.2 - LENGTH OF CONVERSION BY DECADES

	1914-30	1931-40	1941-50	1951-60	1961-70	1971-80	1981-97
Under 1 yr		100%	19.5%	23.1%	16.8%	16.1%	4.5%
1 yr to 2 yrs			36.6%	26.2%	27.6%	39.3%	23.6%
2 yrs to 3 yrs			29.3%	18.5%	20.4%	32.8%	48.3%
3 yrs to 4 yrs			9.8%	21.5%	20.4%	7.9%	15.7%
4 yrs			4.9%	10.8%	14.8%	3.9%	7.9%

The information gleaned from the above table provides additional insight into the subject. It will be noted that in the 1940-1950 period, conversions under 1 year numbered 19.5% of the total conversions for that decade and 23.1% in the 1951-1960 period. Subsequently, this rate is in decline and by the 1981-1997 period represents only 4.5% of the total number of conversions. On the other hand, those that took 2 years were 29.3% in the 1940-1950 period but rose to 40.3% in the 1981-1997 period.

Here, too, these statistics can be related to changes in the policy of the Beth Din. In the years of the "closed door" policy there were either minor children of mixed marriages or compassionate grounds recognised by the Beth Din. Furthermore, although the conversion authorities were strict with regard to admission of converts but once having accepted them, they tended to be more lenient regarding the length of the process.

In the latest period, there was a shift of emphasis in Beth Din policy. On the one hand, greater leniency was exercised in admitting the prospective convert to the process. On the other hand, there were increased demands with regard to the study programme and observances and this invariably prolonged the procedure. Motivation, in fact, has become a less important issue.

TABLE 5.3 - LENGTH OF CONVERSION – PREVIOUS RELIGION AS A FACTOR

	Other religions	"Jewish Past"
Under 1 yr	4.3%	27.8%
1 yr to 2 yrs	26.9%	36.9%
2 yrs to 3 yrs	41.3%	21.6%
3 yrs to 4 yrs	17.4%	9.5%
4 yrs and up	10.2%	4.2%

Remarks: Other religions: Previously Catholic, Presbyterian, Methodist, Anglican, Dutch Reform
Jewish Past: Jewish father or ex-Reform

This table looked at the previous religious affiliations of the candidate and its effect on the length of the conversion. These were divided into two groups. One group consisted of candidates with no Jewish background whatsoever. That group consisted of converts from Christian denominations. The second group had some type of Jewish ancestry. Either the candidate had a Jewish father or a Jewish status recognised only by Reform ("Jewish past"). 27.8% of the total conversions of these candidates with a Jewish past took place in less than a year, whilst the corresponding figure for the non-Jewish category was only 4.3% of the total. In the 1-2 year length, which is still relatively lenient, 36.9% had a Jewish past and 26.9% were non-Jewish. As the length of the conversion increases the non-Jewish figure begins to be in the lead. In the 2-3 year length, 41.3% of the total non-Jewish conversions took place as against 21.6% of those with a Jewish parent.

In my interviews with personnel from the Beth Din I posed the question as to whether in the present day the previous Jewish background of a Jewish father or ex-Reform serve as credits to the expedition of the process and the answer was mostly negative. In practice, however, these findings demonstrate that exposure to a Jewish background has proved an advantage in reducing the length of the conversion.

(Case 42)

Despite the lack of Halakhic endorsement of a child born of a mixed marriage or a Reform conversion, this is not a candidate who has to renounce a totally different religious doctrine. Invariably, and as perusal of the files proved, the prospective convert in that category had experienced some type of Jewish upbringing and identity. In other words, the transformation from his status, being the child of a Jewish father, or a Reform Jew, is not a drastic change. He or she will have some knowledge of the Sabbath, Festivals, dietary laws, services in the Synagogues, etc.

4.6.5 Analysis of previous religious denominations of converts

TABLE 6.1 - PREVIOUS RELIGIOUS DENOMINATIONS OF CONVERTS

Previous Religion	No. of cases	Percentage
"Jewish Past"	342	42.8%
Anglican	145	18.2%
Catholic	112	14.1%
Methodist	99	12.4%
Dutch Reform	59	7.4%
Presbyterian	40	5.0%
TOTAL	797	100%

Remarks : "Jewish Past" – Jewish father or ex-Reform

TABLE 6.2 - SOUTH AFRICAN WHITES BY RELIGIOUS DENOMINATIONS 1960-1991 PERCENTAGES

	1960	1970	1980	1991	Total Average %
Dutch Reform	52.4%	49.0%	45.8%	38.7%	48.4%
Anglican	12.5%	10.7%	10.1%	5.8%	9.8%
Methodist	8.7%	9.6%	9.3%	6.6%	8.2%
Catholic	6.2%	8.2%	8.5%	6.2%	7.8%
Presbyterian	3.6%	3.2%	2.8%	1.8%	2.2%

Remarks : Extract from *The South African Population of South Africa, The 1991 Sociodemographic Survey* (Allie Dubb Table 1.2 (p.8))

One of the issues explored was the previous religion of the candidates who had applied for conversion and the attachment to it. Out of the 1275 cases examined, 797 contained information as to the former religious affiliations of the converts.

A question was posed as to whether there was a proportionate relationship between the previous religion of the applicant and the national figures for distribution of religious affiliation amongst the white South African population.

At this stage, it will exclude that category of applicants, which will be discussed separately, that were either of Jewish descent or Reform converts. Various Christian denominations are looked at. The breakdown, which was compiled, related to Church affiliations that came forth as dominant. This did not include in the analysis the odd case of a Muslim or a member of sects that featured negligibly in the files. Thus, of the 478 cases that do not feature in Table 6.1 there was either no information as to previous religion or membership of a group that barely manifested itself in the archives. Table 6.1 shows 5 major denominations – Anglican, Catholic, Methodist, Presbyterian and Dutch Reform – from which the converts hailed. Looking at Table 6.2 which had been drawn up from the results of a census (*S.A. whites by religious denomination 1960-1991: Percentages*) information was abstracted regarding these five denominations and their percentage distribution throughout the population.

Comparing these tables it is clear that there is no proportionate relationship between the distribution of former religious affiliations of candidates to the percentage of religious divisions within the white South African population.

Of the previous religions of converts Anglican represented the highest percentage (18.2% of the total number of converts). On the national side examined, Anglicans rated an average of 9.8% over the decades between 1960 – 1991. Although this denomination featured as first in Table 6.2, the figure was below that of the leading church in South Africa which was the Dutch Reform Church with an average of 48.4%. Of the converts to Judaism only 7.4% had belonged to the Dutch Reform Church. The only church which showed the same place on both tables was the

Presbyterian Church, which was the smallest denomination both for converts and nationally.

To explain the disparity apparent in the comparison between Table 6.1 and Table 6.2, three possibilities may be advanced.

- (i) The majority of converts hail from the main centres, which are essentially urban areas, whilst the national figure also covers rural areas, where a large proportion of Dutch Reform Church membership is concentrated. At the same time, the Anglican, Catholic and Methodist churches have wider support in the urban population, which can explain why the intake of converts would be generated more from these groups.
- (ii) A further hypothesis is the probability that the majority of converts are English speaking rather than Afrikaans speaking, the latter being the predominant composition of the Dutch Reform Church, and the vast majority of the Jewish population fall into the English speaking group.
- (iii) A higher internal religious orientation within the membership of the Dutch Reform Church has tended to keep its adherents within its fold. Added strengthening attributes are (a) the fact that the Dutch Reform Church is bound up with Afrikaner culture and (b) the major role the Dutch Reform Church has played in the history of South Africa.

These factors could well have brought about a greater resistance to conversion than the other denominations.

Converts with "Jewish past" (Jewish father or ex-Reform)

Some fascinating results were found whilst looking at candidates who were either of Jewish ancestry or Reform conversions. The term Jewish ancestry refers to cases where the father is Jewish and the mother Gentile. Reform conversions include, too, the children of the conversions in question. Both categories were combined for ascertaining the previous religion of a candidate and are collectively

referred to as converts with “Jewish past” for the purpose of this study. From Table 6.1 it is seen that 42.9% of the converts had a “Jewish past”.

(Cases 43,44,45,46,47)

There are 479 cases where no previous religion was indicated. If any of these candidates did have a “Jewish past”, it would doubtless have been reflected. Thus, these candidates could be presumed to be of Christian origin and were added to the figure representing previous Christians. Even then the percentage of candidates with a “Jewish past” was 26% which was quite a substantial number of the total conversions.

Despite the “closed door” policy towards converts the Beth Din were, however, more lenient and encouraging in cases where the applicant had a Jewish father. That era contributed to a high percentage in the group with a Jewish father.

Furthermore, there was a return by children of a mixed marriage to the religion of the father. This is because, generally speaking, the Jewish male who intermarried is motivated by personal rather than ideological considerations. He will thus tend to retain his attachment to his Jewish culture and possibly convey this sentiment to his offspring. In many cases, which have been observed to a large extent in Durban, children of such a mixed marriage will be sent to a Jewish Day School, will find themselves observing Festivals and mix with other Jewish social groups. There is a very good chance that the child of a mixed marriage will gravitate towards his Jewish sources, possibly motivated by a Jewish mate, or alternatively conviction.

In the files of candidates whose Jewish status was sanctioned by Reform, though not validated by Orthodox, a similar situation occurred. The historical chapter demonstrated that South African Reform, unlike its counterpart in America, has been a small minority. Invariably Reforms are brought into contact with Orthodox, which in South Africa is the larger denomination. On the communal level, with the exception of purely religious aspects, there is a high degree of unity between the two sects. Thus in South Africa Reform is exposed to the Orthodox to a far greater

extent than in the U.S.A. South African Reform, too, which is relatively conservative, feels closer to its local Orthodoxy than does the American model to its respective Orthodox Synagogues.

Because of their small size, Reform are unable to run their own Jewish Day School and many of them are absorbed into the same Jewish Day School system as the Orthodox. Therefore, there is wider socialisation and intermarriage between adherents of Orthodox and Reform. Included in these processes are the offspring of Reform conversions.

The problems surrounding these parties usually find place when the descendant of a Reform convert wishes to wed an Orthodox spouse. Halakhically, the Reform convert is unacceptable as a party to marriage in the Orthodox Synagogue. This applies, too, to the descendants of a female who has been converted Reform. When this happens, the prospective couple has two principal options. Either to marry in the Reform itself or for the Reform spouse to convert Orthodox. In many cases, the files proved the latter to be the preferable choice, as the Reform spouse did not wish her Halakhically questionable conversion to be perpetuated in future generations. There also appeared in the files, and in my fieldwork in Durban, Reform converts who opted for Orthodox regularisation for reason of conviction motivated by the Jewish education they had received and exposure to Orthodoxy.

Another important factor is that the motivation for joining Reform is, generally speaking, personal rather than ideological. Based on my knowledge of the Durban Reform community one can state categorically that a sizeable proportion are members because of an intermarriage. In that instance, they will find conversion of the non-Jewish spouse much less complicated in the Reform than in the Orthodox. This will also explain why there is an absence of parental objection, and perhaps encouragement, when the offspring seeks to convert to Orthodox.

Both categories which fall under the description - a "Jewish past" - have much in common and a background that will explain why their cipher appears high in an analysis of previous religions.

4.6.6 *Previous Religion of converts : Levels of adherence*

TABLE 6.3 - PREVIOUS RELIGION OF CONVERTS : LEVELS OF ADHERENCE

	No. of Cases	Percentage
Practising	57	12%
Non-practising	418	88%
TOTAL	475	100%

Another issue investigated was how the applicants for conversion related to their respective previous religions and, in the context of their proposed proselytisation, to what extent was their level of adherence to their original faith an advantage or disadvantage.

On the one hand, one who was not intimately bound up with the faith into which he or she was born is free of its influence and therefore it could be suggested that the transition to a new religion need not be traumatic. On the other hand, one who has already subjected himself or herself to a religious discipline had developed a level of spirituality. This quality of conscientiousness could prove beneficial to a transformation to an alternative religious discipline, especially in the post-religious stages.

Information supplied by application as to the level of attachment to the previous religion is only available in 475 files, which is little more than one-third of the total number of cases investigated. Most of these responses relate to their latter years where the application forms were more comprehensively upgraded and included more detailed information from the candidate on this issue.

In Table 6.3 it was found that 12% of the total claimed they were following their previous religion while 88% stated that they were not. Although the analysis

reveals assertions by the vast majority of candidates that they were non-practising, the researcher needs to react with reservation. It must be borne in mind that in many cases the applicant is tempted to impress the conversion authority. By claiming that a previous religion meant very little in their lives they compute that this answer will be to their credit when seeking conversion to Judaism.

TABLE 6.4 - PREVIOUS RELIGION BY DENOMINATIONS

	Non-Jewish Religions	"Jewish Past"
Practising	8.4%	53.1%
Non-practising	91.6%	46.9%

Remarks : *Non Jewish Religions: Previously Anglican, Catholic, Presbyterian, Methodist, Dutch Reform - "Jewish Past": Jewish father or ex-Reform*

This table takes the breakdown of practising or non-practising of their previous religion a stage further. This information was supplied according to the five denominations selected, as well as those with a "Jewish past".

Out of those who claimed to have been practising 53.1% had a "Jewish past". Here, the candidate feels it to be an advantage to claim to have been practising the previous religion because it is closer to Orthodox Judaism than the religions of the other candidates. For the same reasons, only 46.9% of those with a "Jewish past" described themselves as non-practising. Looking at the non-Jewish category only 8.4% claimed to have been practising their previous religion while 91.6% claimed they were not.

4.6.7 *Parents' reaction to conversion*

In the introductory chapter it was demonstrated how the contending convert is reared in a particular social setting and now looks to another in which to be included. An important aspect of the original background is the role of the parents, their religious values and their attitude towards the Jews as an ethnic group.

It is a clear fact that by and large any Jewish parent, whether religious orientated or not will feel adversely towards an outmarriage. This has been observed as a particularity of South African Jewry, which is highly conscious of its Jewish identity. There are, however, varying degrees of intensity manifested in response to intermarriage with a Gentile partner and the original attitude of the parents itself undergoes variations throughout the successive stages of the relationship between their child and his spouse. In the analysis of parental reactions to outmarriage of the Jewish child and from my experience of the phenomenon there is invariably at the outset some form of shock, resentment or disappointment. The extent to which these tidings are negatively received will depend on several factors – the level of religious observance on the part of the family, the position of the family in the community, personal levels of expectation and fundamental attitude towards the very concept of intermarriage. The latter category does not necessarily mean the parents were religious at all, but have either inherited or acquired an outlook on Jewish – Gentile intermarriage as a line that ought not be crossed. When, however, the child announces that the Gentile spouse intends converting the initial shock on the part of some of the parents gives way to acceptance, co-operation and perhaps encouragement. Others are not ameliorated by the prospect of conversion and only change their attitude as the process reaches completion by which time they may even regard the Gentile spouse as an integral part of the family. A small number will maintain a hard line even at that stage and will perhaps only soften towards the wedding. It is very seldom that the birth of a grandchild will not bring about some form of acceptance. This development is probable even when a conversion does not take place.

(i) Reaction of parent of Jewish partner**TABLE 7.1 - REACTION OF PARENTS OF JEWISH PARTNER**

	No. of cases	Percentage
Positive	173	93%
Negative	13	7%
TOTAL	186	100%

In compiling a statistical analysis it ought to be noted that only a limited amount of information on this aspect appears in the files. Only 186 files presented an intelligible response to the question of reaction of the parent of the Jewish partner. 93% of the total showed a degree of acceptance during one of the stages.

There were only 13 cases of total rejection by the Jewish parents. In some instances, they contact either the Conversion Committee or the Beth Din itself requesting that the conversion process be stopped. One tried to jeopardise the applicant just before its finality by alleging to the Beth Din that the candidate was dishonest in his/her claim that the requirements of the conversion were met. In this case the Beth Din disregarded the allegation because they felt the parents of the Jewish partner were merely being vindictive. In any case the Beth Din will deal mostly with the case on its merits rather than on the basis of approaches by potential in-laws.

(Case 51)

(ii) Reaction of parent of non-Jewish partner**TABLE 7.2 - REACTION OF NON-JEWISH PARENTS**

	No. of cases	Percentage
Positive	292	93.3%
Negative	21	6.7%
TOTAL	313	100%

In the Gentile communities from which the applicants for conversion emanated there were also socio-religious attitudes towards the phenomenon but the responses in the files revealed that these reactions were not as strongly negative as those of the Jewish parent toward intermarriage and conversion.

In the course of fieldwork I did meet some of the Gentile parents at one stage or another. Usually this contact took place close to the wedding or at the wedding itself. Mostly I found them favourably disposed towards the concept. I do recall a few cases where the parents asked for a meeting with me during the process with the object of expressing their disapproval and requesting the termination of the programme.

When it came to Johannesburg, however, the sole source of information on this issue was the statements of the candidates themselves regarding parental reaction. These responses need not necessarily have reflected the full reality of the situation and may well have been influenced by the desire of the applicant to impress the conversion authorities. They served, however, as the basis for an analysis. Only 313 cases out of the total of 1275 gave the information. 292 showed a positive reaction by the parents and 21 negative. The latter category appeared in the files either in the form of information given by the candidate or as correspondence from the parents themselves.

There appears a clear trend on both sides of the parentage towards ultimate, if not earlier, acceptance of the conversion. My impression is that whatever reservations the parents have, mostly they will eventually compute that the undertaking is a decision to be made by the adult children. Moreover, in most cases it would seem that condoning the conversion is the preferable option to severing bonds with their children.

(Cases 52,53,54)

4.6.8 Education background of converts

TABLE 8.1 - EDUCATIONAL LEVEL OF CONVERTS

	No. of cases	Percentage
Less than matric	123	22.1%
Matric	270	48.6%
Matric + Diploma	48	8.6%
University	114	20.5%

Education has always occupied a prime position in the Jewish culture. Dubb (1994:60) writes,

“As in other western countries of the Diaspora, South African Jews enjoy a relatively high educational and occupational status. The story of sacrifices by immigrant parents to provide their children with the best education possible is well known. This attitude has been reflected in the continuous upward mobility of Jews and, for the last several decades, in a higher level of education and occupation than any other white group.”

This truism presented by Dubb prompted me to investigate the level of education on the part of the converts. This information was supplied in 555 cases. The highest figure of 48.6% represented those who were matriculated and 22.1% had

achieved a level lower than matric. Those who had matric and a diploma numbered 8.6% whilst University graduates were 20.5% of the total number of conversions.

Since 77.9% of the candidates had at least matriculated, the level of education on the part of the converts appears quite high. This becomes even more evident when one considers that most of them were females who in general did not always have the educational qualifications of their male counterparts. It is understandable, too, that these figures would point to the educational institutions that they attend as a meeting ground with their Jewish partners. The value of these figures may be realised when compiling an education programme for prospective converts since this group is of an intellectually high standard.

4.6.9 Occupation of converts

TABLE 8.2 - OCCUPATION OF CONVERTS

	No. of cases	Percentage
Professional	128	16.6%
Educational/Social Work	156	20.2%
Sales/Clerical	328	42.4%
Housewife	161	20.8%

In the last section it was shown how Jews tended to regard education as a high priority. As a result they gravitated towards the professions. Dubb (1994:62) reports:

"The differences between whites and Jews with regard to occupational structure thus remained virtually unchanged during the 1980s. Jews were still more concentrated in the higher status occupations than the white group as a whole or, in fact, than any other urban white religious grouping."

Looking into the occupation of converts, information was obtained from 773 cases. The majority of 42.4% were engaged in sales or clerical work whilst 16.6% were

professionally employed. 20.2% were involved in educational or social work and 20.8% gave their occupation as housewife.

Although the professional figure may be assumed lower than that of Jewish people, one ought to take into account that most of the converts were of the feminine gender and were occupying positions mainly held by females. Added to that, the housewife percentage probably represented mothers of young children, which is the norm. Relatively speaking this is an occupationally active group which also makes its impact on the attitude of the conversion authorities as well as the study programme that is compiled.

4.6.10 Hebrew names chosen by converts

TABLE 8.3 - HEBREW NAMES

Names	No. of cases	Percentage
Ruth	115	21.8%
Channah	81	15.4%
Miriam	80	15.2%
Leah	67	12.7%
Sarah	57	10.8%
Dvorah	49	9.3%
Rachel	30	5.7%
Rivka	17	3.2%
Chayah	16	3.0%
Chavah	15	2.8%

Once the conversion process has been completed the newly inducted proselyte selects a Hebrew name for religious purposes. For all ceremonial purposes in the Jewish lifestyle this Hebrew name is used. Here the convert demonstrates a new

stage in his/her life. In some cases, they re-inforce this transformation by using the religious name for secular purposes as well.

The only other occasion when a Jewish name is changed is when a person is critically ill. It is suspected that there is a decree for the death of the patient. By changing the name he or she is introduced as a new person. Thus this procedure is actually a plea and a prayer that the impending decree will be favourable and also serves as a form of repentance for former deeds. By altering the name, the party is actually saying, "*I am not the same person who committed those deeds for which I now repent.*" In a sense, this is also the idea behind the changing of the name on the part of the proselyte.

Technically speaking, there is no clear Halakhic ruling that the convert has to acquire a Hebrew name as an obligation. Concerning the name Ruth, Rabbi Moshe Steinberg (1964:21) brings an opinion of the Talmud commentator, the Maharsha that this was her name prior to the conversion and it remained. Nevertheless, throughout the subsequent history of the Jewish people the acquisition of a Hebrew religious name became an established practice. Some will choose a Hebrew name which closely resembles either in sound or popular translation their official forename and others will opt for a name they just happen to identify with or like.

In most of the Johannesburg files information has been available as to the Hebrew religious names chosen by converts. Out of the 1202 cases where this data was forthcoming 860 chose a name which had no relation to their birth name while 342 corresponded somehow to their registered forename. There are some names that appeared as particularly popular. This trend showed itself more amongst the females than the males.

I interviewed a number of converts and asked them why they had chosen these names. Those who had chosen Ruth as their Hebrew religious name saw her as a role model for converts which is the same way that Judaism itself sees this personality. One of the candidates who had adopted the name Channah made an interesting comment regarding her choice. She compared herself with Channah

(Hannah) in the Bible, the mother of Samuel. The text records how she was confronted by the High Priest thinking she was drunk when she went to the Sanctuary to pray to G-d for a child. In the same way the candidate compared her own intimidation in the face of the Conversion Committee and the Rabbinical authorities to that of Channah. Although her intention was sincere, she felt that, like Channah, she was a suspect and she was encouraged by the positive outcome of Channah's prayers.

Feedback with regard to the name Miriam brought forth responses that the Biblical Miriam impressed as a leader and a feminist and close similarities of views were expressed by those who chose Dvora (Deborah). The choice of Sarah related to the original matriarch. As Abraham was regarded as the first Jew so was Sarah the first Jewess.

Of the names chosen by the male proselytes there was a wide variety of names rather than the trend that appeared in the female samples. David was the leading name with 38 candidates and Abraham with 17 candidates, Chayim 13 and Jonathan 12. These are names of Biblical characters and Chayim is a Hebrew word meaning life. The others appear in one digit figures

There were also cases where Yiddish names appeared in place of or in addition to Hebrew names. The probability is that these were the names of deceased ancestors where there was a Jewish parent. Naming children after a close relative who has passed away is a popular Jewish practice.

4.7 REASONS FOR CONVERSION

TABLE 9.1 - REASONS GIVEN FOR CONVERSION

	Count	Percentage
Marriage	717	61.1%
Conviction	116	9.9%
Father Jewish	231	19.7%
Previously Reform	74	6.3%
Beth Din	35	3.0%

Remarks:

- (a) Where a candidate claimed conviction as motivation but was found to have a Jewish partner I included this party as one converting for the sake of marriage.
- (b) In the case where there was an intended marriage by an applicant to a Jewish spouse and the candidate had a Jewish father, I categorised the party as one who was converting because of Jewish ancestry. The same applied in the case of a Reform candidate for conversion.

The Halakhic section dealt with *"The Reasons for Conversion"* as playing an important role in the validity of the proselytisation and the opinions of the various Rabbinical authorities in each age on this issue was examined.

As anticipated, out of the total of 1173 files, which supplied the relevant information, 61% were for the purpose of marrying a Jewish partner. The second largest group were those who had a Jewish father numbering 19.7%. Conversion out of conviction rated third representing 9.9% and previously Reform 6.3%. There were also conversions by the Beth Din for compassionate reasons, or in the case of Arcadia orphans and adoption - 3%, as well as illness.

4.7.1 *Reasons for conversions in relation to age of converts*

TABLE 9.2 - REASONS FOR CONVERSION BY AGE OF CONVERT

	1-17	18-32	33-40	41-50	51-60	61-65	Row Total
Marriage	1 1.6%	364 65.8%	88 69.3%	44 56.4%	10 52.6%	5 50.0%	512 60.3%
Conviction		61 11.0%	14 11.0%	12 15.4%	7 36.8%		94 11.1%
Father Jewish	54 87.1%	100 18.1%	7 5.5%	8 10.3%		2 20.0%	171 20.1%
Prev. Reform	2 3.2%	26 4.7%	14 11.0%	14 17.9%		2 20.0%	58 6.8%
Beth Din	5 8.1%	2 .4%	4 3.1%		2 10.5%	1 10.0%	14 1.6%
Column Total	62 7.3%	553 65.1%	127 15.0%	78 9.2%	19 2.2%	10 1.2%	849 100%

The reasons supplied for conversion manifest themselves in the various age groups, drawn from a total of 849 cases. As established, the 18-32 age group represents the highest number of conversions. So it is logical that conversion for marriage would appear as the main motivation in that age group. Those converted in the 18-32 age group for the sake of marriage numbered 65.8% of the total number of conversions in that age group. The second most popular motivation in this age group was because of a Jewish father representing 18.1% of the total. For those that converted out of conviction the proportion was 11%. Those previously Reform consisted of 4.7% of the total number of converts in that group. There were only two cases of conversion by the Beth Din on compassionate grounds, which was 0.4% of the total.

The 33-40 age group numbered 127 cases but the percentage spread of reasons was very similar to that of the 18-32 category. Both these groups have a number of common denominators. They are both marital ages, taking into consideration

that within the 33–40 bracket there are a number of second marriages. When it came to conviction the same attributes of maturity and outlook applied. The issue of a Jewish father showed only 5.5% of the total since this dilemma mainly occurs in the younger age bracket. Approaching the higher age bracket, conversion for the sake of marriage becomes less of a reason, whilst conviction as a reason for conversion reaches 36.8% of the total number in the age group 51–60. Although the actual number is only 7, this is an age when religious convictions are often reviewed. In the 1–17 age group the main reason for conversion was the Jewish father, which numbered 87.1% of the total conversions in that age bracket. There was only one case where the motivation was marriage where a 16 year old girl had fallen pregnant.

Of the converts out of conviction the age bracket 1–17 appears as a nil figure in Table 9.2, bearing in mind that one or two cases of conversion of minors from a totally Gentile family has been noted in Durban. By and large the policy of the Rabbinical authorities is to discourage such a move for the following reasons.

- (i) A party of that age lacks the maturity to take such a step. Even the knowledge of the original religion is in general limited and insufficient to make a diligent decision on the basis of conviction.
- (ii) The age group in question also signifies an adventurous and rebellious stage of life and the chances are that once over that phase the desire will fade away. This has been observed in a case, which occurred in Durban. (*Lot D.2/1*)
- (iii) The difficulty of complying with the requirements when there is no family environment, which will be antagonistic to such a move. Even if the candidate was agreeable to move out of the home the Beth Din were reluctant to countenance a split in the family unit.

The higher age groups show an increased trend in conversion for conviction. In the 18–32 group we see an age when well informed decisions are capable of being made. Where ideological reasons are supplied by the candidate, these are

carefully scrutinised by the conversion authorities to detect possibilities of emotional disturbance or distress. A case in point was an applicant who wrote a letter to myself expressing deep conviction. Already I could see from his style signs of confusion, which were confirmed during my meeting with him. My decision to discourage this conversion was proved correct when a year later he wrote to me declaring that he found himself wrong in his search for fulfilment. Both his desire to convert and his decision to return to his original religion were based on shallow reasons. (*Lot D.2/10*) On the other hand most of the cases cited as conversion out of conviction were done on an informed basis triggered by intelligible exposure to Judaism or an attraction to the lifestyle of the Jews.

(Cases 55,56,57,58,59,60)

4.7.2 *Reasons for conversion by marital status of converts*

TABLE 9.3 - REASON FOR CONVERSION BY MARITAL STATUS OF CONVERT

	Marriage	Conviction	Father Jewish	Prev.Reform	Beth Din	Row Total
Married	412 78.5%	37 7.0%	23 4.4%	43 8.2%	10 1.9%	525 48.1%
Single	261 49.1%	77 14.5%	155 29.1%	19 3.6%	20 3.8%	532 48.7%
Married through Process	31 88.6%	1 2.9%	3 8.6%			35 3.2%
Column Total	704 64.5%	115 10.5%	181 16.6%	62 5.7%	30 2.7%	1092 100%

It has been established that of the cases reviewed 532 were single at the time of the conversion and 525 were married. Although there is not a quantitative difference between the two groups there is a vast difference in the motives supplied for conversion. Where marriage has been given as a reason for conversion this includes both single and married applicants but clearly the interpretation will differ.

Whereas the single seeks to marry according to Jewish rites the married category is motivated by family dynamics. One of the frequent reasons supplied by the latter group on the application form was *"to raise a Jewish family with one religion"*. It is not surprising therefore to see that of the married candidates 78.5% gave the motive as marriage/family. In the single group only 49.1% of its total made this claim.

Where ideological reasons were given for conversion singles were leading with a 14.5% of its total as against only 7% married group. For the married, conversion was largely a practicality. Of the 7% of married couples who converted for ideological reasons there were isolated cases of the conversion of both spouses and if they had children their minor offspring converted with them. In Durban, there have been three such recorded cases.

Another discrepancy between these two groups is on the issue of the Jewish father. Whilst of the married only 4.4% of the applicants had a Jewish father, the figure was 29.1% for singles. Those converts who had a Jewish father mostly completed the process prior to their marriage because of the tendency of the conversion authorities to treat their applications with sympathy. In the case of married applicants the Jewish father was possibly merely a re-enforcement of their central motivation, which was the marriage itself and the desire to raise a Jewish family.

When it came to those who were Jewish by Reform standards who sought conversion to Halakhically regularise their status, 3.6% were single and 8.2% married. Here we see a reverse of the previous example. A greater majority in this category was married. From my impressions gained from the files a picture emerges of a couple, one from an Orthodox background and the other Gentile, who sought an easier route around the conversion process. This was provided by the Reform both in terms of conversion and fulfilling a desire of having a Jewish wedding. I have found that the wish to have a Jewish religious nuptial ceremony to be a strong incentive. Outwardly the Reform model symbolically resembles the Orthodox and where the demands of Orthodox conversion seem formidable, Reform conversion appears at the time to be a solution.

In the post-marital stages the Jewish spouse feels a yearning to return to the Orthodox. The religion itself increases in importance as an issue stimulated by the question of raising children.

(Cases 61,62,63,64,65,66,67,68,69,70)

4.8 CONVERSION – PERSONS OF COLOUR

In that section of the historical chapter dealing specifically with South Africa, Simon (1996:83) is quoted as saying,

“The general socio-cultural climate in South Africa very much accentuated the importance of group identity.”

The context of that statement finds place in an attempt to assess how mainstream South African Jewry gained its cohesive strength. At the same time, the concept of “group identity” had a reinforced significance on the South African scene. This perception related in no small measure to the local racial attitudes. For generations, Western society has, in the main, retained a view that nations other than their own, which in effect meant people of colour belonged to another world. Norms were formulated over the centuries as to how a European would regard the indigenous peoples in the various countries in which Western colonialism made its mark. 20th Century South Africa stood out as the architect of institutionalised separation between what has loosely been termed as White and Black, the latter group also including the Indian and Coloured people.

Seeking to relate this phenomenon to the principal concern of this dissertation it had to be asked to what extent, if any, Jewish conversionist activity was affected. The results of fieldwork revealed that the issue of converting Blacks, Coloureds or Indians was never remembered to arise. In general the feedback pointed to the effectiveness of legal restrictions upon the socialisation between Black and White

and where it was possible within these boundaries, and occasionally practised, the question of religion never entered into such contact.

There does exist an Oriental Jewry and, more recently the acceptance of the Ethiopian immigration to Israel, as Jews. The majority of the South African Jews, however, have been of European origin. Where, occasionally, an Oriental Jew has entered the local community, he has invariably been regarded as a White person, both legally and socially and has conformed to the system that was in existence.

Regarding this question, however, fragmentary records, which were made available contain some interesting disclosures. In his chapter on conversions, Simon (1996:136) writes,

"Perhaps it is not without significance that the earliest references to the problem have to do with marriages across the colour barrier. As early as March 1897 Chief Rabbi Adler had been in touch with Kimberley community on this subject. On 15 March 1897 he wrote to the congregation as follows:

'The fact that the lady's mother is of coloured origins, I would not regard as an impediment, Jewish law not acknowledging definitions of race and colour.'

Two weeks later Adler wrote to the Minister of the Congregation, dealing with the same application in greater detail:

'With regard to this point I have to state that from the Jewish point of view we are not allowed to make any difference between White and Coloured people. Both are regarded equally as a child of G-d and if a (?) convinced of the truth of Judaism and desires to be received into Judaism we dare not reject him on account of his colour. (At the same time I am well aware what a strong antipathy is felt to intermarrying with people of colour both in South Africa and in the West Indies). The rule which I have adopted in all these cases is that before I can entertain any case of Gerut it must come to me recommended by the Minister of the Executive of the congregation. If they, for valid reasons, withhold such recommendation believing that cases of conversion will encourage mixed marriages, I shall not entertain the

application however strongly it may be urged but in each case the Minister of the congregation should carefully weigh whether there is not reason to apprehend that refusal to entertain a case may lead to the party who is married being altogether lost to Judaism.’ ”

It will be seen, however, that Adler’s ruling on this issue was not accepted by all authorities.

“During November 1897 the Committee of the Witwatersrand “Old” Hebrew congregation, in contrast to Chief Rabbi Adler, unanimously resolved, ‘that no black proselytes be admitted to the synagogue and no man who had married one can be admitted as a member; also no black person be allowed to enter the synagogue during any service.’ ” (ibid)

Looking at the difference of opinion between Chief Rabbi Adler of London and the resolution by the Witwatersrand “Old” Hebrew Congregation, it is noticeable that the former view was expressed by a qualified ecclesiastical spokesman, whereas the latter appears to be a decision by lay Congregation leadership. One may, however, appreciate the fact that Adler was residing in London, whilst the Congregation was locally based and was thus faced with the realities, rather than the principle. Furthermore, the local Jewry, itself a minority founded upon a recent immigration, had to take into account surrounding political and social circumstances. It might be added that the climate, which was hostile to all immigrants, was gradually building up to the issue that precipitated the Anglo Boer War (1899-1902). Thus the Congregational decision was not based purely on religious grounds.

In later years where certain members of South African Jewry did oppose the Apartheid system, some more vehemently than others, there is no evidence of any link between this abolitionism and any interest in conversion.

As previously mentioned there just did not appear any awareness of the issue of non-white conversion to Judaism in South Africa. From Simon’s account it

obviously had arisen at some time. The Pergola/Dubb report (1988:65), too, offers some interesting disclosures,

“Another interesting fact is that a small proportion – less than 0.1 per cent in each case – of coloureds, Asians and blacks declared themselves to be Jews. In 1980 this represented a total of 3,125 individuals (2,320 black, 533 coloured and 272 Asians) in addition to 117,963 white Jews. While it is possible that coloured and Asian Jews were either ‘reclassified’ white Jews or their offspring, they had in fact increased by more than 150 per cent since 1970 and seventeenfold since 1960.”

For this statistical development, the report offers a possible explanation by way of footnote in which he refers to rumours of an Israeli Rabbi allegedly selling conversions to blacks during the 1970s and subsequently left the country. Dubb suggests that almost all the black Jews belonged to a sect founded by the “self styled Rabbi” Mshizana of Soweto but their group was never endorsed by either Orthodox or Reform as authentically Jewish.

The practicalities of Jewish life in South Africa, which never really had to confront this particular challenge, only seems to appear fragmentarily in some of the records which I have quoted. From the study of the Beth Din archives, there was no indication of applications by black candidates. Rabbi Kurtstag, who has been involved in conversions for more than 20 years, confirmed that he cannot recall any cases, barring two coloured persons who successfully converted, though under the old apartheid regime. My enquiries in Cape Town revealed that 3 coloured persons converted through the Cape Beth Din in the last decade.

It would appear then that at present this particular issue is theoretical but may in the future manifest itself as a reality. Let me say at the outset that I follow the selfsame view expressed by Adler a century ago that colour is not an issue affecting conversion. This I understand clearly as the Halakhic position. The administration of Halakha, however, by a conversion authority involves other factors. My policy, along with that of the Beth Din, is to insist that the candidate reside close to the Synagogue so that he or she may attend Sabbath and Festival services on a regular basis without having to use transport and thereby violate the

Holy Days. Under the Group Areas Act this was impractical for a person of colour. Thus in the days of Apartheid, my tendency was to discourage the occasional petitioner. Curiously enough, since the demise of racial segregation, I have not had such approaches. Of the requests that did come before me, the majority of the interested parties were motivated by conviction. Nevertheless they did not appear to have an in-depth knowledge of practical Judaism. Mostly they were influenced by their study of the Jewish people as they appeared in the Old Testament. They were impressed and felt they would like to identify with the people of the Bible.

It strikes me, too, that transformation to Judaism on the part of South Africans of colour, judging by those whom I had interviewed who had an interest in conversion, involves a variety of social factors. In view of the racially orientated policies of the previous regime, together with its oft-repeated emphasis on group identity, barriers were created which would hinder the assimilation of a non-white into a Jewish socio-religious environment, which would inevitably be Western in character. Although these obstacles may have been present amongst the candidates from Western Christian society, there were more common denominators, which they shared with their Jewish fellow persons. They were free to attend the same schools, the same work environment, the same clubs, where the latter had an open-door policy and the selfsame social functions. Moreover, there was more in common with respective cultural heritages. Invariably, a non-white was part and parcel of a strong traditional background of his own. A question would arise as to how they would then relate to their peers from their original environs in the post conversion stages. Here, I am speaking very generally. In the New South Africa the doors are open for social change.

Whilst there is no single answer as to the anticipated response by the conversion authorities in the event of this happening, I feel that the operative principle that will triumph is that colour *per se* is not an obstacle.

I am reinforced in this way of thinking by one case (*Lot 5, No. 19/1969*) that did occur in the files of the Johannesburg Beth Din of an Ethiopian who applied for conversion. He was, however, referred to the conversion authorities in Israel that

was handling *en masse* the Halakhic recognition of Ethiopian Jewry. The fact that Israel has in this way absorbed the Ethiopians who claimed their Jewishness is proof that Judaism does not make colour an issue for accepting converts.

At this point I should like to refer to a case from the Beth Din archives (*Lot 86/13*) concerning an Israeli Arab of the Moslem faith married to an Israeli Jewess from a religious family. They had met in Israel and married. Both experienced rejection from their parents although the Moslem's family had secretive ties with the Israeli Government. The husband did not convert in Israel for fear of reprisals from his Arab peer group but, whilst on contract in South Africa, entered a conversion process, became devout and joined a Sephardic community.

4.9 CONVERSION PROGRAMME: THE ROLE OF THE TEACHER

The actual act of conversion consists of specific physical actions, which are subject to attestation. Likewise, *Kabbalat Mitzvoth* is declared before witnesses. The depth, however, to which this particular requirement of the conversion is fulfilled is an inward phenomenon. In practice, the religious behaviour of the prospective convert is monitored, and means of observing whether the candidate is in fact adhering to the prescribed requirements develops as conversion programmes become more sophisticated. Those responsible for directing the conversion procedures are invariably interested in the prospects of continued observance in the post conversion stages. Moreover, throughout this work it has been stressed that the transition from one ethno-religious situation to another is a major socio-psychological transformation.

Taking into account all these factors, conversion authorities have placed great emphasis on the education of the intending proselyte towards the formidable steps he or she has elected to take. Whilst the actual practice of Jewish observances has in itself an educational value, any conversion procedure will include courses in the theory and philosophies of Judaism, as well as a level of proficiency in the Hebrew language, a knowledge of the prayer book and a final examination at the conclusion of the process. This is a requirement which has been fulfilled by every

convert on the South African scene barring exceptional circumstances, some of which have been noted in the case study. In the same way as the conversion procedure advances from stage to stage, so, too, do the academic aspects of the programme. At the time of application the candidate is given a reading list. From the accounts that appeared in the files most of the applicants had already engaged in some sort of preliminary research. There were also a few instances where the prospective convert had credits in Jewish Studies for the purpose of a University degree. Whilst knowledge of Judaism already acquired is undoubtedly beneficial to further progress on the part of the candidate, the level of learning at the time of application has still to integrate into the course of the procedure. In its early stages the recommended study is of an independent nature. Only at a later stage is the candidate assigned to a formal educational programme, which is conducted by a teacher, recognised by the Beth Din.

The past decades have seen a revision in the policies of the Johannesburg Beth Din towards converts. One significant step has been the acceptance of proselytes who have sought this route, initially and even primarily for marriage to a Jewish partner. Even more recently, a Registrar for Conversions has replaced the lay conversion committee. To keep pace with these changes the need for the convert to acquire the maximum knowledge of Judaism has been considered an issue of even greater momentum and so, too, does the role of the teacher play the essential part in achieving this goal. Moreover, if the candidate had a partner he or she, too, had to attend the classes.

Regular contact is made between the Registrar for Conversions and the teachers, as evidenced by the minutes of a meeting, which took place in 1991 between the teachers, the Beth Din and the Chief Rabbi. Ministers with candidates attending services in their respective congregations were also invited. In the context of these minutes is seen the principal issues determining the functionality of the various teachers in the conversion procedure. Chief Rabbi Harris made it clear that, whereas in certain places the referral of a candidate to a teacher signified completion of the process was imminent, in Johannesburg it marked the beginning of the learning period. At the same meeting Rabbi Kurtstag reiterated the importance of the role played by the teacher in communicating with the convert and

partner. Since the teacher was the principal link between the pupil and the process, during the educational stages, Rabbi Kurtstag said opinions, assessments and reports, as submitted by teachers to the Beth Din, needed to be realistic. He noted two major areas of concern

- The cost of the lessons
- Teacher / pupil relationship

and proposed an agenda, including a contract to be drawn up by the parties regarding rates of payment and the actual service supplied by the teacher.

At this stage, this essay focuses on the teacher / pupil relationship. Several times in the files there were found complaints of personality clashes between the candidate and the teacher. Recognising this problem Rabbi Kurtstag directed pupils to approach the Registrar, Rabbi Bender, who would arrange for an alternative teacher from the panel approved by the Beth Din. The teacher would also advise the Registrar if the pupil was not attending properly to the course. A further suggestion that lessons on the theoretical aspects should be spread further apart to allow the candidate to keep pace with the mastering of the practical side of Judaism demonstrates the quality of interest in the efficiency of the lessons. An important consideration was to take into account the average intellectual level and circumstances of the candidate and this would assist in the compiling of programmes.

Following upon the meeting guidelines were issued to the teachers from the office of the Registrar.

At discussions held during the sessions, besides the educational aspect, the teacher also tries to find the level to which the candidate is absorbed into the Jewish religious way of thinking and the Jewish community. The teacher is asked to observe whether there are any signs of mental illness or drug abuse on the part of the candidate. If there were such indications or shortfalls in the level of observance, the candidate is not necessarily disqualified but is certainly subject to closer scrutiny.

4.10 CASES FROM THE BETH DIN ARCHIVES

The cases that have been selected from the archival sources serve to illustrate the various situations which have arisen in the spectrum of conversions on the South African scene. Each case has been allocated a number. For the convenience of the reader, all the cases have been gathered in this sub-section and arranged in their respective categories. Their significance, however, is spread throughout the work. Therefore, cross-references to this section are indicated wherever a case is relevant to a particular part of the essay.

1. Kabbalat Mitzvoth

C 1 - 1944 Lot 47/13

The applicant was a female soldier in the South African army during the war. A letter of recommendation from the committee to the Beth Din urging that she be allowed to proceed with the programme. In response the Beth Din stated that whilst the applicant was serving in the army it was impossible for her to comply with the requirements of the Jewish laws with regard to Sabbath and Kashrut and thus would only be able to consent to the conversion after the war. Later on, when conscription was introduced into South Africa, the South African Defence Force were particularly circumspect to ensure that Jewish servicemen had facilities for kashrut and other aspects of their observance.

C 2 -

A female candidate who was prepared to be totally observant but objected to the role of women in Judaism was rejected by the Beth Din on the grounds that the commitment requirement was a totality.

As a general rule a convert to Judaism is required to be totally observant and, especially in later years, the spouse had to be equally committed. There were,

however, cases for leniency in the application of this condition. In other instances, the Beth Din stood firm.

C 3 - 1964 Lot 24/19

The applicant was a nursing sister. Part of her work involved the care of patients on Friday nights, which brought her into conflict with the Sabbath regulations. She was nevertheless converted on the following conditions:

- *that any transport during the Sabbath be conducted by a Gentile chauffeur;*
- *that she should avoid writing reports on the Sabbath and rather communicate them verbally.*

C 4 - 1980 Lot 30/2

Applicant's husband was a bookmaker and his livelihood was thus dependent upon activities that were taking place on Sabbath. The Beth Din was prepared to convert the applicant but recommended that, if at all possible, the husband make the necessary changes to his occupation.

C 5 - 1985 Lot 16/14

Applicant was previously married to a Jew and divorced. Afterwards she met a Jewish partner and sought conversion. The former husband, however, tried to prevent the conversion by asserting that she was not a suitable candidate and was not adhering to the Beth Din requirements and even produced a surveillance report by a private detective to prove her desecration of the Sabbath. Nevertheless, the Beth Din felt this report was not objective and proceeded with the conversion.

At certain times, especially in small places, lack of facilities present obstacles to conversion.

C 6 - 1937 Lot 24/14

The candidate lived in Krugersdorp, which lacked facilities for the obtaining of kosher meat. To alleviate this difficulty the husband of the applicant opened a kosher butchery in the area, which was run by him.

Referring back to the historical section we saw how in the 19th Century South Africa the earliest converts established their own *Mikvah* (ritual bath).

In Durban, there was a stage when the community was without *Mikvah* facilities causing a delay in locally conducted conversions. Two husbands of prospective converts were instrumental in the funding and the establishment of a *Mikvah* on the premises of the Synagogue.

Also in Durban arose the case of a husband who was concerned that his wife who was in the process of conversion should not have to walk long distances from the Synagogue on a Friday, at night-time. He therefore set up a Synagogue in the garage of his home where services would be held on Friday nights. This concept resulted in the Glenmore Minyan, which is still operative.

2. Conversion of children

C 7 - 1930 Lot 15/8

This is a case of a non-Jewish mother married to a Jewish spouse and who had two children by him. The Beth Din was prepared to convert the mother but ruled that the children should wait until they were 21 when they could make up their own minds. The Beth Din emphasised, however, that the children should be raised in a Jewish home.

C 8 - 1964 Lot 33/5

Candidate was 14 years old at the time of her application. Both her parents were Christians but the three sisters of her mother were converted to Judaism. As the

mother was heavily involved in her work the applicant was raised by one of the mother's sisters who kept a strictly kosher home. The applicant found herself attending Synagogue and observing Jewish laws. Her parents were willing to have her adopted by the aunt but the committee would not allow this. They stated that they would recommend the applicant's conversion as soon as she became independent or prior to her marriage. When she was 18 she expressed her desire to settle in Israel as a full Jewess. The committee approved her application recommending expedition.

C 9 - 1973 Lot 28/15

Applicant, a divorcee with two children in her custody, sought conversion for reasons of conviction both for herself and the children. However, applicant's ex husband objected to the conversion of his children to Judaism. The mother then sought legal advice and received an opinion based on a recent decision by the South African High Court that the mother was perfectly within her rights to determine the religious upbringing of her children on the grounds that it was in the children's best interests. The Chief Rabbi requested an opinion from Senior Counsel after which the Beth Din would make its decision as to what action was appropriate. The children were eventually converted.

C 10 - 1956 Lot 7/9

The applicant always regarded herself as Jewish. The father who had custody made application when his daughter was 6 but was told to re-apply when older. He claimed to have done so but committee could find no records. Apparently the mother would not consent then till child was in a position to make up her own mind. The conversion was completed in 1957. In 1993 the mother, who had apparently remarried, wrote a letter of retraction of her consent for her daughter to embrace Judaism and her Christian conscience was sorely troubled. She claimed now to endorse the information contained in the "Protocols of Zion". The Beth Din discussed the letter and ruled consent was given at the time and this subsequent retraction had no validity.

3. Converts and the issue of the "Cohen"

C 11 - Lot 2/A6

This was a case where the Jewish spouse argued that he was not a Cohen and he went to great lengths to prove this point despite the fact that his family was regarded as Cohanim. Based on what he felt was a Biblical injunction, he asked whether if he damaged his finger he would be rendered unfit for the Cohen status. The Beth Din replied that the perception was wrong.

C 12 - 1985 Lot 11/9

A candidate was converting for conviction. During the programme she met a Cohen with whom she fell in love. The Beth Din explained to her the problematic area, of which she was not aware, and that she would have to make a choice between continuing her relationship with the Cohen and pursuing her conversion. She opted for the latter.

C 13 - 1944 Lot 29/1

A lengthy correspondence took place involving the Beth Din of Johannesburg and Cape Town as well as the Chief Rabbinate of Israel. The case in point was that of a Jewish woman who wanted to marry a Cohen. When he was requested to produce the Ketubah (the religious marriage contract) of her parents the wife was unable to do so, as her parents were married only civilly. The fact that her parents were not married according to Jewish rites, as well as her mother's forename "Christina" (an unlikely name for a Jewess) aroused the suspicion of the Beth Din as to her Jewishness. This created a dilemma. On the one hand she was not Jewish and conversion would have to be rejected as the Jewish partner was a Cohen. On the other hand, to allow a marriage to take place where the bride had a doubtful Jewish status was also a problem. When the case was referred to the Chief Rabbinate of Israel, Chief Rabbi Herzog ruled that this issue should be regarded as Safeik S'feika (a doubt upon a doubt). Here we are dealing with a doubt of Jewishness and a general rule as to whether the Cohen of to day is a

genuine descendant of the original priestly caste. Thus Rabbi Herzog ruled the woman could be converted and still marry the Cohen according to Jewish rites.

C 14 - 1972 Lot 16/28

A Cohen was already married to a Gentile spouse. The committee, impressed by the sincerity of the candidate and her positive influence in reuniting the husband with his family, approached the Beth Din's Chief Rabbi Casper and felt there were grounds in Halakha for an exception but not a precedent and therefore ruled that the conversion could continue on the basis of possibility. The couple, however, would be precluded from a formal Jewish wedding ceremony. Barring possibly one other, this is the only case of its kind I encountered in the archives of the Beth Din.

4. Cancellation of conversion / Avoidance of Mamzeirut (Illegitimacy)

There were a few cases where the Beth Din had to resort to cancellation of the conversion in order to resolve the problem of illegitimate status of the children. This case serves as an example.

C 15 - Case 44/26

The Johannesburg Beth Din in correspondence with the Chief Rabbi of Jerusalem stated the following. Mrs X was converted as a child together with her mother. She married Mr A in a Synagogue and has two children. Subsequently, she divorced civilly and re-married a Jewish person, Mr B, at the Reform. From this union she begot two children. Since she had not received the GET (the religious bill of divorcement) she was Halakhically married to Mr A and, strictly speaking, her second marriage was adulterous and the children of this union are Mamzeirim (illegitimate).

Earlier in the Halakha section dealing with "Conversion of children" it was shown that because the child converts without his/her consent there is a right of invalidation upon reaching maturity.

In the case of Mrs X the Johannesburg Beth Din sought to apply the invalidation clause retrospectively. Added to that, they argued that Mrs X was not an observant Jewess in her adulthood and on that ground the conversion should be annulled. This would confer on her, Gentile status and so, too, upon her children. In this way the children of the second marriage would be relieved of the status of Mamzeirut and would be able to convert on their own to Judaism. This, however, also would affect the first set of children. They, too, had to undergo conversion, which was expedited by the Beth Din.

5. Kabbalat Chaveirut (re-acceptance of Judaism)

C 16 - 1956 Lot 33/21

A candidate who applied for conversion stated she had married her Jewish husband in the Magistrate's Court. When the Beth Din asked for the marriage certificate it was discovered that they had married in the Methodist Church. Although the submission of false information caused a delay the conversion finally went through but the husband had to go through a ceremony of Kabbalat Chaveirut.

C 17 - 1989 Lot 36/22

Applicant was born to a Jewish mother and a non-Jewish father. At an early age she was adopted by Christian grandparents who had her baptised. When she wished to marry in a Synagogue, she was told to go through Kabbalat Chaveirut.

C 18 - 1995 Lot 24/22

Applicant was born to Jewish parents in Holland who had her baptised together with her sister. Through her grandmother she knew she was Jewish. When the grandmother died she was prompted to return to Judaism. After a visit to Israel she met her future husband who also wanted to become Jewish. When he was converted she underwent Kabbalat Chaveirut.

C 19 - 1969 Lot 6/14

There are cases where the Beth Din has ruled Giur L'chumrah (conversion in the case of doubt). In the above the applicant met a Jewish man and began her conversion programme. Through the process the Beth Din discovered her maternal grandmother was Jewish. Thus she herself was Jewish. However, the Beth Din put her through a process of conversion.

6. "Pirate" conversions

C 20 - 1939 Lot 54

Lengthy correspondence between the Johannesburg and Cape Beth Din took place with a view to finding a way of dealing with unauthorised conversions conducted by a Rev. M — for a fee. The Beth Din wrote a long letter to Rev. M— in Cape Town advising him to stop his conversions, warning him that he might incur legal action from the convertees once they realised their so-called conversions were not recognised. Rev. M — replied that he would cease this practice. When the Beth Din found out that he had not in fact done so they wrote him a harsh letter rebuking him for commercialising the religion and selling conversions for a bribe. They further warned him there was a party in Durban who was taking steps to sue him for charging £40 sterling for an invalid conversion. Moreover the Beth Din stated that they might support the plaintiff. They explained to him that the only way they were prepared to help him escape legal consequences lay in the signing by him of a lengthy binding undertaking not to conduct any more conversions and only then would they consider a formal re-conversion for the purpose of regularising all his past proselytes. The same Rev. M — was encountered in several files.

C 21 - 1949 Lot 30/4

In this case the applicant had received a conversion from Rev. M — as early as 1926 and had for 20 years lived in the belief that the conversion was valid and was regarded by the community as Jewish. Only when the applicant's- daughter produced her parents' documents for her own marriage did she realise what had

happened. Both the mother and the daughter were re-converted by the Johannesburg Beth Din.

C 22 - 1941 Lot 20/6

Another case concerned an applicant who claimed to have been married to her Jewish partner according to Jewish rites by a Rev. G—. It turned out that Rev. G— had no ecclesiastical title but was merely a bookseller who had staged a Jewish wedding. In a very kindly worded letter written by Rabbi Aloy to Rev. G —, an appeal was made to the latter to refrain from conducting conversions outside the boundaries of the Beth Din, as those would only encourage intermarriage.

C 23 - Lot 19/19

Chief Rabbi Rabinowitz had publicly attacked Rabbi Dr. R — from the pulpit on the issue of unauthorised conversions, which were undertaken for a fee and published a proclamation entitled "Solemn warning by the Beth Din". (Appendix 2) Responding to these developments an applicant who had been converted by Rabbi Dr. R — wrote to Rabbi Rabinowitz requesting him to deal with the matter assuring him that she had maintained the standard of observance which she avowed at what she believed was a genuine conversion. Chief Rabbi Rabinowitz replied and expressed sympathy but wanted a written recognition by her that the former conversion was unacceptable and a fresh application from her. He promised favourable consideration for her case.

C 24 - 1968 Lot 27/12

In this case the applicant waited to make application because she was told that it was very difficult to get converted. Applicant, together with her husband, visited Israel at the beginning of 1968 and was offered to be converted for the sum of three thousand dollars. The money had to be deposited in a Swiss bank. They were not prepared to entertain the idea of conversion for money.

7. Post-conversion follow up

C 25 - 1964 Lot 9/13

Candidate with high Zionist ideals wished to convert in South Africa and emigrate to Israel. The Beth Din was reluctant to countenance this concept as there would be no post conversion follow up. Rabbi Casper asked the Beth Din to expedite the conversion and from the candidate he asked for a commitment not to emigrate at that stage

8. Arcadia

C 26 - 1967 Lot 12/19

A Gentile mother deserted her husband and child (who was 3 years old). The social worker recommended the child be converted and accepted in Arcadia followed by a request from the father. The application was expedited in a short space of time without any religious demands from the father.

C 27 - 1954 Lot 8/9

An application was made by a Jewish father of children in a Johannesburg children's home. The Gentile mother was a drinker and the father could not afford to support the children and requested they be converted and placed in Arcadia. Likewise the conversion was expedited with no obligation placed on the father.

C 28 - 1953 Lot 2/A3

A case arose concerning children who were committed to Arcadia by Government order since they were classified by the State as Jewish. Since there was no concrete proof of their Jewishness, Arcadia negotiated their conversion with the Beth Din. The matter was expedited.

C 29 – Lot 14/30

A policy was expressed by the Chief Rabbi in 1948 that if, the children of a mixed marriage were removed from the mother's care, the Beth Din would most likely agree to convert them. This case involving 5 children was expedited.

9. **Leniency of Cape Town Beth Din**C 30 - 1961 Lot 4/13

I came across cases where candidates were advised (in this instance by a Rabbi) that it would be easier to convert in Cape Town, rather than Johannesburg, because Johannesburg had a reputation for a lengthier procedure and more demands than the Cape Beth Din. When the candidates began applying to Cape Town this caused a friction between the two Batei Dinim especially as it touched on the issue of jurisdiction.

10. **Attitude towards intermarriage in the early days**C 31 - 1958 Lot 26/10

Applicant was a non-observant Protestant who had been courted by a Jewish male for 14 years. The question of their differing religions was a major conflict in their relationship and, for this reason, they had not married. Moreover, the Jewish partner had a complex regarding conversion as a solution. Concerted attempts had been made to sever the relationship but had failed. The Jewish partner had suffered a nervous breakdown in the past and submitted a doctor's report that his mental condition was aggravated by the fact that he could not accept the concept of being married to a non-Jewish partner, since Jewish social norms were still hostile towards intermarriage. Despite the fact that at times the Beth Din maintained a "closed door" policy towards conversion and the lack of knowledge of Judaism on the part of the convert, the wife made a fine impression and the committee referred the case to the Beth Din for urgent attention. The conversion followed shortly thereafter.

11. "Closed door" policy**C 32 - 1958 Lot 23/9**

Here the mother had been converted in 1941 during the "closed door" period when the policy was not to convert children until they reached maturity. The mother who converted on her own without the children was told to raise them as Jewish and see to their conversion at a later stage. Though the children grew up as Jewish they were never informed by the mother as to their religious status and it only became an issue when one of the children had actually booked a date with the Synagogue for his marriage. He was shocked to hear that he was not actually Jewish. Here, too, the Beth Din expedited the conversion.

12. Length of conversion**C 33 - 1983 Lot 13/8**

The candidate discovered a condition that would affect her fertility and was advised by the gynaecologist to have children as soon as possible. She submitted medical information on her condition and the Beth Din agreed to expedite the case so that the children could be born Jewish.

C 34 - 1965 Lot 11/13

A Jewish deaf mute had met a Gentile suffering from the same affliction. He stated he did not love her (although she claimed she loved him) but he felt he could only marry a person of his kind and since there was no other eligible Jewish deaf mutes in South Africa he had to take this opportunity. The conversion was expedited within 4 months with minimal requirements.

C 35 - 1962 Lot 30/21

Applicant was the daughter of a mixed marriage, her father Jewish and her mother Gentile (now deceased). She was brought up by her father as a Jewess. She was converted by the Reform in 1959. She had been in Israel for the last two years, was fluent in Hebrew and was engaged to be married to a Jew, an Israeli. She applied for conversion from the Reform because she was told that it took a long time to be converted Orthodox. Her fiance did not know that she was not Jewish. The application was recommended for the sake of the marriage, the Beth Din being requested to treat the matter as urgent and confidential.

13. Expedition / Compassionate groundC 36 - Lot 70/D

Candidate, a religious observant person, was married to a Jew by Jewish law and was living in Israel and subsequently divorced by the Beth Din as a Jewess. Her grandfather revealed to her that her maternal grandmother was not Jewish and never converted. This meant she herself was not Jewish. Although this was not discovered by the Beth Din itself she felt the weight of conscience. On her own accord she approached the Beth Din with this information and proceeded with conversion in order to regularise her position. The Beth Din, however, made a remark that, if further investigation was undertaken, it could be found that she was Jewish since her parents were married in Tel Aviv. For the sake of doubt, however, the conversion took place but was expedited in a short space of time.

C 38 - 1967 Lot 41/21

Applicant was engaged to a Jewish spinster who was advanced in years. Although the candidate would not normally have been considered suitable for conversion the committee felt that because of applicant's age and also in view of the fact that she came from a poor family and was not attractive, should she miss this opportunity she would remain a spinster all her life. Therefore they recommended expedition of the conversion.

C 39 - Lot 12/25

An attorney associated with the family of the applicant presented an affidavit stating he had interviewed an unmarried Jewish woman who was pregnant. He arranged official adoption of the child who was circumcised in the religious Jewish manner. The information was never disclosed to him that the birth mother was raised by a Jewish family but had never herself converted though she always regarded herself as Jewish. Applicant consequently had Gentile status which he only realised when applying for marriage. The Beth Din expedited the conversion.

There have been various cases which came before the Beth Din requesting conversion be expedited as the applicant had a terminal illness.

C 39 - 1986 Lot 15/1

In this case, the candidate sent a letter requesting conversion before Rosh Hashanah believing that it would be to the benefit of his condition and his afterlife.

In another case the father of the Jewish partner was terminally ill and asked me to expedite the conversion of his future daughter in law so that he would be able to attend the wedding. His request for expedition was granted but he died before the actual wedding took place.

C 40 - 1971 Lot 27/14

An application was made to the Synagogue by applicant to be married. On checking the information given by applicant it was discovered that, whereas applicant may have been under the impression that his mother was born Jewish, this was not so. The circumstances were that when he was 6 months old his mother was killed in a car accident and his father remarried a Jewish woman whom he had always believed to be his real mother. He had always regarded himself as Jewish and even had a Barmitzvah in the Synagogue. A request was made that a formal conversion ceremony be performed before the marriage, to which Rabbi Aloy agreed.

C 41 - 1986 Lot 44/3

Applicant for reasons of conviction was ready for the final stage of conversion. On the night before it was to take place Rabbi received a phone call from a congregant stating that applicant was living with a non-Jewish girl. The following morning when he appeared for his conversion in front of the Beth Din, he passed the final test with excellent results. When confronted with the rumour he admitted it and was told the conversion could not be completed under those circumstances. He had to start all over again together with his non-Jewish partner.

From time to time it appeared in the files that anonymous letters were sent to the conversion authorities regarding an applicant's character. These allegations were always checked.

14. Length of conversionC 42 - 1977 Lot 10/5

This is a case where the candidate, a former Reform convert, was converted in less than a year. She was recommended to receive the speedy expedition of the Beth Din as she was emigrating to Israel. Since she was, as a Reform Jewess, nevertheless entitled to the privilege of the Law of Return, it was felt preferable that she took this step as a fully fledged Orthodox Jewess.

15. Jewish father as reason for conversionC 43 - Lot A/18

Applicant had a Jewish father and was raised as a Jew. In his advanced years he realised he would not receive a Jewish burial. To avoid being interred in any other way, he pursued conversion.

16. Regularisation of statusC 44 - 1974 Lot 13/14

Applicant, a 60 year old spinster, had been brought up to believe she was Jewish and only later to discover her mother was not Jewish. Her motive on application to the Beth Din was to regularise her position so that she might be buried as a Jewess.

C 45 - 1953 Lot A/16

Applicant's husband was Jewish and married to a Gentile who was the candidate for conversion. As he advanced in years he knew that he would be buried on the outskirts of the cemetery because of his intermarriage. This greatly concerned him and he wished his wife to be converted.

C 46 - 1989 Lot 11/8

Candidate was born of a Jewish father who had married a Gentile. It had bothered the father that his son was therefore not Jewish. On his deathbed he made the son promise that he would become a fully-fledged Jew.

C 47 - 1968 Lot 22/3

Applicant grew up believing himself to be Jewish. As a middle-aged man he discovered his mother was not Jewish. As he wished to regularise his position without revealing his dilemma to anyone else he left his hometown and spent time in Johannesburg until he was formally converted.

There was a substantial number of cases where an Israeli would meet a South African Gentile who was on a voluntary programme on an Israeli Kibbutz or an Israeli who met his Gentile spouse whilst residing in or touring South Africa.

C 48 - 1972 Lot 10/9

In this particular case the committee stated that they departed from their usual policy by recommending conversion even though the parties had been married for two years and had no children because the husband felt he could not return to Israel and face his parents unless his wife was converted.

17. Reaction of Jewish parentC 49 - 1961 Lot 2/A

The father of a Jewish spouse was heartbroken when his son married a Gentile woman and actually became sick as a result as he felt it was a shame on the family. As a result the Beth Din was prepared to expedite the conversion.

C 50 - Lot 5/6

A father had refused to communicate with his son for 17 years because of his marriage to a Gentile woman, even though there were grandchildren. When the Gentile spouse sought conversion, her father in law wrote to Rabbi Aloy requesting him to encourage the conversion as this would be the only way he could re-unite with his son. He made a plea that he had suffered greatly and he would appreciate the Beth Din bringing an end to his sorrow.

C 51 - Lot 44/20

The father of the Jewish partner corresponded with the Beth Din objecting to the conversion because he felt the Beth Din, by entertaining the conversion, was aiding and abetting the relationship of his son with a non-Jewish partner. He argued that if the latter was not converted the relationship would dissolve. The Beth Din responded that they took the case on its merits.

C 52 - 1979 Lot 3/88

Applicant wished to belong to the people and believed Judaism, both as a religion and a way of life, was the closest to give mankind ethical and moral values. Having encountered vehement reaction from her mother who was a religious Christian she was asked to leave the house.

C 53 - 1976 Lot 31/4

Applicant was a 58 year old widow whose only daughter had been converted to Judaism. She, too, wished to convert so that she could effectively participate in the raising of her Jewish grandchildren according to Judaism. The Chief Rabbi suggested the case be dealt with by the Beth Din without referral to the committee. On her appearance before the Beth Din it was decided that, in view of the circumstances, she would study certain prescribed portions of the syllabus and present herself for examination by early 1978. Because of her sincerity and the special circumstances surrounding the conversion, the Beth Din converted her in a relatively short space of time.

C 54 - 1968 Lot 22/14

Applicant's father was an elder in the Dutch Reform Church. He encouraged her to convert as he felt it was important that the daughter followed the religion of her husband.

18. Ideological conversion

There were three cases in Durban and a few more in Johannesburg where the entire family converted to Judaism, mainly motivated by ideological reasons.

C 55 – Lot 43/20

One such case received local coverage. This was an Afrikaans family, a couple who had 12 children. Five had married and left the home but the remaining 7

children (ages 8-20) were included in the conversion of their parents. The father, who had been a member of the Dutch Reform Church, had shown interest in investigating various religions being unhappy with his current affiliation. Discovering contradictions between the Old Testament and modern day Christianity, he attended a Synagogue in 1979 and began to pursue Judaism. His wife stated that the introduction of Jewish laws into the house by her husband had been a most beautiful experience and the children felt equally enthusiastic. They sold their farm so that they could move to Johannesburg and thus closer to the Synagogue to keep the Sabbath and to proceed with the conversion. The Beth Din was most impressed with the family who had become very observant. After their conversion the family settled in Israel. It is interesting, too, that one of the married sons took the path of conversion.

19. Sincerity

C 56 - 1977 Lot 31/26

Applicant was interested in conversion at an earlier stage but felt herself not ready to take the step as she was in a great deal of financial debt and only made application 20 years later when her debts were paid off. The Beth Din was impressed by her honest disposition and converted her.

20. Conversion sparked off by close association with Jewish people

There were a number of cases where conviction as a motive for conversion was sparked off by a visit to Israel or from associating or working closely with Jewish people.

C 57 – Lot 11/2

Applicant worked in a Jewish Old Aged Home and became involved in the Jewish way of life. In another case (1960, Lot 19/18), a nursing sister in Tara Hospital had observed how Jews take care of their sick, aged and mentally ill patients, a quality which she so admired that it became her motive for conversion. Another (Lot 10/9)

grew up in Antwerp where her parents had assisted Jewish people during the Nazi occupation. This prompted her to visit Israel and she became most impressed. She then pursued conversion and finally emigrated to Israel.

21. Emotional

C 58 – 1968 Lot 11/48

Applicant, married to a Jewish woman, sought to have his child circumcised and to be converted himself but his wife objected because both her parents were killed in the Holocaust. Later on she relented and the conversion proceeded.

C 59 - Lot 23/1

Applicant's father's death through terminal illness evoked a number of fears regarding her spiritual position. In her search for religious peace she was attracted to Judaism.

22. Holocaust related cases

C 60 - 1967 Lot 3/7

Here applicant and children fled from Germany after Hitler's advance to power. They had always wished to identify with the Jewish people as a form of empathy but wanted for the children to grow up and make up their own minds so they could apply together.

C 61 - Lot 8/20

Applicant claimed to be Jewish but had no documentation to prove it due to the loss of all records in the Holocaust. This type of incident was frequently encountered in the Beth Din archives. The general policy by the Beth Din in such cases is one of conversion for the sake of doubt.

C 62 - 1970 Lot 21/27

In another case applicant lived in Holland during the Nazi occupation and explained that his father married his mother, a Christian woman, in order to save his life. Here the Beth Din were sympathetic as they often were throughout all periods which appeared in the Beth Din files.

C 63 - Lot 20/10

The Beth Din were sympathetic in the case of a candidate who was persecuted by the Nazis because of the relationship with her Jewish fiance whom she later married when they escaped to South Africa. Her conversion and that of her young adult daughter was expedited by the Beth Din.

C 64 - 1994 Lot 5/15

Applicant was raised in a convent. Her M.A. thesis was on the study of the Holocaust. She then became a teacher of history in the convent. Amongst her subjects was "The Holocaust". This prompted her to take an interest in the Holocaust and Judaism. Within the course of her studies she visited the sites of the camps in Poland as well as touring Israel. She was left with a marked impression and decided to pursue Judaism. During the conversion process she met a Jewish person whom she subsequently married, after conversion. The Beth Din was very impressed by her vast knowledge of Judaism and the Holocaust.

C 65 - 1939 Lot 24/11

At an early stage of the application when the committee was prepared to entertain the application the Jewish husband of the applicant made the point that it was preferable that his wife should not be converted in view of the Nazi persecution that was taking place. It would be preferable, therefore, for her to remain a Gentile. The wife was nevertheless steadfast and continued to pursue the conversion, which was finally recommended after the war. There was a rumour that a relative of the husband had offered to pay for some Jews to be released from Germany if

the committee was prepared to consider the conversion and they agreed on the grounds of Pikuach Nefesh (a principle in Halakha which gives priority to the saving of life).

23. Beth Din Policy

C 66 - 1940 Lot 18/15

The child of a Jewish father separated from a Gentile mother was attending Hebrew/Jewish studies classes in Rhodesia in preparation for his Barmitzvah. Only two months before the event it was discovered that the mother was not Jewish. The father, together with the local minister, applied to the Beth Din for the conversion of the child in time for his Barmitzvah. Rabbi Aloy wrote to Rev Dr Levine and pointed out the Beth Din is against conversion for the sake of barmitzvah celebration but if Rev Levine is prepared to impress upon the candidate the importance of mitzvot and he responds with genuineness to convert they would reconsider the matter.

C 67 -1956 Lot 3/1

The husband of the applicant was previously married to a Jewish spouse and subsequently divorced but he refused to give a GET (Bill of Divorcement) to his former wife. Later, he met a Gentile whom he wished to marry and she applied for conversion. The decision of the committee was to recommend subject to applicant's husband giving a GET to his former Jewish wife.

24. Relationship between the Batei Dinim of Israel and South Africa

C 68 - 1959 Lot 19

There is correspondence between the Johannesburg Beth Din and the Chief Rabbinate in Israel dated August 1959 in which it is stated that there is an understanding and an agreement between the above that no candidate from South Africa will be converted in Israel without the knowledge and the approval of the

Johannesburg Beth Din. Based on that, the Johannesburg Beth Din complained to the Chief Rabbinate of Israel of a case where the Ultra-Orthodox Beth Din of Jerusalem converted a South African candidate who had begun the process in Johannesburg. In the correspondence between the Johannesburg Beth Din and the Ultra-Orthodox Beth Din as well as the Chief Rabbinate of Israel, the latter claimed they do not recognise the Ultra-Orthodox authority and in response the latter claimed they do not recognise the former authority. The matter was resolved by an undertaking by the Ultra-Orthodox that they, too, would inform Johannesburg in the future of any South African candidate who made application to them for conversion.

25. Conflict between the Israeli Beth Din and Batei Dinim abroad

C 69 - 1989 Lot 41/1

A South African beauty queen was engaged in a process of conversion with the Johannesburg Beth Din for 2 years. The Beth Din was not satisfied with her progress. She then presented herself to an Orthodox Rabbi in Philadelphia who converted her in two weeks and she returned to our Beth Din with the certificate. The Johannesburg Beth Din corresponded with the Chief Rabbinate of Israel complaining about the matter. In response, Chief Rabbi Avraham Shapira said that the Beth Din in Philadelphia was recognised by the Chief Rabbinate of Israel.

Within the same correspondence the Johannesburg Beth Din referred to a similar case. Here the candidate from Cape Town had refused to accede to all their demands and then approached a Rabbi in Belgium to expedite the conversion.

This practice appeared several times in the files and, in some cases, involved "pirate" conversions.

26. Validation of an Israeli conversion abroad

C 70

A South African candidate was converted in Israel with a conversion certificate signed by Chief Rabbi Goren with a remark that the certificate was not valid overseas. It has already been mentioned that the standard practice adopted by the Beth Din in Israel is that their conversions were contingent upon the parties remaining in Israel. Lot 9/A cites the case of a South African candidate who had completed the course in Israel but, on discovering the abovementioned regulation, decided to finalise the conversion in South Africa where he had to repeat the conversion.

Halakhic guidelines for proselytisation by Israeli conversion authorities do not actually differ from those of their counterparts in the *Diaspora*. Nevertheless, Rabbi Goren felt it necessary to introduce the clause calling for the settlement of the accomplished candidate in Israel. There were several reasons for this decision. In order to circumvent the demands of conversion authorities in the *Diaspora* potential converts could be tempted to opt for the relatively easy Israeli conversion. The rationale, however, behind this lenient Israeli approach is that living in Israel is conducive to post-conversion observance. For the candidate, therefore, to use the Israeli conversion authorities purely for the purpose of proselytisation and then to leave the country would defeat the object of the facilities afforded them.

It must be noted, however, that this ruling of Rabbi Goren has not been accepted by all Rabbinic authorities nor has it always been implemented.

4.11 Conclusion

The information contained in this chapter bears testimony to the actual nature of Jewish proselytisation as it has evinced itself in South Africa over the three quarter century of effective recording of the phenomenon in operation. Clearly, the

conversion authorities responded to the original demands for proselytisation with extreme caution but, as this section of the disquisition has demonstrated, policies were reviewed from time to time to meet socio-demographic exigencies. A development was set in motion resulting in the present system comprising a Rabbinic registry for conversion and upgraded programmes.

Therein is seen an evolution, which I have attempted to illustrate with statistical tables and case study. These mechanisms have enciphered characteristics of the applicants and their motives.

The issue still to be investigated in greater depth is that of post conversion behaviour with which the focus on the Durban model in the next chapter sets out to deal.

CHAPTER 5

DURBAN AS A MODEL

5. INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, the investigation turns to the Jewish community of Durban. There are several reasons as to why this particular centre is suitable as a model for conversions in South Africa. The statistical analysis revealed that Durban was the third largest Jewish community in South Africa. Nevertheless, the size of this population lags far behind that of Johannesburg and Cape Town. Once again, this factor could serve as an advantage to the investigator. This is because there are two principal objectives, which this section of the work sets out to achieve. Firstly, a more comprehensive study of the post-conversion stages and secondly, a closer understanding of attitudes towards conversion on the part of both the proselyte and the surrounding community.

During the perusal of the archives of the Johannesburg Beth Din, part of the agenda was a search for information regarding the level of observance of the converttee after the completion of the process. The data contained in the files, however, was almost negligible. Indeed, this issue was raised with great frequency in the minutes of meetings of the Beth Din and the lay committee. It was found that, in practice, the magnitude of the community was a complication. Moreover, the role of the conversion authorities was merely one of agency for proselytisation. The contact between the committee, the Beth Din and the candidate was a formal procedure, such that did not lend itself to developing the type of inter-relationship which provides a *modus* for follow-up in the post conversion stages.

In Durban, on the other hand, the entire Jewish community is more centralised, thus facilitating observation of the post conversion stages. A dual purpose may be

served by my role as the spiritual leader of Durban Jewry on the one hand, as the local affiliate of the Beth Din acting as its agent in processing the conversions, and at the same time, as the Rabbi of the community of which the convertee becomes an integral part. Thus a basis is created where the interaction between the conversion authorities and the proselyte takes on a more personal nature. A more intimate knowledge of the convertee greatly assists follow-up.

Certain historical differences were drawn between the Jewish population of Durban and that of the major centres. Nevertheless, when considering the population characteristics appertaining to Durban Jewry, these can be found to share many common denominators with those of other parts of South Africa. Moreover, the system of conversion operative in Durban aligns itself with that of the Johannesburg Beth Din and is sanctioned by it. The same can be said regarding attitudes of the general Jewish public and the convert towards conversion. Thus, the Durban model may be looked upon as a representative of its counterpart in the rest of the country.

Methodology

For the purpose of drawing upon Durban as a model, several methodological steps were undertaken. The conversion files available in the community were investigated. Although some of the information also appeared in the Johannesburg archives, a greater insight into the subject was obtained on the local level. Thus this part of the investigation complemented the study of the Johannesburg files. 176 files were located dating back to the 1940s. A breakdown of their contents was provided in Chapter 4. From the total number of 176 files, a sample 102 was extracted. These represented cases where information relating to post conversion adherence was obtainable.

Interviews were held with a number of converts as well as a candidate in the process of conversion. The subjects were selected from both genders and covered a wide spectrum of ages. Some of these sessions were conducted by myself whilst I

appointed a journalist from the congregation to interview some of the others, who had the option of anonymity. Lastly, a questionnaire was sent to the entire community consisting of Orthodox, Reform and unaffiliated respondents. The format contained two sections, one that was to be completed by those Jewish by birth and another to be filled in by the convertees. The written questionnaire sought information designed to examine the respondents' personal circumstances, as well as attitudes towards the concept of conversion and the converts themselves.

Analysis of sample

The general picture that emerged from the study of the 102 cases of Orthodox conversions in Durban, where detailed information was available, was that of a higher level of observance on the part of convertees as compared with those Jewish by birth.

In the observation of these convertees major areas of their religious observance were examined. These were adherence to Shabbat, Kashrut, laws of family purity and Synagogue attendance. Social factors were also looked at, such as involvement in the Jewish communal organisations in the city, acceptance by the community, the divorce rate within this sample and those who reverted to their original religion. These particular criteria represent the major challenges in the socio-religious transformation of the proselyte.

The sample covered the years 1949 -1997. Of these cases 78 were female and 24 were male. 59 were married, 18 divorced, 10 single and 7 widowed. 19 converted between 1949 and 1970, 34 between 1971 and 1980, 26 between 1981 and 1990 and from 1991 to 1997 there were 15 cases of conversion. In 8 of the cases, the actual date of conversion was uncertain. Out of the total number of cases, there was a striking figure of 18 individuals who had either married a Gentile (usually a second marriage) or reverted to their previous religion, making up 17.6% of the total.

5.1 Kashrut observance

<i>Year of conversion</i>	<i>Percent</i>		
	<i>Fully</i>	<i>Partial</i>	<i>None</i>
1949 – 1970	16.7%	5.6%	77.8%
1971 – 1980	33.3%	12.1%	54.5%
1981 – 1990	30.8%	26.9%	42.3%
1991 – 1997	93.3%	6.7%	—
<i>Column Total</i>	38.7%	14%	47.3%

Adherence to this aspect of Judaism on the part of the convert was examined from the viewpoint of three categories – fully kosher observant, partially observant and non-observant. The “fully kosher” category consisted of those who purchased their meat exclusively from the kosher butchery and ate only kosher certified foodstuffs. This group also maintained a separation of meat and dairy products in their homes and dined only at kosher approved venues. The “partially kosher” group kept a certain level of Kashrut, mainly in the sense that their meat cuisine was aligned with Kashrut but, with regard to eating outside the home, they compromised their standards. 38.7% of the total were Kashrut observant in the complete sense, 14% partially observant and 47.3% non-observant.

Looking at the general Durban Jewish community from empirical data, the average Kashrut observance rates approximately 10%. From here, it can be deduced that the level of Kashrut observance amongst the convertees is quite high. In fact, the list of customers that support the local kosher butchery contains a substantial number of converts.

Of those who converted between 1949 and 1970, 16.7% were fully observant of Kashrut, while the great majority was not. Between 1971 and 1990 an average of 30% of the converts fell into this category. The latest group (1991-1997) shows a 93.3% total Kashrut observance. Whereas the first of these periods shows a low Kashrut observance and the second an increase, the most recent years reveals escalation in Kashrut observance.

These variations can be attributed to development of conversion policies and programmes as well as social factors. Two of the subjects who were interviewed said that they had started their post conversion stages with every intention of keeping Kosher but, as they mingled in Jewish peer groups, they found themselves in a minority and isolated by virtue of Kashrut restrictions. This made it difficult for them to accept invitations from members of the Jewish community, most of whom kept non-Kosher homes. One candidate felt herself on the defensive as a convert who was more observant than a Jew by birth.

In contrast, a number of factors contributed to the upsurge in Kashrut observance in the latter years. A greater consciousness and improved Kashrut facilities were promoted and upgraded conversion programmes proved instrumental in creating support groups for observant converts.

5.2 *Shabbat observance*

Level of Shabbat observance

<i>Year of conversion</i>	<i>Percent</i>		
	<i>Fully</i>	<i>Partial</i>	<i>None</i>
1949 – 1970	5.6%	22.2%	72.2%
1971 – 1980	14.7%	32.4%	52.9%
1981 – 1990	19.2%	38.5%	42.3%
1991 – 1997	80%	20%	—

A similar pattern is detectable when analysing levels of Shabbat observance on the part of convertees. Of the total number of cases in question, 24.5% were fully Shabbat observant while 29.8% partly observant and 45.7% non-observant.

Under full Shabbat observance were included abstention from work, travelling and the maintenance of the home according to Shabbat regulations. The partially observant would probably avoid working on Shabbat but would nevertheless drive on Shabbat and would lack meticulousness when it comes to using electrical appliances.

Once again, in comparison to the general Jewish community the rate of Shabbat observance on the part of converts far exceeds that of the general Jewish community. As a point to note, it was calculated that out of 19 known fully observant families in Durban, 7 were converts. Looking again at the years up to the 1980s, an average of 10% of the total number of converts were totally observant. This figure climbed to 19.2% between 1980 and 1990 and then spiraled to 80% between 1991 and 1997.

The factors governing these statistics can be likened to those which were examined under Kashrut observance. Furthermore, to meet the most requirements for conversion, a candidate is expected to live within walking distance from the Synagogue. Thus, in the period of the programme, which is between two and three years, the converttee (and partner) becomes accustomed to the experience of Shabbat observance.

5.3 Attendance at Synagogue

	Percent		
	Fully	Partial	None
<i>Attendance at Synagogue</i>	33.3%	40.2%	26.5%

Here, too, three categories are presented - regular Friday night and Saturday morning Shul attendances, Friday night only and attendance mainly on High Festivals. 33.3% attended Shul on a regular basis, 40.2% on Friday night only and 26.5% on High Festivals only. In comparing the converttee to the general Jewish community, the level of Shul attendance, as do other observances, rates higher.

The relatively small figure of 26.5% who only attend Shul on High Festivals indicates a probable low Kashrut and Shabbat observance as well. On the other hand, this table shows that 73.5% of converttees are regularly attending Synagogue, if only on Friday night.

5.4 *Laws of Family Purity*

	<i>Percent</i>		
	<i>Fully</i>	<i>Partial</i>	<i>None</i>
<i>Laws of family purity</i>	10%	—	—

As to whether the proselytes maintain the laws of family purity in the post conversion stages is difficult to monitor because of the confidential nature of the act. Nevertheless, some form of assessment of adherence to this observance becomes possible by virtue of information as to who uses the Mikvah and knowledge of the level of observance of the converttee himself/herself. Out of the 102 candidates in the sample, a total of 12 converttees observed the laws of family purity, which is more than 10% of the total. This figure ranks high when one considers that the general use of the Mikvah by the community is minimal.

5.5 *Community Involvement*

	<i>Percent</i>		
	<i>Fully</i>	<i>Partial</i>	<i>None</i>
<i>Community involvement</i>	25.3%	42.2%	32.3%

In any Jewish community there are organisations which serve its needs. These bodies for the most part depend upon the input of voluntary workers. As many of the volunteers form long-standing attachments to particular organisations, cohesive social groups are created. There are 24 communal bodies within the parameters of

Durban Jewry. The need for the converttee to become involved in communal service, therefore, is intensified by the desire for social acceptance in a community, which is probably diverse from the original background.

In compiling statistics relating to communal involvement on the part of the converttee three categories are presented – highly involved, moderately involved, not at all involved. Of the total, 25.3% of the converttees were classified as highly involved. This level of involvement would include an ongoing participation in an organisation or perhaps several such bodies, even to the extent of holding leading positions in the communal spectrum. The 42.2% who were moderately involved are those who occasionally offer assistance to the organisations and/or respond when called upon. Those who comprise the balance of 32.3% are categorised as not involved at all. In comparison to the general Jewish public a high rate of involvement on the part of the converttee is apparent.

5.6 Divorce among the converts

In addressing the issue of the potentiality for divorce amongst converts Steven Huberman (1981:313) writes,

“Empirical research has shown that there is a correlation between the religious affiliation of marital partners and the rate of family disorganisation through annulment, separation, or desertion. Dr. William Goode, a specialist on the family, reports that intermarriages are more prone to divorce than marriages in which the partners are of the same faith because the former have a greater potential for tension and incompatibility. Marital relations are, at best, fragile and by introducing another source of possible discord – divergent religious backgrounds – the marriage is far less likely to succeed.”

Conversion of the Gentile spouse to Judaism could be presumed to stabilise former differing religious backgrounds. Of the model group of 102 converts, however, 21 couples (20.6%) were divorced.

Another analysis looked at the number of divorces in the Jewish Orthodox community of Durban from 1970-1997 during which the number of Jewish families in Durban numbered 900 units. A total of 149 gittim were issued during that period. Of those 83.2% were Jewish by birth whilst 16.8% were Jewish by conversion. Dubb (1994:56) reports that by 1988/89 the divorce rate in the entire Jewish community of South Africa had reached 4.2% per 1000 Jewish marriages per year. Using this as a basis of comparison, it can be deduced that the divorce rate amongst converts ranks high. Looking, too, at the proportion of converts in relation to the Jewish population in Durban, once again a high rate of divorce is seen. Though the Durban model is a comparatively small sample in relationship to the entire Jewish population, more accurate data regarding this phenomenon on a national level is worthy of further investigation.

An American survey of Jewish families (Phillips, 1998:65) reports:

"Divorce and mixed marriages are strikingly associated. Mixed marriages are twice as likely to end in divorce. The fact that divorce ratios are highest where religious differences are greatest suggests that religious differences may have played a part in the divorce."

The question thus has to be asked as to what extent proselytisation of the Gentile spouse in fact does bring about religious stability in the marriage and furthermore how does their mutual religious consensus affect their relationship. It has to be taken into account that from the courting stage till the marriage thereafter, individual religious attitudes held by the respective spouses are sensitive to a number of influences, not the least of them being their social backgrounds. Often, during dating, religious differences are not a priority. The challenge to this religious oblivion is expressed by Peterson and Remsen: (1988:9)

"But as they stride along confidently, a mixed couple may suddenly stumble into unanticipated pitfalls. The truth is that the differences have not vanished and the

pull of tradition has not died. Sometimes, despite their apparent smooth blend, a couple finds that cultural differences create tensions or misunderstandings. As people get older, latent loyalties can surface. Often, there is community and family opposition."

As the relationship progresses in its intensity, the religious question assumes a more momentous significance. Whereas conversion of the Gentile spouse is sought as a solution, the spouses invariably revise their former religious attitudes. Though it is expected at the time of conversion that they have reached some form of consensus as to the religious side, there are still the post conversion stages to be addressed. Moreover, religion is not the only factor that will determine the success of a convert. There is also a possible incompatibility that has been overlooked during the courtship and the process of conversion. Interviewing a couple, consisting of a Jew by birth and a convert who divorced six months after their marriage, revealed that they shared a mutual challenge during the conversion process. They were determined to achieve their goal despite all the odds that were against them. In the words of the converting partner, they had a mission, so much so that they overlooked any personality differences. Having fulfilled what they had so vigorously set out to achieve the absence of the original challenge brought into focus their incompatibility.

Another subject at an interview said that, at the time of courtship, religious differences did not feature greatly. Once the Gentile spouse converted and they married he longed for the type of traditional home in which he was reared; with its Friday night dinners and Passover Seders. The wife was unable to provide this atmosphere. She had not seen it in her own background and the conversion course, such as she had undertaken, had failed to make its impact on her. In his words, she remained a Gentile and though he himself was not very observant, she was unable to fulfil his minimal requirements. It is interesting to note that, out of those 102 cases in the sample, there were no cases of divorce amongst those who were categorised as fully observant.

From the interviews conducted by Huberman (1981:315) he concludes,

"In sum, the remarks of our respondents indicate that a common religious base can help centralise the individual members of the family."

The results of the findings in the Durban sample, however, indicate that conversion without proper commitment to the religion may be insufficient to serve as a stabilising factor.

6 of the 21 divorces in this sample reverted to former religions. A possible explanation lies in the social implications involved. Having converted for marriage, the proselyte has detached himself/herself from the previous society to become part of the spouse's peer group. When the divorce takes place, often the relationship between the convert and the acquired social group becomes estranged creating a vacuum in the support system of the convert, which may lead to reversion to the previous religion.

It would seem, therefore, that a conversion, which is superficial, rates the same results as an intermarriage. On this subject, the former Chief Rabbi of the United Kingdom, Lord Immanuel Jakobowitz, in his essay *"Intermarriage and Conversion"* (Safran 1992: 54/55) presents a relevant comment,

"In the end, however, the choice whether to marry in or out is a highly personal decision, little influenced by communal policies and attitudes. The real argument to be overcome is: 'As long as we are happy together....' It is of little avail to counter such a philosophy of life with statistics. Experience may show, as in fact it does, that the rate of marriage failures and divorces is twice as high in mixed marriages as in endogamous unions. Sociological surveys may also indicate that children brought up in a spiritual no-man's-land are more prone than others to end up in misery and mischief."

This view was affirmed in the course of interviews with personnel of the Beth Din. Although they were unable to summon statistics to support their content, their own observation over years of experience testified to a higher divorce rate amongst converts to Judaism than amongst Jews by birth.

5.7. QUESTIONNAIRE TO COMMUNITY

Introduction and Methodology

From the information extracted from the archives of the Beth Din and investigation of the Durban sample, trends could be detected which were relevant to the issue of conversion in South Africa. From the analysis drawn up, a historical perspective was evident with regard to the evolvement of the policy of the Beth Din and the lay conversion authorities towards the acceptance of converts. Yet another chapter in the long history of attitudes towards proselytisation unfolded. To some extent, it was possible to understand the candidates themselves and so, too, the reactions of parents involved.

In order to expend on that aspect, a questionnaire was sent to the entire Jewish community of Durban, which was in fact an opinion poll on attitudes towards conversion. The value of this type of inquiry lies in its role as an essential component in the entire spectrum of the principal topic at hand. From this sample, it can be seen on an "here and now" basis how conversion to Judaism is perceived both by the candidates themselves and the surrounding Jewish community.

The questionnaire was sent to 1374 households, drawn from a list of all persons registered as Jews in the records of the Council for KwaZulu Natal Jewry, the official Jewish regional communal body, which represents the total number of Jewish households in the city, whether Orthodox, Reform or unaffiliated. The latter

category refers to those who have not subscribed to Synagogue membership. This does not necessarily indicate a severance from the faith.

The actual questions were preceded with a letter of introduction explaining the purpose for this investigation. There were two parts to the questionnaire. Part A was intended for those who are Jewish by birth and part B for the converttee. (*Appendix 3*)

In both sections the first set of questions sought individual characteristics, such as denominational affiliation (i.e. Orthodox, Reform, unaffiliated), gender, age, marital status and then followed an opportunity to express feelings and attitudes regarding proselytisation. With regard to Part B (the section completed by the converttee) some of the questions compiled were based on a similar questionnaire issued by the American Jewish Committee in its study entitled "*Conversion among the Intermarried*" (Egon Mayer and Amy Avgar, 1987)

Out of the total of 1374 to whom the questionnaire was sent 544 responses were forthcoming. This figure represents approximately 40% of the Jewish households in Durban. This cipher is made up of 474 Jews by birth and 70 converts. Of those Jewish by birth 78.5% were Orthodox, 16.2% Reform and 5.3% were unaffiliated. Interestingly enough, the distribution of percentages by denomination in respect of those who replied to the questionnaire is almost identical with the denominational distribution on the national level. The 70 converts who responded consisted of 41.4% Orthodox and 58.6% Reform. As a general observation it would appear that in proportion to the total Jewish community of the city, the percentage of converts who responded to the questionnaire was much higher than the Jews by birth. This could be attributed to their personal experiential interest in the subject.

It was important to know the denominational identity of the respondent, as Jewish religious doctrinal concepts are perceived differently by Orthodox and Reform. As to the respondent's actual identity, the name column was left as optional, in order not

to inhibit those who preferred anonymity from expressing their opinions. One has to take into account that, as the researcher, I am also the Rabbi of the community. Responding to the party in my position was a strong variable factor, whether or not the respondent would choose anonymity.

The respondents are mostly known to me. Some, therefore, would prefer to remain unknown but nevertheless express their views, which may be diametrically opposed to mine. Others would give their names in order to air their views, as a direct message to myself. Nevertheless, the majority of 64% did submit their names.

5.7.1 *Gender of respondents*

<i>Gender</i>	<i>Percent</i>	
	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>
<i>Jewish by birth</i>	49.8%	50.2%
<i>Convertees</i>	10%	90%

The 10% male and 90% female convertees is close to the general trend in conversion.

5.7.2 Age of respondents

Age	Percent	
	Jewish by birth	Converts
Under 40	13%	45.6%
40 – 49	13.4%	21.1%
50 – 70	40%	33.3%
71 +	33.5%	—

It has been seen how the Beth Din policy towards the acceptance of converts varied from generation to generation. It could be assumed that this was also a reflection of social attitudes. Therefore, it was important to look at the age of the respondents, in order to determine to which generation they belonged.

Amongst those respondents who were Jewish by birth the dominant figure, 57.6% of the total, were over 40. Of this total 33.5% were over 70 years of age and only 13% of the total were under 40. A possible explanation as to why the older rather than the younger community were represented more predominantly in the responses is that this group is in fact more predominant in Durban Jewry itself. Certainly, that is an observation which is reinforced by Dubb, (1994:125) who gives a figure of 22% of the total of Durban Jewry as over 65. That was the position in 1991. Since then the total figure for Durban Jewry has shrunk, mainly due to the exodus of the younger age groups, which accords to the over 65s an even higher percentage scale in relation to the total.

Looking at the distribution of age groups amongst the converttee respondents, a significant difference is observed – 45.6% under 40, 21% in the 40-49 age bracket and 33.3% in the over 50 age bracket. This is because the earlier periods in Durban saw a very small number of converts and thus most of the converts will fall into a younger age group.

5.7.3 *Marital status*

<i>Marital Status</i>	<i>Percent</i>	
	<i>Jewish by birth</i>	<i>Converts</i>
<i>Single</i>	7.6%	2.9%
<i>Married</i>	63.3%	75.7%
<i>Divorced</i>	10.1%	14.3%
<i>Widowed</i>	19%	7.1%

In investigating the various attitudes towards conversion the significance of marital status could well lie in differences in the general attitudes between single and married persons.

Of the Jews by birth, 63.3% respondents were married, 10.1% divorced and 19% widowed. This makes a total of 92.4% who were married at one stage or another as opposed to 24% who were single. Looking at this category of converttee respondents 75.7% were married, 14.3% divorced, 7.1% widowed, which makes a total of 97.1%, which could be considered as married category, whilst only 2.9% were single. This can be understood in terms of marriage, which has been established as the principal reason for conversion.

Up to this point, the investigation has looked at common denominators germane to respondents, both Jewish by birth and converttees. From here, the inquiry turns to questions posed to each group.

5.7.4 Part A - Jewish by birth

Has a close member of your family undergone conversion?

<i>Affiliation</i>	<i>Percent</i>					
	<i>Orthodox</i>		<i>Reform</i>		<i>Unaffiliated</i>	
	<i>Yes</i>	<i>No</i>	<i>Yes</i>	<i>No</i>	<i>Yes</i>	<i>No</i>
	27.2%	72.8%	45.9%	54.1%	16.7%	83.3%

It could be assumed that, if a member of one's family has been through the conversion process, the answer of the respondent would be affected in a different way from that of one who has not had the experience. Invariably, if a family member has been converted, the others in the family will be party to a more intimate knowledge of the phenomenon.

Of the total number of respondents 29.6% replied that they did have a close family member who underwent conversion while 70.4% answered negatively. This figure, however, does not represent a real distribution of the general position in the community. A better perspective is obtained with a breakdown of the number of respondents into Orthodox and Reform. Whilst 27.2% of the total Orthodox respondents replied that a family member had been converted, the figure in respect of Reform was 45.9%. As was mentioned earlier, two third of the total conversions in South Africa were in the Reform. Correspondingly, this would explain the high percentage of conversion in Reform families.

How do you feel about conversion?

<i>Affiliation</i>	<i>Per cent</i>		
	<i>Orthodox</i>	<i>Reform</i>	<i>Unaffiliated</i>
<i>"In favour"</i>	46.1%	52%	32%
<i>"Mixed feeling"</i>	45.5%	29.3%	44%
<i>"Against"</i>	8.4%	1.3%	24%
<i>Total</i>	100%	100%	100%

The phenomenon of conversion as an institution has been an issue of disagreement in Jewish communities throughout the ages. Not only has the controversy been Halakhic but the lay Jewish public has also differed to a great extent on this issue. Responses to the questionnaire demonstrated that this divergence of opinion still persists.

Of the total respondents, 49% were in favour of conversion, 42.9% had mixed feelings and only 8.1% were against conversion. At the outset, it would appear that only a small number are expressly negatively disposed towards proselytisation, whilst the balance are about equally distributed between mixed and favourable feelings. This would indicate a shift towards positive acceptance of the phenomenon.

Analysing the responses in terms of Orthodox and Reform, 46.1% of the total Orthodox respondents were in favour whilst the corresponding Reform figure was 69.8%. 45.5% of Orthodox respondents had mixed feelings and Reform 29.3%. Of

those against, 8.4% were Orthodox and only 1.3% Reform. This would confirm that Reform is more favourably disposed towards conversion than Orthodox.

Attitude towards conversion - by age

<i>Age of respondent</i>	<i>Per cent</i>		
	<i>Up to 29</i>	<i>30-40</i>	<i>50+</i>
<i>"In favour"</i>	38.5%	49.3%	47.4%
<i>"Mixed feelings"</i>	61.5%	47.8%	42.5%
<i>"Against"</i>	<i>Nil</i>	2.9%	10.1%
<i>Total</i>	100%	100%	100%

This breakdown in relation to the age of respondents requires further investigation. A trend is detectable. In the age group up to 29, 38.5% were in favour whilst the majority of 61.5% in this age bracket expressed mixed feelings. When it came to those older than 29, the majority were in favour of conversion. It would appear that the younger generation has not formulated any firm decisions regarding conversion, whilst the older groups could be said to have more definite ideas on the subject, due to wider experience in the field.

Most decidedly of significance is the age of those against conversion. Out of the 25 who responded as being against, 23 were over 60. An important result of this finding is the upcoming generation that is either pro-conversion or having mixed feelings about it. The concept of conversion as a social taboo belongs to an older generation.

Attitude towards conversion - by gender

<i>Gender</i>	<i>Percent</i>	
	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>
<i>"In favour"</i>	57.3%	40.9%
<i>"Mixed feelings"</i>	33.6%	51.9%
<i>"Against"</i>	9.1%	7.2%
<i>Total</i>	100%	100%

The responses revealed that, of those in favour of conversion, the percentage of males is higher than that of females. Males comprised 57.3% of their total and 40.9% of females answered positively. Those with mixed feelings were made up of 33.6% male and 51.9% female. Since it has been established that most of the converts are females, the male is more open to the concept since it is mostly amongst the masculine gender that conversion for a partner is sought. On the other hand, the Jewish female feels her position as a potential marriage partner to be threatened by the conversion of non-Jewish women. Moreover, as has been previously posited the Jewish female feels more restricted to her own community than does the male.

Attitude towards conversion – by whether there was a conversion in the family

	Percent	
	Convert in family	No convert in family
<i>"In favour"</i>	71.1%	40.4%
<i>"Mixed feelings"</i>	24.4%	49.8%
<i>"Against"</i>	4.4%	9.8%
<i>Total</i>	100%	100%

The investigation now looks at another set of personal circumstances influencing the reply to the question *"How do you feel about conversion?"* in the light of positive replies to the previous question, *"Has a close member of your family undergone conversion?"*

Of the group of 135 that had a family member converted, 71.1% favoured conversion. The other 327 who responded to this question but did not have a conversion in the family, showed only a 40.4% positive attitude towards conversion. Families that had experienced a conversion of one of their members had an opportunity to develop sympathy towards the concept rather than having to rely on various lay perceptions relating to proselytisation. Moreover, of those who were against conversion, the figure was 9.8% in the case of those who did not have a conversion in the family. This was double the cipher of 4.4% of those who did have such an experience.

In your opinion what is the main motive for conversion?

	<i>Percent</i>
<i>"Conviction"</i>	13.4%
<i>"Marriage"</i>	86.6%

Responses were sought which would indicate the perception of the respondents as to the motive for conversion. 86.6% of the total replies aligned themselves with the previous findings of the case studies that conversion is motivated by marriage whilst 13.4% felt conviction to be the main motive. Based on the remarks from respondents to the questionnaire, one can assume that those who took the view that proselytes were moved by ideological considerations actually meant that, despite the marital motive, there was still a strong idealistic component. Therefore, it can be seen that, in the mind of the community, conversion is considered a need for the marriage, though some will undoubtedly acknowledge conviction as a motive in a minority of cases.

Do you feel conversion has achieved its goal in augmenting the Jewish community?

	<i>Percent</i>
Yes	74.2%
No	25.8%

A Jewish community, which is invariably a minority in a national sense, will tend to feel that augmentation of its members is beneficial to its viability. In order to increase its numbers, campaigns are regularly conducted within the Jewish

community in the form of religious outreach and membership drives for the various congregations. Conversion, too, has been seen by some as an additional way of achieving this objective. This perception is of interest to the researcher. From the Halakhic viewpoint, however, the question may well be asked as to whether augmentation is in fact a legitimate goal of conversion.

74.2% of the total respondents held that proselytisation did, in fact, augment the Jewish community, whilst 25.8% did not. Of those who had a family member converted, 86.8% felt conversion did increase the Jewish community, whilst only 67.8% of those who did not have a conversion in the family felt likewise. Once again, it is seen that a conversion in the family will tend to foster a positive outlook towards conversion.

Previous question – by whether there was a conversion in the family

	Percent	
	<i>Convert in family</i>	<i>No convert in family</i>
<i>Yes</i>	86.8%	67.8%
<i>No</i>	13.2%	32.2%
<i>Total</i>	100%	100%

Do you feel conversion has achieved its goal in keeping the Jewish spouse within the fold?

	Percent
<i>Yes</i>	92.1%
<i>No</i>	7.9%

On the second issue, which poses the question as to whether conversion serves the purpose of keeping the Jewish spouse within the fold, 92.1% felt it did have that effect and the argument is prevalent that conversion ought to be facilitated to that very end. This has been a strong argument advanced by parents who fear or have experienced intermarriage of their children. When this does occur, the options become limited. If the spouse will not convert and if the Gentile partner is a female, the children will not be Jewish. Thus the choice left to parents is either to face that eventuality or to encourage the conversion of the non-Jewish party. One particular respondent wrote in the remarks section of the questionnaire that he himself was previously strongly anti-conversion. His view was that one was either born Jewish or not. When confronted by the agony of the courtship of his son with a Gentile partner, he altered his opinion and is today quite enthusiastic regarding the outcome of the conversion.

What is your reaction when a close family member has intermarried?

	Percent			Row Total
	Orthodox	Reform	Unaffiliated	
"Severance"	6%	1.5%	—	.0.7%
"Disappointed"	81.3%	52.9%	47.6%	79.2%
"Indifference"	12.7%	45.6%	52.4%	20.1%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%

In previous sections, various reactions of parents and family members towards intermarriage have been considered. In statistics compiled from individual responses, only 0.7% of the total number of respondents replied they would sever

the relationship with an individual who intermarried. The majority of 79.2% answered they would be disappointed and a surprising figure of 20.1% indicated complete indifference.

Looking at the breakdown from a denominational point of view, 81.3% of the Orthodox respondents, as opposed to 52.9% of the Reform, said they would be disappointed, while 12.7% of the Orthodox, as against 45.6% of the Reform, replied they would be indifferent. Out of the 3 who opted for total severance 2 were Orthodox and 1 Reform. For the most part, it seems that, although intermarriage still disappoints, it has become an accepted phenomenon in the Durban Jewish community.

A similar research was conducted by Nathan Glazer (1989:18) who reports,

"There is no denying that attitudes towards intermarriage have become more accepting over time. They have changed strikingly since, for example, Sklare's Lakeville study of 1957-58 (the book was published ten years later): 43 percent of the population in that prosperous suburb said that they would be 'somewhat unhappy' if their child married a non-Jew, while another 29 percent indicated that they would be 'very unhappy'. In Boston, 20 years later, negative attitudes towards intermarriage had dropped substantially, and particularly so among the younger age group : 43 percent of those over the age of 60 were very negative compared to only 5 percent of those aged 18-29."

Although these statistics relate to an American situation, a pattern is evident, which is equally applicable to the local scene. Looking at Glazer's terminology, "somewhat unhappy" and "very unhappy", these classifications are expressed differently in the local questionnaire. "Very unhappy" is hardly equivalent to "severance". If, however, "disappointed" is equated to "somewhat unhappy", the figure supplied by Glazer is close to the local Reform responses.

How do you respond to a converted Jew?

	Percent		
	Orthodox	Reform	Unaffiliated
"Same as any other"	73.6%	89.5%	64%
"As different"	26.4%	10.5%	36%
Total	100%	100%	100%

As a convert embarks on his/her major life changing transformation, having fulfilled the requirements set forth by the conversion authorities, another challenge presents itself – social acceptance. On the one hand, the convert has severed himself/herself from the past but future acceptance to the adopted social milieu is not guaranteed.

It has been stated that Halakha commands equal treatment of the proselyte and that he/she be welcomed in the same way as a Jew by birth. There is, however, a shadow of prejudice in the minds of certain Jews by birth, and sometimes, too, the snide or insidious remarks. The significance of this question is to obtain a real reflection of feelings towards the convert on the part of Jews by birth. From the response one can plan future education of the Jewish public with regard to this issue.

Of those who replied that they would regard the convert as different, 26.4% were Orthodox and 10.5% Reform. Thus we can see that the Orthodox response represents a higher resistance to the acceptance of converts. This difference can be attributed to the greater number of conversions in the Reform, making it a more acceptable phenomenon.

Do you feel we should be more lenient in admitting converts?

	Percent			Row Total
	Orthodox	Reform	Unaffiliated	
Yes	55.8%	78.7%	75%	60.6%
No	44.2%	21.3%	25%	39.4%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%

There is an ongoing debate within Jewish circles as to whether the requirements for the admission of converts are too strict. Some feel that the conversion authorities demand too much of the candidate. In this questionnaire, where the respondents are invited to air their views, I felt that the replies did not necessarily reflect opinions on the conversion process in general but rather addressed the system which is in operation in Durban.

60.6% said there should be greater leniency in admitting proselytes, while 39.4% did not think so. Looking at the Orthodox/Reform analysis, we see that 55.8% of the Orthodox were in favour of leniency, whilst 78.7% of the Reform answered likewise. The question, however, may be asked, "*Are the Reform respondents saying that Reform conversion should be easier or is this a message to the sender of the questionnaire?*"

5.7.5. Part B – Response of Convertees

Location and Year of conversion

(a) *Location*

	<i>Percent</i>
<i>Durban</i>	67.1%
<i>Johannesburg</i>	21.4%
<i>Other</i>	11.5%
<i>Total</i>	100%

(b) *Year of Conversion*

<i>Year</i>	<i>Per cent</i>		
	<i>Orthodox</i>	<i>Reform</i>	<i>Row Total</i>
<i>1953-1970</i>	31%	105%	19.4%
<i>1971-1980</i>	24.1%	10.5%	16.4%
<i>1981-1997</i>	44.8%	78.9%	64.2%
<i>Total</i>	100%	100%	100%

A major explorative theme of this work is the attempt to understand the subject from the point of view of the actual participant in the process of conversion. To further investigation on this aspect of the study, a section of the questionnaire sought responses from those who completed the conversion process. Certain personal

details having been obtained, several questions were posed which were not related to the conversion *per se* but would supply background information that would be of particular value in compiling programmes for converts. As to the year of conversion, 19.4% converted between 1953-70, 16.4% converted between 1971-80 and the majority (64.2%) converted between 1981-1997. The latest period, which incorporated the highest intake of converts applied to both Orthodox and Reform. Of the total, 44.8% of the Orthodox and 78.9% of the Reform responded. There were two possible reasons for this. Firstly, there was not as extensive a conversionist activity in the earlier years and, secondly, converts of more recent times replied more enthusiastically to the questionnaire.

Of the respondents, 67.1% were converted in Durban, 21.6% in Johannesburg and the balance in various other places. 17.2% converted with their children and 82.8% on their own.

Educational and Occupational Background

	<i>Percent</i>
(i) Education	
<i>Matric</i>	50.7%
<i>University degree</i>	24.6%
<i>Technical diploma</i>	24.6%
(ii) Occupation	
<i>Professional</i>	17.4%
<i>Education/Social work</i>	14.5%
<i>Sales/Clerical</i>	14.5%
<i>Housewife</i>	26.1%
<i>Other</i>	27.5%

One of the criteria which serves as a guideline in the compiling of conversion programmes is the educational and occupational background of the candidates, and responses to a questionnaire of this nature provide the opportunity to make this assessment. Generally speaking, the level of education was high and most of the candidates were quite actively productive in the open market. 50.7% of the respondents had matric, 24.6% had University degrees and 24.6% technical diplomas. The highest percentage (26.1%) were housewives followed by 17.4% professional. The educational/social work category showed the same as the sales/clerical – 14.5% each. The balance of 27.5% had widely varied occupations.

When you decided to convert, were you

	<i>Percent</i>
<i>"In the process of courtship with a Jewish person"</i>	75%
<i>"Married to a Jewish person"</i>	25%

The statistics obtained from the study of the archives revealed that over the 70 years of the filing system of the Johannesburg Beth Din, almost half of the conversions took place during the marriage. This estimate includes a period when the doors were virtually closed to conversion for the purpose of marriage. Thus, to overcome the obstacle presented by this policy, many potential converts re-applied after they were married and had children.

In this questionnaire, however, can be seen a reflection of the revised policy of the present day towards conversion for the sake of marriage as 80% of the respondents were converted after 1971. The findings of the questionnaire indicated that 75% of the respondents converted in the process of courtship whilst 25% when married.

Do you have a Jewish parent?

	<i>Percent</i>
Yes	15.9%
No	84.1%

It has been found frequently that a potential convert has gravitated towards Judaism because of a Jewish parent. In this questionnaire, however, which reflects a modern period in the history of the process, the Jewish parent as a motive was not found to occupy its place as a principal reason for conversion, as it was in the earlier years covered by the archives of the Johannesburg Beth Din. Only 15.9% of the respondents had a Jewish father whilst 84.1% hailed from a totally non-Jewish background.

Before you were married how did you feel about the fact that your future husband/wife was Jewish?***Reaction to Jewish spouse before marriage***

	<i>Percent</i>
<i>"Happy"</i>	66.7%
<i>"Unconcerned"</i>	33.3%

Here the investigation takes the convert back to the early days of his/her relationship with the Jewish partner to pose the question as to the perception of marrying a Jew.

None of the respondents answered that they were not happy about it. 66.7% replied that they were happy at the prospect whilst 33.3% stated they were unconcerned.

Before you married how did your future spouse feel about the fact that you were not Jewish

	Per cent		Row Total
	Orthodox	Reform	
"Happy"	—	18.9%	11.9%
"Unhappy"	63.6%	10.8%	30.5%
"Unconcerned"	36.4%	70.3%	57.6%
Total	100%	100%	100%

In this question, the convert was asked how he/she perceived the reaction of the future spouse to the fact that he/she was not Jewish. Here it is revealed that the Jewish partner showed more concern about the interfaith aspect of the relationship than did the non-Jewish partner. Moreover, it emerged that there is substantial discrepancy between the attitudes of Orthodox and Reform in that regard.

18.9% of the Reform respondents claimed that their Jewish partners were happy about the fact that they were intermarrying. None of the Orthodox respondents made the same claim. It has to be taken into consideration that the impression in the mind of the non-Jewish partner was not necessarily an accurate one. Had this selfsame question been asked of the Jewish partner, totally different responses may well have been forthcoming.

63.6% Orthodox respondents said that their Jewish partner was unhappy about the prospective intermarriage and only 10.8% Reform responses indicated likewise.

36.4% of the Orthodox respondents maintained that their Jewish partners were unconcerned, whilst the Reform figure was 70.3%.

It should be added that, during the courtship, the inter religious implications are often a minor consideration and do not become issues of momentum until the relationship becomes more serious. Possibly, too, in the early stages of dating, the non-Jewish partner will not even know that the other party is Jewish, whereas it is unlikely that the converse is true. This is because the consciousness on the part of the Jewish partner is governed by stronger ethno-religious ties, even amongst nominal Jews, than on the part of the nominal Christian. And even amongst nominal Jews, an element of taboo surrounding intermarriage is palpable. Thus, it can be understood that the Jewish partner will manifest a greater degree of concern regarding a prospective intermarriage than will the non-Jewish partner.

Would you describe yourself/parents before conversion as

	<i>Per cent</i>	
	<i>Convert</i>	<i>Parent's convert</i>
<i>"Very/moderately religious"</i>	22.4%	29.4%
<i>"Slightly religious"</i>	53.7%	41.2%
<i>"Not religious"</i>	23.9%	29.4%

Here the convert was asked as to the level of adherence to the previous religion and also that of the parents. Only 22.4% claimed they were religious, whilst the majority of 53.7% graded themselves as slightly religious and 23.9% as not at all religious. When the respondents were asked the same question, this time regarding the religious level of their parents, the results were very similar. 29.4% claimed they

emanated from a religious home, 41.2% from a slightly religious home and 29.4% from a non-religious background. Combining the claims of a slightly religious or non-religious past, it appears that previous religions did not play an important role.

Describe your Jewish in-laws

	<i>Per cent</i>
<i>"Very/moderately religious"</i>	46.8%
<i>"Slightly religious"</i>	45.2%
<i>"Not religious"</i>	8.1%

From the perception by the convert expressed in reply to this question, it can be seen that religion plays a greater role in Jewish households than in the homes from which the proselytes emanated. 46.8% of the respondents described their Jewish in-laws as very or moderately religious. As to what constitutes very/moderately religious is obviously subject to interpretation. 45.2% said the in-laws were slightly religious whilst only 8.1% said they were not religious. These results may well explain why, as will be discovered in the following set of questions and responses, Jewish parents emerged as less accepting of the relationship than the Gentiles.

**How accepting (i) were your future parents-in-law towards you
(ii) your own parents**

	Per cent	
	Jewish in-law	Non-Jewish parents
"Unaccepting"	15.3%	—
"Accepting with reservation"	28.8%	26.7%
"Accepting without reservation"	55.9%	73.3%

Invariably, the relationship between a Jew and Gentile will confront the attitudes of prospective in-laws. 15.3% of the respondents found their future in-laws unaccepting, 28.8% found them accepting with reservations and 55.9% accepting without reservations. It can thus be seen that there is a greater degree of tolerance of intermarriage amongst Jewish parents than there was in previous years. This attitude of acceptance could also be attributed to reasonable confidence on the part of the parents that the spouse is going to convert. When the same question was asked as to the acceptance by the non-Jewish in-laws of the Jewish spouse, none answered that there was non-acceptance. 26.7% were accepting with reservations and 73.3% accepting without reservations. Thus the great majority of non-Jewish in-laws were accepting with regard to the Jewish spouse. Here is seen a reinforcement of earlier findings which revealed a lower ethno-religiosity in the Gentile households in question and a stronger negative feeling in the Jewish family circles regarding intermarriage. On this issue, a comparison may be drawn with the American scene.

Phillips (1998:33) expresses the view,

"The decline in discrimination against Jews has been one of the notable achievements of the American Jewish community, which has labored hard and well

to reduce anti-Semitism. One indisputable consequence of that work has been the increased willingness of non-Jews to marry Jews. Public opinion polls over the years have consistently shown the increasing acceptance of Jews as marriage partners for non-Jews. With that increased acceptance has naturally come a yearly increase in the rate of mixed marriages."

A distinction, however, might be drawn between American and South African Jewry. In South Africa, intermarriage is not a consequence of reduced anti-semitism as this was never a major problem in South Africa. Rather it is attributable to social interaction amongst the white groups. In the U.S.A. anti-semitism is partially a reaction to the major role that the Jews play in the life of the country, which is out of proportion to the actual Jewish population. This factor is not present to that extent in South Africa.

Standard of Observance of convertees

		Per cent		
		Orthodox	Reform	Total
1.	<i>Weekly Shul</i>			
	Yes			32.9%
	No			67.1%
2.	<i>Candle Lighting</i>			
	Yes			90%
	No			10%
3.	<i>Kiddush</i>			
	Yes			72.9%
	No			27.1%
4.	<i>Keeping Shabbat</i>			
	Yes			64.3%
	No			35.7%
5.	<i>Kosher home</i>			
	Yes	65.5%	4.9%	30%
	No	34.5%	95.1%	70%
6.	<i>Pesach Seder</i>			
	Yes			85.7%
	No			14.3%
7.	<i>Fasting on Yom Kipur</i>			
	Yes			64.3%
	No			35.7%
8.	<i>Taharat Hamishpacha</i>			
	Yes	20.7%	—	8.6%
	No	79.3%	100%	91.4%

One of the primary concerns that has been expressed by the Rabbinate and conversion authorities is that of the post conversion stages. From the discussion on

the earliest Beth Din policies towards conversion, mechanisms have been developed to monitor religious observance on the part of the convert, after the process has been completed.

As an objective of this work lies in its contribution to future planning of conversion programmes, it was important to inquire of converttees their current levels of religious observance. For the purpose of this questionnaire, observances which are indicative of an acceptable religious commitment have been abstracted from the total Jewish lifestyle.

1. *Weekly Synagogue attendance*

Jewish life is bound up with communal worship. Particularly in the Diaspora, the service in the Synagogue has a binding social effect. In South Africa, usually the weekly Friday night service is the strongest attraction for worshippers, apart from the overwhelming attendances on High Holy days. 32.7% of the respondents replied that they were attending Synagogue on a weekly basis, while 67.1% were not. Taking into account that most of the converts were female, in the light of predominant male attendances, these figures represent a higher level of Synagogue attendance than those that are Jewish by birth.

2. *Candle lighting*

The practice of lighting candles to usher in the Sabbath enjoys almost total observance amongst Jews of all levels of commitment. 90% of the total number of respondents replied that they did light candles prior to the Sabbath, whilst 10% did not. Here there was no discrepancy between Orthodox and Reform respondents.

3. *Kiddush*

It is customary on Sabbath and Festivals to make a blessing on wine. Like candle lighting, this, too, is widely observed. 72.9% of the respondents replied that Kiddush was recited in their home and 27.1% did not. Once again, there was hardly any discrepancy between Orthodox and Reform.

4. *Keeping Shabbat*

As mentioned earlier, the keeping of the Sabbath is one of the major requirements for conversion and also presents a number of obstacles to the candidate, since it involves abstention from a variety of activities, including prohibition of work and use of motorised transport. Prior to the conversion the authorities in question have to be satisfied that the convert is actually adhering to these provisions. The questionnaire looked at this observance in the post conversion stages. 64.3% of the respondents claimed they were keeping Sabbath whilst 35.7% said they were not. Whilst the figures of those who observe Sabbath appears high and did not differ much between Orthodox and Reform, it has to be taken into account that the fulfillment of Sabbath observance differs greatly in the respective doctrines of Orthodox and Reform. For instance, Reform permits travelling on the Sabbath. Moreover, even amongst the Orthodox respondents, perception of what constitutes keeping the Sabbath are not necessarily in line with Halakhic requirements. The accurate number of Sabbath observant converts in the full sense has been sought in the section dealing with the Durban sample.

5. *Kosher home*

Like Sabbath, the adherence to Kashrut is emphasised as a prime requirement for conversion, as this aspect formidably affects the religious transformation. Prior to conversion, the candidate is required to take steps to have the home brought in line with Kashrut standards accepted by the Beth Din.

65.5% of the Orthodox respondents replied that they maintain a Kosher home and 34.5% answered they did not. As shown in the Durban model, the standard of Kashrut amongst converts proportionately exceeds that of the general Jewish community. Looking at the Reform converts only 4.9% replied that they were keeping a Kosher home whilst 95.1% were not. In the Reform doctrine, Kashrut is not considered a religious requirement.

6. *Pesach Seder*

The celebration of the Festive Passover meal in some form or other is considered a highlight of the Jewish year and generally has a powerful effect of uniting family and friends and invariably involves even the least observant Jews. Thus Orthodox and Reform replies to this questionnaire were almost equal. Of the total respondents, 85.7% replied in the affirmative and only 14.3% said they do not celebrate the Passover Seder.

7. *Fasting on Yom Kippur*

Like the Passover Seder, the major fast on Yom Kippur constitutes an annual highlight, also widely observed on almost all levels of Jewish commitment. Here, too, there was no substantial difference between Orthodox and Reform responses. 91.4% of the respondents claimed to observe the Fast whilst 8.6% were not.

8. *Taharat Hamishpacha (Laws of Family Purity)*

The Torah commands the abstention from conjugal relations during the menses of the wife and the subsequent week. Only after the immersion of the wife in the Mikveh at the end of this restricted period may co-habitation resume. In Durban, this observance is barely practised by the general spectrum of the Jewish community.

But when it came to the responses in the questionnaire by converttees, 20.7% said they do observe these laws, whilst 79.3% did not. From the Reform, there was a total nil response and, here again, this is not one of their religious requirement.

Involvement in the Jewish community

	<i>Per cent</i>
<i>"Very active"</i>	11.6%
<i>"Fairly active"</i>	40.6%
<i>"Minimally active"</i>	43.5%
<i>"Not active"</i>	4.3%

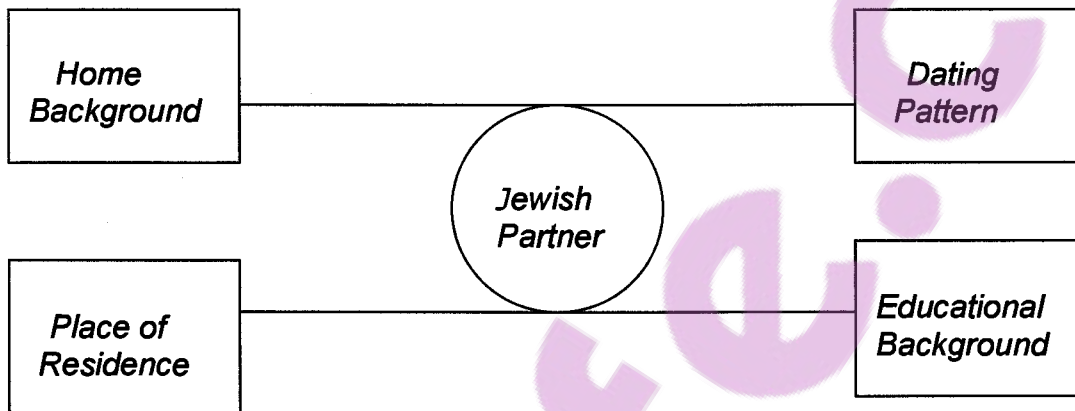
An important aspect of the integration of the converttee into the socio-religious framework which has been entered is involvement in the various voluntary organisations upon which Jewish communal life is structured. Of the total number of respondents 11.6% said they were very active, 40.6% fairly active, 43.5% minimally active and 4.3% not active. Evident from these figures is some form of involvement by the converttee in the Jewish communal sphere.

As compared with the general Jewish community, these figures rank proportionately high. There are several reasons for this phenomenon. As previously mentioned, communal bodies are frequently seeking volunteers to assist them, the convert who is seeking recognition and acceptance by the community will use this opportunity as a means to achieve this goal. Moreover, there is encouragement from the Jewish partner, who by virtue of his intermarriage, has felt a certain social exile and now seeks to re-enter the system.

It ought to be added here that these figures are not necessarily the same in a larger and impersonal community, where the percentage of communal involvement on the part of the convertee can be expected to be much lower.

5.7.6 *Model of factors influencing Jewish/Gentile Courtships*

Figure 2



Based on the information obtained from this chapter, a model may be drawn of the factors influencing courtship and marriage between Jew and Gentile, and subsequently conversion.

The following circumstances explain the gravitation of the Jew towards a Gentile partner.

(a) **Home background**

The Jewish partner will react in terms of the home in which he has been raised with respect to the level of religious observance, emphasis on Jewish identity, extent of involvement in the Jewish community and attitudes towards intermarriage.

Phillips (1998:12) explains,

“The first experiences of Judaism and Jewish culture take place in the family in which one grows up. This is called here the ‘family of origin’ in order to distinguish it from the respondent’s current family. An individual’s choice of marriage partner also represents a choice about the kind of family that he or she will have in the future. That choice will obviously be influenced to some degree by the family of origin. Respondents from the most actively Jewish families of origin are in fact the most likely to replicate that family through an endogamous marriage.”

Findings in this study, whilst confirming the fundamental role of the “*family of origin*”, indicate that the home background is one of many factors which will contribute to the ultimate choice of a partner.

(b) Place of residence

It was found (Table 1.8) that the rate of intermarriage was higher in the smaller centres, due to a limited choice of Jewish partners and less facilities for the pursuit of the Jewish lifestyle. On the national level, the specific characteristics of the country play an important part in this area. In South Africa, for instance, a strong emphasis on group identity may well have reduced outmarriage. This view is supported by Dubb (1994:55) who, on the subject of intermarriage by Jews, wrote,

“... the evidence suggests that these would be far lower than is suggested for most of the Western Diaspora.”

(c) Dating patterns

Whereas in the past, courtship between Jew and Gentile may have been a non-negotiable taboo even at the dating stage, the results of the questionnaire under the section “*Reaction of Jewish parent before conversion*” demonstrate an increased tolerance of inter dating. Dating patterns observed at Carmel College in Durban,

which has been attended by Jewish and Gentile pupils, indicate that these are frequent, accepted by peer groups and not strongly opposed by parents.

Interviews revealed that many parents felt that dating with Gentiles would not necessarily lead to intermarriage. Some looked at dating in the light of their views that Jews living in a mixed society ought to be in touch with Gentile neighbours.

In contrast to these opinions expressed at interviews, Phillips, in a survey of high school dating patterns, reports,

"Respondents who were dating mostly Jews at the time they met their spouses were, not surprisingly, the most likely to have found Jewish spouses. Since the dating process begins in high school, respondents who dated mostly Jews in high school were also the most likely to have been dating mostly Jews at the time they met their current (or most recent) spouses."

(d) Educational background

It has been repeatedly emphasised by Jewish organisations, both religious and secular, as well as a number of outreach movements, that education in the Jewish religious culture is essential to the continuity of the Jewish people. To that end, South African Jewry, along with its counterpart abroad, invested heavily in Jewish education.

To relate the level of Jewish education to the frequency of Jewish-Gentile courtship and marriage requires further investigation. Nevertheless, from empirically observed data, it appeared from the Durban Model that the great majority of Jews who had interrelated with Gentile partners were not former pupils of the Jewish Day School.

5.8 Conclusion

Each successive stage of this work has advanced progressively towards its localisation to a region, which could be more closely observed by the researcher.

The general theoretical background surrounding the topic of conversion to Judaism was followed by the survey of its historical realities, culminating with the transplantation of its occurrence upon the relatively short chronology of South African Jewry with Durban as the ultimate "landing stage" of this route. Likewise Halakhic application of the phenomenon was itself an historical evolvement. The *Batei Dinim* in South Africa were part of it. Their role in the modern day prototype of how Jewish communities approached the issue of conversion was subjected to an archival investigation, from which realistic statistics could be drawn up.

Attitudes of converts and their surrounding communities were more detectable in the Durban model. Here these emerged as real experiences of the researcher. It was here that a questionnaire could draw from the general Jewish public of Durban perceptions that were readily recognisable. On the basis of these findings, the inquiry was able to proceed to the ultimate chapter to present recommendations and proposals.

CHAPTER 6

6.1 CONCLUSION, PROPOSALS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

"Evil after evil comes upon those who receive proselytes" ⁽¹⁾

Rabbi Eleazar states, "When a person comes to you in sincerity to be converted, do not reject him but on the contrary encourage him". ⁽²⁾

"You shall love the proselyte for you were strangers in the land of Egypt" ⁽³⁾

As this investigation surveyed the long road to conversion, its historical terrain and its Halakhic feasibility emerged as the most significant forces accompanying the intending proselyte on the formidable journey from a previous socio-religious structure to a new holism.

Remarkably, Judaism has synthesised the history from its Biblical inception to the technological era. It is this same history that is part and parcel of the Jewish people itself, and as such it has developed philosophies that have interacted with Halakha. Thus, the process of conversion is not a phenomenon that takes place in isolation. Rather it orientates itself within a reconciliation of Halakhic principles and contemporary circumstances.

The introduction to this chapter commenced with three diverse statements. The first two epitomise the clash in opinions regarding conversion, such that were intensively treated in the Halakhic section. At the same time, these apparently opposing attitudes are destined to lead to the Biblical injunction, *"Love the stranger."*

I should like to suggest these three verses represent three stages. First there is the antagonist view, which emphasises that Judaism neither seeks nor encourages proselytes. Rather than reach out to the Gentile world, Orthodox Judaism sets forth to strengthen Jewish identity and religious adherence as a buffer to the prospects of outmarriage.

The second statement may relate to the stage when a questor has initiated a petition for conversion. In this situation, it falls upon the conversion authorities to implement a suitable preparatory programme which will impressively instill in the applicant the requirements of the Jewish experience, such that will assist the convert to maintain the resultant inner transformation long after the procedure has been completed.

On the third statement, "*Love the ger*", there are no polemics. It is an indisputable Biblical command, which effectively refers to the post conversion stages. The accomplished proselyte has to be welcomed as a fully-fledged Jew. This is the obvious way to the fulfillment of expectations that the *ger* will remain true to the teachings and the ideals acquired during the training period.

The basis of my proposals and recommendations is the aim that conversions which are performed achieve the ultimate concept of "*ger Tzedek*", a *righteous convert*. Any suggestions forwarded to the local Chief Rabbi and the Johannesburg Beth Din are based on the intensive research into the subject at issue and complemented by 15 years of experience in the Rabbinate.

First, I believe one has to take into account the needs and expectations of all the parties included in the conversion – the convert, the conversion authorities and society. Basically, the personal requirements of the *ger* can be summarised as two main objectives – finalisation of the conversion procedure and successful integration into the Jewish community. The conversion authorities, the Beth

Din, need to feel assured that the party they have converted will live up to the standards which they set, as has in fact been undertaken by the convertee.

Society, in this context, refers both to the Jewish people and the immediate social environment of the convertee. Responses to the local questionnaire revealed a number of misconceptions on the part of lay people. On the one hand, there was a feeling the Beth Din could be more accommodating to the convert and, on the other, there was a total rejection of the concept of proselytisation. The way in which these opinions were expressed demonstrates the need for education of the Jewish lay public as to the facts of conversion, so that Jewish society may relate more constructively to the phenomenon. Just as the proselyte has to adjust to another socio-religious milieu so, too, ought consideration be given to the reconciliation of the society of origin with the fact that one of its close members has opted for this critical change.

6.2 Some views of local Rabbis

Before proceeding to provide my input in the form of recommendations and proposals for the future of conversions in South Africa, I should like to present the view of other local Rabbis.

These appeared in a questionnaire (*Appendix 4*) which I sent to all officiating Rabbis within the Orthodox Rabbinate of South Africa. Their responses have been of great assistance in the forming of conclusions. The questionnaire was sent to 52 Rabbis of which 31 responded.

Table 6.2.1

Q.	<i>Have you been active in the process of conversion?</i>	
	Yes	No
A.	87.5%	12.5%

87.5% of the respondents had been active in the conversion process at various levels of involvement. Some of those who had not been involved at all said they had deliberately distanced themselves from the issue since they felt reluctant Halakhically to accept responsibility for conversions, which had not met with the expected level of commitment. Though the majority of the Rabbis in this sample stated that they were involved in the conversion process, there is a need to address the extent of interaction between the congregational Rabbi, the Beth Din and the convert. As one respondent stated: *"The administration is in urgent need of improvement. Not enough communication with the congregational Rabbi."*

Table 6.2.2

Q.	<i>Do you feel the present conversion process in South Africa is</i>		
	<i>Too lenient</i>	<i>Too strict</i>	<i>Adequate</i>
A.	30.4%	4.3%	65.2%

65.2% of the respondents felt the conversion process in South Africa was adequate but they expressed reservations in the remarks section. One of this category of respondents felt that, though the process was intrinsically adequate, its success largely depended upon the candidate. This would indicate a need for the conversion programme to be made adaptable to the varying

circumstances appertaining to candidates. 30.4% felt the process was too lenient. Whereas nearly a third of the Rabbis expressed this view, this was in total contrast to that which emerged in the questionnaire sent to the general Jewish public of Durban, the majority of whom felt the conversion procedure to be too strict. Only 4.3% of Rabbis stated the process was too strict. Of these, one made a strong remark, *"It is inconsistent and irrelevant and does not deal with the real issues."*

Table 6.2.3

Q.	<i>Do you feel the length of the average conversion process is</i>		
	<i>Sufficient</i>	<i>Too short</i>	<i>Too lengthy</i>
A.	86.4%	4.5%	9.1%

A majority of 86.4% felt the length of the process to be sufficient as a period of up to 2 years would give the candidate the opportunity to cover the syllabus and to live a Jewish life. This statistical finding speaks loudly against prolonging the process beyond the *status quo*. Many felt that greater emphasis should be given to the quality of the process rather than its quantity. 9.1% felt it was too long. One respondent felt that the present length of conversion and the inconsistencies in the policy on this issue often caused disheartenment on the part of the candidate, which could lead to a "dropping out". There were, however, 4.5% who felt the procedure was of too short duration and should move in line with the model of the London Beth Din. A general, but not necessarily a rigid policy needs to be formulated with regard to the time period of the conversion process, such that will give an indication of time-related expectation to all the parties involved.

Table 6.2.4

Q.	<i>Do you find that gerim maintain an acceptable level of commitment long after their conversion?</i>		
	<i>In most cases</i>	<i>On the average</i>	<i>In few cases</i>
A.	13.6%	31.8%	54.5%

Whether the convert maintains an acceptable level of commitment long after the conversion is actually the most important issue from the Rabbinical point of view as to the assessment of its success. 54.5% felt only few maintained an acceptable level of commitment, 31.8% felt that, on the average, the converts maintained an acceptable level of commitment and only 13.6% were of the opinion that in most cases, the commitment level was of a satisfactory nature.

Analysing the percentage distribution of responses, it would seem that there is decidedly a shortfall between the actual average level of commitment on the part of the convert and optimistic expectation. From the remarks of the respondents three recurrent variables were detected that would significantly affect post-conversion commitment - the content of the preparatory programme and its points of emphasis; the socio-religious environment in which the convert is absorbed and the era in which they were converted.

It was largely felt that the highest levels of commitment were products of the last decade. These were the views of Rabbis from Johannesburg and Cape Town and are supported by the results of the Durban model. Though most of the replies favoured the current conversion programme as an advancement in comparison to the past, there was nevertheless room for improvement as one respondent remarked: *"It all depends on the preparation, not on the original motivation"*.

Concern was also expressed with that aspect of post-conversion which I have demarcated as "the landing stage". One Rabbi wrote: *"Those that have become part of an observant community maintain the standards of that community. In the general shuls they tend to sink to the lowest common denominator"*.

Table 6.2.5

Q.	How do you feel about the programme/syllabus? Is it	
	Adequate	In need of upgrading
A.	55.3%	44.7%

When the issue of the actual programme was addressed, a greater clarity was obtained. 55.3% felt it was adequate while 44.7% replied that it required upgrading. In general, this question attracted more pro-active comments than the others and many of the remarks came from the group that stated the programme was adequate.

I was amazed, however, that several of the respondents felt unable to comment at all. Despite the fact that these Rabbis were involved with the convert they felt strikingly unfamiliar with the actual content of the programme. Therein lies an imbalance that clearly needs to be addressed. Of those who were aware of the programme content one commented: *"It needs to be modernized. There is far better material available in many of the areas."* Another felt there should be more emphasis on *"living as a Jew."* One respondent felt that the administration of the programme was chaotic. The issue, however, which attracted the most criticism centered around the teachers. Respondents felt that many were of sub standard quality, lacking personality and a level of observance that could inspire as a role model. It was recommended in one response that *"teachers need ongoing training and liaison with the Rabbis so as to be able to deal with questions and practical solutions that occur"*.

Table 6.2.6

Q.	<i>Describe the level of communal involvement of the ger as compared with the rest of the community</i>		
	<i>Average</i>	<i>Greater than average</i>	<i>Less than average</i>
A.	31.8%	40.9%	27.3%

Another important subject that has been investigated in this work is the level of communal involvement on the part of the convert in the post conversion stages. The majority of 40.9% felt that the converted Jew is more involved communally than the Jewish born person. 31.8% felt there was not really much difference in communal involvement between proselyte and born Jews, whilst 27.3% felt the convert was less involved in communal work than the home born Jew.

One of the respondents said that converts feel their status and are thus too intimidated to participate in Jewish activities which are essentially of a public nature. On the other hand, the view was expressed that the communal sphere was a place where the convert could prove his/her Jewishness. Most of the opinions felt that communal involvement on the part of the convert was proportionate to sincerity and level of observance. As one respondent commented: *"The stronger their commitment, the greater their involvement"*.

By and large, the response to the questionnaire was encouraging. It shows that Rabbis involved with conversions are taking a great interest in the topic and expressed great enthusiasm for this investigation. Many have asked to be informed of the outcome of this research.

Any future revision of the conversion process ought to draw from the wealth of knowledge and experience on the part of the congregational Rabbis with whom

the conversion authorities need to interact and be regularly informed of developments taking place in this area. Ultimately it falls on the congregational Rabbi to play a major role in directing the post conversion stages.

6.3. RECOMMENDATIONS

“Just as the Torah did not wish to complicate the laws of lending money in such a way that would close the door to the granting of loans, so, too, the Torah did not wish to complicate the laws of conversion that it may close the door to converts”.⁽⁴⁾

Following upon the Talmudic logic thus presented it may be computed that whilst, on the one hand, it is not desirable that conversion to Judaism be easily accessible or encouraged, nevertheless the potential convert ought not to be irrevocably repelled. It would seem, therefore, that the principle of the “Golden Mean” is indicated.

Having surveyed the history of conversions, the Rabbinical debate on the subject together with the relevant statistics and having related these with personal experience acquired during my congregational service, as well as the fieldwork undertaken for the purpose of this essay, the proposals which flow from this study are guided by the requirements for a midway approach. The recommendations which follow relate to the principal phases in the process of pre-conversion and post conversion procedures.

At the outset, it ought to be emphasized that the optimal goal lies in prevention of intermarriage. This principle gains greater momentum as the challenges of the new South Africa present themselves. On this sentiment, the view of the Chief Rabbi of South Africa, C.K. Harris, was conveyed to me,

“The new dispensation in South Africa offers greater opportunity for mixing on the part of diverse ethnic and religious groups and fears have been expressed that tendencies towards assimilation will accelerate and the number marrying out of the faith increase”. (Appendix 9)

There is an urgent need for a forum on the subject *“Confronting intermarriage in the new South Africa”*, such that will involve local Rabbis, lay leaders and educationalists. From there, a composite organisational body needs to be set up to inform and educate the Jewish public on the issue of intermarriage, through the Synagogues, schools and publications.

Preventative measures against intermarriage could be strengthened by adopting a strategy on the lines of that suggested by Yossi Beilin M.K. (member of the Israeli Parliament) that Jewish matriculants in the Diaspora be offered a free ticket to Israel in order to attend seminars on Jewish identity and roots. Sponsorship for these excursions could be drawn from the funds collected in the UID/UCF campaigns.

Whilst these measures could be expected to reduce the rate of intermarriage it is obviously not predicted that the problem will be totally eliminated. It is anticipated that the demand for conversion will persist as an issue to be addressed and efficient machinery to deal with such requests needs to be maintained and constantly upgraded.

6.3.1 *Pre-conversion procedure*

The future success of a proselytisation could well be conceived in the primary stages of interaction between the candidate and the conversion authorities. It is here that the Halakhic principle of initially refusing the application has somehow to be implemented. Attention, therefore, has to be given as to how the first inquiry on the part of the petitioner is handled.

Upon receipt of a request for conversion to Judaism, the applicant ought to be directed to furnish in writing elementary personal details, which would include identity, address, age, marital status and reason for conversion as well as disclosure of the Jewish spouse or partner. (*Appendix 5*)

Once this preliminary information is made available to the satisfaction of the Registrar, a further letter ought to be forwarded to the applicant in which are outlined certain requirements which will have to be met prior to the first interview with the conversion authorities (*Appendix 6*) stressing that the letter itself is not an acceptance to a conversion programme. In that letter one such prerequisite is Synagogue attendance. A place of worship within walking distance would be selected by the Registrar. It is advantageous that the candidate stick with one particular Synagogue. This, I have found, has proved to be an excellent basis for forming personal contact with the Rabbi and the community and also for the post conversion stages. The particular congregational Rabbi needs to be informed as to the details appertaining to the applicant. So, too, ought a lay committee member be appointed to a portfolio of facilitating the integration of the candidate (and partner) into the Synagogue situation. It would be the task of that office bearer to introduce the conversion party to the Rabbi and to familiarise him or her with the actual services as well as the programmes offered by the Synagogue.

Furthermore, the letter needs to notify the candidate to be in a position, which will enable him/her to observe Sabbath. Moreover, a short reading list ought to be compiled so that the applicant acquires a basic knowledge of Judaism. A detailed application form should accompany the letter (*Appendix 7*), after which the interview with the Registrar ought to be set up.

The length of the period from the original inquiry to the interview ought to be approximately six months. By this time, the Registrar will have been able to obtain a comprehensive report from the congregational Rabbi on the candidate

and will have formed substantial impressions regarding the party concerned. If, at the interview, the Registrar is confident as to the potentialities of the applicant he then arranges for the party to join a programme. This is also an appropriate stage to request any required documentation appertaining to the candidate i.e. birth certificate, *Ketubah*, *Get*, civil marriage, etc.

Since this pre-conversion stage is rightly held to be crucial in the life of the intending proselyte, it needs to be handled with the delicacy worthy of a human situation. At the same time, it has to be brought home to the applicant that conversion to Judaism, far from being a light matter, is, in fact, a major undertaking involving the deepest commitment. In this way, I feel that a healthy balance will be achieved between acceptance and rejection of the request for conversion.

6.3.2 *Conversion "Ulpan"*

Having passed through the critical stages leading up to acceptance on to the programme, the successive phase of the procedure proves even more decisive as a barometer for expectations of the convert's adaptation to the "landing stage". At this milestone on the long road to conversion a great deal depends on pedagogic techniques and the manner in which concepts are inculcated.

The statistical analysis provided in this work revealed that, for the most part, the conversion programme has to serve participants in the 18 to 32 age group, well above average in intelligence and education. From interviews with candidates, the archives and the feedback, which emerged in the questionnaire sent to the Rabbis, the present system of tuition, although a vast improvement on its predecessors, nevertheless necessitates the type of radical upgrading sufficient to meet current demands.

It was mentioned previously that the quality of teachers came under severe criticism. Thus it must follow that the selection and training of the instructors themselves be considered a focal point in the future arrangement of conversion programmes. Besides the value of the learning side as a pivotal aspect of the process, it has to be taken into account that an unfamiliar religious culture is being transmitted to adults. Apart from the fact that adult education itself requires specialised teaching skills, a course in conversion to Judaism has unique characteristics. The goal has to far exceed a mere dissemination of material. For an intending proselyte merely to comprehend the syllabus is insufficient. Subject matter has to be absorbed in such a way that it is internalised into the lifestyle of the candidate.

Studies undertaken by the convert are a form of tertiary education, which could not be said to be totally of a voluntary nature. Since it has been proved that the majority of conversion is motivated by marriage to a Jewish partner, the acquisition of knowledge is not always felt by the intending proselytes to be the primary objective. Rather, they could well feel compelled to undertake the course of study as a means to another end. In all probability, this feeling of compulsion will manifest itself in latent resentment on the part of the student. To these possible emotions the teacher has to relate with understanding and a need to build up the enthusiasm of the participant. Ideally the candidate, who at the outset sought conversion for an ulterior motive, will in time, through the programme, develop conviction. This is precisely where the teacher has an important duty to inspire as a role model.

Having surveyed these drawbacks in the instructional aspect of the process, together with other issues such as the absorption of the accomplished convert into family and new group relationships, I believe the conversion process would best be centralised in an *Ulpan* (school) orchestrated by the Beth Din. In this way, the Beth Din will cease to be merely an agent for expediting conversions but will be fully and actively involved in the entire procedure.

It may be argued that an *Ulpan* concept once institutionalised would create an impression on the Jewish public that the Rabbinical authorities are tolerant towards conversion as a solution to intermarriage. To resist, however, for this reason the opportunity of a well-structured system, is a form of denial. By now, the Jewish community is well aware that conversions are being conducted on a sizeable scale.

Statistics have been given that in Johannesburg alone approximately 25 conversions *per annum* are taking place. Bearing in mind that most of the intending proselytes have a partner, the *Ulpan* would then serve between 40 and 50 persons *per year*. In all probability, this number will increase because of the shrinking of the South African Jewish population, the increase in the rate of Jewish-Gentile relationships and the consequent demand for conversion.

6.3.3 *Proposed locality of the Ulpan*

The *Ulpan* would best be situated on the premises of the Beth Din as it would provide the Beth Din with the means to keep its pulse on the actual *modus operandi* of the system. A suitable person could be appointed, on a part time basis, as director and co-ordinator of the *Ulpan* programme and to act as a liaison between the converts and the Beth Din. Two classrooms need to be made available, as well as a library equipped with appropriate reading and audio-visual material. According to a *memorandum* of Rabbi Bender in 1992, there were 21 conversion teachers in Johannesburg and surrounding districts. In terms of this proposal, the number of regular teaching personnel would not exceed four members of staff. This reduced number would assist an *optimum* selection of instructors and enable their training to be both thorough and intensive. Moreover, the system would draw on the vast number of locally available Rabbis as guest speakers on aspects of their expertise. Thus the intending proselyte would be exposed to "the top of the range" instruction with

the added benefit of increased interaction between the conversion programme and the Rabbis. Since most of the converts are working people, the classes would probably have to be conducted at night, possibly twice a week and perhaps one Sunday a month.

In my own community, I found the group situation to impact positively on the process and the post conversion stages. One of the issues, which I have constantly raised, is the difficulty of absorption of the convert into existing peer groups. By becoming part of an *Ulpan* programme, the intending proselyte immediately finds a support group, which serves as a sound basis for starting on the right footing.

6.3.4 *Pecuniary considerations*

I have calculated that, at present, the costs that fall upon the converttee, with regard to registration, monitoring sessions, tuition fees and books are in the region of R5 000. This amount is supplemented by the expenses incurred in kashering the home and the purchase of religious articles such as *tefillin*, *tzitzit and mezuzot*, and, in certain cases, loss of income due to the restrictions of Sabbath and Festivals. Financial burdens borne by the candidate have been expressed as a bone of contention. In this model, the cost of the conversion course could be made affordable in a way that will also cover the cost of the *Ulpan*.

6.3.5 *A proposed syllabus*

The present syllabus could be revised by a forum consisting of Rabbis and educationalists in order to make the course of study more up-to-date and stimulating. A conversion programme could be compiled on the basis of ten modules, which would be covered over the period of one year, each dealing with a specific aspect of Judaism. Because of the independence of each module, the

convert may join the class at the commencement of any module and thus at varying times of the year. As a draft of the syllabus, I propose the following structure.

Module 1 – Jewish philosophy

This section is an introduction to Judaism which would include the fundamentals of the Jewish conception of G-d, the Divine origin of Torah, written and oral law, the 13 principles of faith, reward and punishment, differences between Judaism and other religions and the concept of *mitzvot*.

Module 2 – Jewish history

Here it is stressed that proselytisation to Judaism is not only an adoption of a religion but also a conversion to a people and its history. The subject matters would cover the history from Biblical times to the present, concentrating on leaders and teachers within the people of Israel as role models. Particular emphasis should be given on the Holocaust and the rebirth of the State of Israel.

Module 3 – Prayers

In this part of the syllabus the student is introduced to the meaning of prayers and is familiarised with the prayer books. Part of this course is a tour of the Beth Din Synagogue as a visual demonstration of various aspects of the Synagogue and how the ritual actually applies. This module will incorporate the learning of *Brachot* (blessings) on partaking of various categories of food and for various occasions.

Module 4 – The Jewish calendar cycle

This includes the construction of the Jewish calendar, the role of Shabbat and Festivals and the Halakhot and customs appertaining to them. Demonstration would be made of this practical application, *inter alia*, Shabbat table, Pesach Seder and Sukkah. A *Shabbaton* (a group Sabbath experience) weekend could be organised for the entire group by an outreach movement such as *Ohr Sameach*.

Module 5 – Kashrut

This section concentrates on the laws and practical application of *Kashrut* including the running of a *kosher* kitchen. During this part of the course, arrangements will be made for the *kashering* of the homes of the participants.

Module 6 – The Jewish life cycle

Here the participants would study the different stages in the life cycle of a Jewish person – circumcision, bar/batmitzvah, the laws of marriage, divorce, death and mourning.

Module 7 – Jewish values

In this section, the time-honoured trends of Judaism are studied including charity and acts of kindness, business ethics, modesty in dress and behaviour, the importance of Torah study, symbols of Judaism e.g. *yamulka*, *mezuzah*, *tzizit*, the conduct of a Jewish home including as an optional extra Jewish cooking (for the female). An appropriate theme for inclusion in this module is the role of the Jewish woman.

Module 8 – The laws of family purity

Here the programme enters a highly specialised area. Instruction on this aspect of Judaism has to be thorough and convincing, since the laws of family purity are not widely practised outside the ranks of fully observant Jews.

Inspiring Rabbinical instruction, together with the input of fully observant qualified female teachers, ought to be supplemented by medical experts and psychologists to lend greater support to the practice. This could also include a visit to the *mikvah*.

Module 9 – The structure of Jewish community life

The object of this section is to facilitate the integration of the prospective convert into the Jewish communal scene. Here, the student would be introduced to the various communal bodies. Representatives of the appropriate organisations would be invited to address the group on their functions and to suggest ways of communal involvement. A visit to the Jewish day school system would be arranged.

Module 10 – Hebrew studies

Communal prayer has constantly served as a major pillar of operative Judaism. Since the service is conducted almost entirely in the Hebrew medium, it would follow that the ability to keep up with the proceedings would depend largely on the ability to read the language.

At the very outset, the style of service in the Synagogue is quite diverse from any previous format to which the entrant to Judaism has been accustomed. Added to that is the usage of the Semitic language, which is in total contrast to the English tongue. The intending convert would tend to feel lost and unable to

participate. This has been a significant stumbling block in the conversion process.

Although I have positioned this module as the final one, it differs from all the previous modules in that it actually needs to run concurrently with the others. As the candidate enters the programme, he or she ought immediately to be introduced to the Hebrew language. Groups would have to be set up to cater for each level of Hebrew knowledge.

The requirement for conversion as upheld by the Beth Din has been the mechanical ability to read Hebrew, not necessarily to speak or understand the language. To this end, methods which have been utilised in the Israeli Hebrew Ulpan system for new immigrants can be expected to meet with a great deal of success. These could serve as a model, which could be compiled by the Jewish Board of Education and adapted to the needs of the conversion programme.

6.3.6 Examination

I have found from the Beth Din archives, as well as my own presence at the conversion examination, this phase of the procedure preceding finalisation to be a highly traumatic experience for the convert. The candidates feel intimidated appearing before three strange Rabbis, feeling that the future of his/her conversion depends on their performance. Added to that is the pressure that has constantly been building up and which now reaches its climax. It has not been unusual for the intending proselyte to break down and cry. There have been instances when the Beth Din has actually had to eliminate or greatly modify this final oral examination, due to excessive nervousness of the candidate. This creates a problem of assessment of the candidate by the Beth Din as it becomes difficult to determine whether the lack of knowledge apparent at this examination arises from "blackout" or inadequate preparation.

In the Ulpan model, the dilemma can be partially overcome. It is proposed that a written examination take place after each module. Where the candidate performs below the required standard, repetition of the module may have to be considered. Intermediate monitoring reports (*Appendix 8*) would be submitted to the Registrar by the Director of the Ulpan and these would be presented to the Beth Din prior to the oral examination. The latter would then play merely a symbolic role in the total assessment of the candidate and finalisation of the procedure.

The Ulpan model could be adopted fully or partially. If adopted as suggested, the entire process of conversion should take about two years, comprised as follows – a six month probationary period from the original letter of application as previously described until acceptance on the Ulpan programme; 12–14 months in the Ulpan and 4-6 months of orientation and finalisation.

6.3.7 *Adopt a “ger” campaign*

The most effective method of instruction in Judaism, such that would result in internalisation of its precepts, is the experiential aspect. Often the Jewish partner of the convertee has not been raised to a high level of Jewish observance. Thus, he or she, too, will find the religious Jewish lifestyle to be somewhat strange and overwhelming. I propose therefore that Synagogues be encouraged to appeal to observant families to take intending converts and their partners under their wing. This type of adoption would consist of befriending the convertee (or couple), extending invitation to the Sabbath and Festival tables, assisting with the following of the service and in general to facilitate the adjustment and integration of the proselyte to both the undertaking and the post conversion stages.

6.3.8 *Gaining parental support*

From the research conducted in this work, reaction of the parents both of the Jewish and the non-Jewish partner have been a significant factor affecting the flow of the conversion. It is therefore important that the Jewish parents be made aware of the major transformation that is taking place in the life of their child and the role that they can play as parents. This can be done in the form of lectures to a group comprised of the parents of the Jewish parties to encourage them to accommodate wherever possible the religious needs of the couple. Where there is a request by the parents of the convert to discuss the issue with the Rabbi involved in the process, a sympathetic and compassionate attitude ought to be adopted.

6.3.9 *Education of the Jewish public*

In general, there is a need for adult education programmes that will reach the Jewish public. One objective previously mentioned was the prevention of outmarriage. When it comes, too, to the subject of conversion here, too, previously erroneously held concepts have to be addressed. Many of these attitudes came to the fore in the questionnaire sent to the community. Some criticized the severity of the demands made on the convert. Others did not regard the convert as fully Jewish.

Chief Rabbi Cyril Harris wrote,

“Sociologists differentiate objective public identity – a person’s Jewishness as perceived by others – and subjective public identity – his/her perception of how their Jewishness appears to others.

Regarding converts this distinction can be acute. A Jewish convert is not always regarded by other Jews as a ‘full Jew’, a generation gap difference in attitude

often being discernable, the older generation looking with disfavour on the whole issue of proselytisation, the younger generation usually accepting it."

In aiming, therefore, at inculcating into the Jewish public a positive balanced view of the issue of conversion, the facts regarding the subject need to be effectively disseminated. Information ought to be supplied as to the actual procedure, stressing, on the one hand, the consequences of conversion, such as hardship of the programme, hurdles of integration and the rate of divorce amongst converts and, on the other hand, the need for the convert to be accepted as a fully fledged Jewish person.

6.3.10 *Conversion of adopted children*

This group of converts has to be singled out as a category separate from the others. Here the process of transformation falls upon the parents who are expected to lead a fully observant Jewish life in order that the previously Gentile child will be raised in a Jewish environment.

The attitude of the conversion authorities towards the parents has from the outset to be compassionate. In all probability, the couple has already become traumatised by the question of barrenness and the process of adoption. Since the parents are Jewish, there is no need at all for any form of rejection of the convert. Rather, here *Kiruv* (outreach) is appropriate. Thus the parents ought not to have to undergo the Ulpan programme but rather to receive private tuition of an inspirational nature.

6.3.11 *The conversion ceremony*

The ceremonial finalisation of the process ought to be retained by the proselyte as a vivid and moving experience, such that will impact positively on the post conversion stages.

Shaye D. Cohen (1990:177-203) brings down the Rabbinic conversion ceremony, analysing the Talmudic model found in *Tractate Yebamoth* and in *Tractate Gerim*. The Rabbinic conversion ceremony of the present day, however, differs from that of the Talmudic period in that the components of the current procedure are actually spread over the entire process. Thus the modern ceremony of conversion is merely a formality. Nevertheless, it is an opportunity to serve as a valued memory for the convert and the procedure for the ceremony should be arranged with this objective in mind.

It is advisable that the Beth Din of three Rabbis which presides at the final interview with the convert include, as one of its members, the Rabbi of the congregation which the party has been attending. Also present at this session should be the partner/spouse. Having completed this interview, the parties ought to proceed to the *mikvah*. In the case of a male, the circumcision or *Hatafah* would take place. Prior to the immersion, the proselyte should recite the convert's prayer (*Appendix 10*). At the immersion, there should be a re-affirmation of the acceptance of the *mitzvot*.

Upon emergence from the *mikvah*, those involved ought to proceed to the adjacent Synagogue and it is recommended that the Jewish partner, together with his/her parents, be present at this stage. The Ark would be opened by the Jewish partner and, in front of the Ark and in the presence of the Beth Din, the convert would recite the first paragraph of the "*Sh'ma Yisrael*" prayer, which is the acceptance of the yoke of the Almighty. The ceremony would conclude with the declaration made by the convert. (*Appendix 11*)

6.4 CONCLUSION

The introductory chapter chartered the long road to conversion to Judaism. In the historical survey, it was seen how the concept of Jewish proselytisation

evolved as it travelled the long road of millennia. During this time Halakha, too, developed in its interpretation till its current application.

As archived resources were explored, the road took its turn to the local scene and for the first time the statistics relating to conversion in this country in its entirety have been subjected to analysis, accompanied by the study of actual cases. Here the work was able to study the various categories of motivation. This was an opportunity, too, to observe how the intending proselyte related to the concept of the process.

The outcome of accomplished conversions was a major theme of this investigation. Results were sought through fieldwork and statistics. Degrees of observance in the post conversion stages became discernible. These were matched against the expectations of the Beth Din and Jewish society in general.

The road became even more intelligible where the Durban model provided a focus based on first hand present observation and experience. Finally, this work surveyed the road ahead.

It is hoped that the material covered in this inquiry, together with its conclusion and recommendations, will contribute positively to the future of conversion to Judaism in South Africa and in a humble measure to the very concept itself.

"DOCUMENT 1:

MINUTES OF A SPECIAL MEETING OF THE EXECUTIVE COUNCIL OF THE FEDERATION OF SYNAGOGUES AND THE BETH DIN HELD AT 24 RALEIGH STREET, YEOVILLE ON THURSDAY 2ND FEBRUARY 1956 AT 8 P.M.

PRESENT: Mr I J Kagan (In the Chair)
Messrs S Danziger, J Rubik, E Greenblatt, M Barsel, W Aron,
P Shaw, I Bersohn, B Patley, L B Katz, M Silberberg, L Gut

Chief Rabbi Rabinowitz, Rabbi M Kossowsky,
Rabbi S Rosenzweig

APOLOGIES: Messrs I Kuper, M Luck, M Berzack, H Maister,
Adv. L R Dison and Rabbi A H Lapin

CONVERSIONS

The Chief Rabbi:

This meeting has been called to discuss the question of conversions and the policy adopted by the Conversion Committee in recommending cases to the Beth Din. On the whole, the Beth Din is very happy indeed for the preliminary process of screening as cases that are refused by the sub-committee do not bother the Beth Din. The set up is a healthy one and the investigations have been very thorough and cover practically every point that the Beth Din wishes to know.

The Beth Din has found that it has not as yet been necessary to refer any case back to the Conversions Committee. However, once a case is recommended to the Beth Din it is very difficult for the Beth Din to refuse. He has one complaint and that is that, despite the request of the Beth Din that the applicant should not be advised that the case has been recommended.

The general lines on which cases are to be considered are:

- (a) Both bodies are opposed to conversions for the purpose of marriage as this is forbidden by Jewish law, which emphatically states that if there is an ulterior motive or if the motive is particularly for the purpose of marriage, then no conversion can be granted.*
- (b) Nothing can be more fatal than to convert immediately after marriage and this is therefore also barred.*
- (c) The essential cases for consideration are:*
 - (i) A child of mixed marriage who is being brought up to regard himself or herself as Jewish.*
 - (ii) In the above event, if the mother is suitable, then she too is converted because of the child.*

The Chief Rabbi went on to say that children should be considered when a boy is nearing the age of Barmitzvah and when a girl is nearing the marriageable age and also where younger children are to be put into a Cheder or the King David School by the parents in an earnest desire that they should be brought up as Jews and that they should know that they are Jews. In the case of a girl of marriageable age, we can always convert her immediately before she is to be married as by that means she is separated from her mother and can set up a Kosher Jewish home; in this event we do not, of course, have to consider the mother in any way.

- (d) *The members of the Conversion Committee themselves should be above personalities and there has been talk of members getting themselves appointed to the Conversion Committee as they had a case to consider. This must be avoided at all costs.*

We have had two or three tragic cases in the past year of women who have been converted, who have left their husbands and have gone back to "goishkeit", even though legally they are Jews.

As far as subsequent investigation is concerned there appears that very little has been achieved in the above direction up to now but it is the intention of the Beth Din to take action. About 25 cases over the past five years have been taken out of the files and it is the intention of the Beth Din to have them investigated to see if they are carrying out their promise to abide by the laws of Judaism.

In this connection, the Chief Rabbi asked the Women's Guilds for assistance but they were unwilling to do so and he now asked the Executive to assist.

Mr Kagan expresses his gratification at this opportunity of meeting the Beth Din in order to discuss the matter. He was also pleased by the statement that the Beth Din have so far accepted all our recommendations.

The policy of the Conversion Sub-Committee is exactly as set out by the Chief Rabbi and in no case have we recommended when there has been a marriage motive. The children's interests have always been the first consideration and the mother secondary but she is accepted on account of the children. When a child of a mixed marriage makes an application in his or her own right the case is treated with every consideration.

On the question of personal contact by individual members I can assure the Beth Din that we all refuse to discuss anything with applicants prior to the interview before the Committee and any discussion subsequent to the interview is only if we wish some point cleared up.

With regard to the question of what is happening to the convertees, Mr Kagan reminded the Beth Din that sometime ago we asked the Beth Din to undertake an investigation.

In regard to the delay in finalising cases by the Beth Din he pointed out that we are dealing with human beings and their lives; the applicants pester us and we should be in a position to advise the applicant whether his case has been accepted or not.

Other points made were :

1. *Rabbi Kossowsky: When a Jewish man comes to the Beth Din and says he wishes to marry a Gentile he is told emphatically that she will never be converted. Such cases should never be converted.*
2. *Rabbi Rosenzweig: A daughter of a mixed marriage is converted and there is the danger that her brothers and sisters will all consider themselves as Jews and will marry accordingly.*
3. *In reply to Mr Gut: Convertees cannot marry a Cohen. This fact is noted on their certificate by the Beth Din.*
4. *Chief Rabbi: The Conversion Sub-Committee should go into the question of putting applicants and their spouses on one year's probation.*
5. *The Conversion Sub-Committee to investigate 5 to 10 cases of those converted in the past 5 years.*
6. *Children of mixed marriages, if brought up in a proper Jewish manner, are worthy of sympathetic consideration. The mother is not a case for conversion.*
7. *No non-Jewish child of a mixed marriage can be accepted into Cheder unless the mother has, in principle, been accepted by the Beth Din.*
8. *Adoptions take up a lot of time of the Beth Din.*

Re: Israel

Urgent steps are being taken to stop these conversions as far as South African applicants are concerned.

The Beth Din has a great deal of information at its disposal.

DOCUMENT 2

GUIDELINES FOR LAY CONVERSIONS COMMITTEES

1. *The following guidelines are issued by the Beth Din after careful consideration of the discussions at the Special Conference on conversions convened in Johannesburg on Sunday 5th November 1972 under the auspices of the Federation of Synagogues of South Africa.*
2. *The substance of the following rules was conveyed to the Conversions Conference by the Chief Rabbi in the presence of the full Beth Din of Johannesburg and the Av Beth Din of Cape Town and with their unanimous concurrence.*

3. *It is again emphasised that there is no Halakhic departure in what follows from the rules recorded in the Minutes of the Meeting between the Federation of Synagogues Executive Council and the Beth Din on the 2nd February 1956. Special attention is drawn to the phrase in those Minutes "if there is an ulterior motive or if the motive is particularly for the purpose of marriage, then no conversion can be granted". In this context the word "particularly" is of special significance. A big element of judgment is involved in assessing whether the motive in such applications is ulterior in nature or whether other factors should be taken into account. Therefore the ultimate decision whether or not to convert a given applicant must be made by the Beth Din.*
4. *The Lay Committee must see itself as the agent of the Beth Din, assisting the Beth Din by gathering information concerning the applicant and making a preliminary assessment of the applicant's sincerity. The Committee can be an invaluable help to the Beth Din in this connection. In particular the Lay Committees are requested to enquire carefully into the following aspects of any candidate.*
- (a) His (or her) moral character.*
 - (b) His (or her) intellectual and mental stability.*
 - (c) His (or her) own family details, closeness of family ties, character of brothers and sisters, etc.*
 - (d) Where there is a stated marriage link

 - (i) what is the Committee's assessment of the Jewishness of the proposed spouse's family;*
 - (ii) in case of a subsequent divorce or decease of the Jewish spouse, what are the chances of the applicant (if converted) remaining loyally Jewish.**
 - (e) Should the Beth Din reject the application what, in the opinion of the Committee are the chances of the proposed marriage being broken off.*

It is appreciated that in all these matters one cannot expect more than an assessment but this in itself can be a good guide for the Beth Din when it comes to consider the case.

5. *In all the following cases the Lay Committee shall submit a detailed report to the Beth Din when referring the case, including its recommendation for or against acceptance of the candidate.*
6. *If the applicant's father is Jewish and there is evidence that the candidate has been encouraged to regard himself (or herself) as Jewish and has been associated with Jewish life, the case should be referred to the Beth Din after the investigations referred to in paragraph (4) have been completed, unless there are serious moral or other grounds for its rejection in which case the Beth Din shall be informed of the rejection.*
7. *Where both parents are non-Jewish, the case shall be referred to the Beth Din with the Lay Committee's observations and recommendations after one year has elapsed from the date of the original submission of the application provided it is renewed and pressed forward by the applicant. This year shall be regarded as a year of testing of the sincerity and determination of the applicant in his desire to embrace Judaism. He (or she) shall not be referred to any formal course of study during this period. The initial*

rejection shall be in the discretion of the Lay Committee and the Beth Din does not have to be informed at this stage.

8. *All applications on behalf of minors shall be referred to the Beth Din with the Committee's Report after completion of the above enquiries in terms of paragraphs (4) and (5) without any waiting period.*
9. *In no cases shall the applicant be advised to "get married and have children" as a preliminary to, and in order to facilitate, the conversion.*
10. *Lay Committees are urged to keep contact with Gerim in order to encourage and assist them in the maintenance of their Jewishness. The Beth Din will notify the Committees of all cases in which conversion has taken place."*

Solemn Warning by the Johannesburg Beth - Din

THE BETH-DIN issues a solemn warning to the Jewish community that ceremonies of conversion to Judaism are being performed by individuals without the authority of the recognised religious bodies of the Jewish community, the Batei-Din of Johannesburg and Capetown. There is clear evidence that these conversions are made for considerable sums of money.

Under no circumstances will such conversions be recognised as valid and steps are being taken to inform Jewish communities throughout the world to this effect.

The Beth-Din views these malpractices with added seriousness, since they are undermining the foundation of organised Jewish life in this country.

BETH-DIN, JOHANNESBURG.

9th Tishri, 5712/9th Oct., 1951

This is a copy of the original document which was circulated throughout South Africa



Rabbi Pinhas Zekry
Spiritual Leader

**CONVERSION IN SOUTH AFRICA
QUESTIONNAIRE**

Dear Member of the Jewish Community

For the past two years I have been engaged in compiling my thesis towards my Ph.D., the subject being "Conversion to Judaism in South Africa". Clearly this is a topic which has involved intensive research of the relevant sources available including the archives of the Beth Din.

Since conversions have been one of the momentous issues within the South African Jewish community as in Israel and other parts of the Diaspora, I firmly believe this work when completed, will be of great benefit to both Rabbinical authorities as well as the lay Jewish population.

In addition to the intensive academic investigation, an important part of the research required is the result of surveys and opinion polls. Your individual views will make a significant contribution to the resultant value of this research.

Please assist by filling in the enclosed Questionnaire which consists of 2 parts. Part A to be completed by those members who are Jewish by birth, whether Orthodox or Reform. Part B to be completed by converts whether Orthodox or Reform. It would be appreciated if each adult member of the family completes a separate form (additional copies can be obtained by phoning 21-5177 office hours). Please return forms at your earliest convenience in the enclosed addressed envelope - no postage required.

Please be assured all information will be treated as strictly confidential.

With grateful thanks for your kind co-operation.

Yours sincerely

RABBI PINHAS ZEKRY

14. Would you describe your parents as:
- | | |
|--|--------------------------|
| Very or somewhat religious | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Slightly religious | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Not at all religious or anti-religious | <input type="checkbox"/> |
15. How accepting were your parents toward your future Jewish spouse:
- | | |
|------------------------------------|--------------------------|
| Unaccepting | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Accepting with reservations | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Accepting without any reservations | <input type="checkbox"/> |
16. How accepting were your future parents-in-law toward you:
- | | |
|------------------------------------|--------------------------|
| Unaccepting | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Accepting with reservations | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Accepting without any reservations | <input type="checkbox"/> |
17. Has your parents-in-law's attitude toward you changed since you've been converted:
- | | |
|---------------------------------------|--------------------------|
| Yes they've become more accepting | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Yes they've become less accepting | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| No there's been no significant change | <input type="checkbox"/> |
18. Who reached out to encourage you to convert:
- | | |
|----------------|--------------------------|
| Spouse | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| In-laws | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Other relative | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Rabbi | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Friend | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Other | <input type="checkbox"/> |
19. Standard of observance
- | | | | | | |
|---|--------------------------|-----------------|--------------------------|-------------|--------------------------|
| Weekly Shul Attendance | <input type="checkbox"/> | Candle Lighting | <input type="checkbox"/> | Kiddush | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Fasting on Yom Kippur | <input type="checkbox"/> | Pesach Seder | <input type="checkbox"/> | Kosher Home | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Keeping Shabbat | <input type="checkbox"/> | | | | |
| Taharat Hamishpacha/Laws of family purity | <input type="checkbox"/> | | | | |
20. Involvement with the Jewish community:
- | | |
|---------------|--------------------------|
| very active | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| fairly active | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| minimal | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| none | <input type="checkbox"/> |

REMARKS:

.....

.....

.....

.....

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APPENDIX 4

QUESTIONNAIRE

Dear Rabbi

Over the past few months I have been involved in preparing a thesis entitled Conversions in South Africa. I have engaged in a great deal of research in order to collect relevant data including perusal of the archives of the Beth Din of Johannesburg and the conversion authorities in other centres.

A major aspect of the study is fieldwork. I have compiled questionnaires in order to gauge attitudes to conversion in the community and intend interviewing the converts themselves. An essential theme in the analysis of this vast subject is the invaluable role played by the Rabbi and I am most interested, therefore, in including in my essay a current Rabbinical consensus of opinions.

Towards the achievement of this goal I enclose a questionnaire which I invite you to complete. Your co-operation will indeed be appreciated.

With Torah blessings

RABBI PINHAS ZEKRY

Enc.

1 Name (Optional) _____

2 Have you been active in the process of conversion

Yes No

3 Do you feel the present conversion process in South Africa is

too lenient too strict adequate

Remarks _____

4 Do you feel the length of the average conversion process is

sufficient too short too lengthy

Remarks _____

5 In your experience, do you find *gerim* maintain an acceptable level of commitment long after their conversion

in most cases on the average in few cases

Remarks _____

6 How do you feel about the program/syllabus. Is it

adequate in need of upgrading

sufficiently comprehensive

Remarks _____

7 From your experience, what involvement do you find on the part of the proselyte in Jewish communal affairs as compared with the Jewish-born member of the community

average involvement greater than average involvement

less than average involvement

Remarks _____

בית דין צדק דק"ק יוהנסבורג והמדינה
BETH-DIN OF JOHANNESBURG
(JEWISH ECCLESIASTICAL COURT)

Telephone: (011) 485-4865
Facsimile: (011) 640-7528

APPENDIX 5

55 Garden Road
Orchards, 2192
Johannesburg
P.O. Box 46559
Orange Grove, 2119

Dear

ב"ה

We have received your inquiry regarding conversion to Judaism. In order that we may proceed to respond to your request, please supply us with the following information.

Name Age

Home Address

Tel. No (H) (B)

Marital Status

Is there a Jewish spouse/partner? Yes No

Identity of spouse/partner (name, age and address)

.....

Reasons for conversion

.....

.....

In the case of a minor please supply information with regard to parents.

Please forward this information to:

The Registrar for Conversions
Beth Din
P O Box 46559
Orange Grove
2119

Yours sincerely

SECRETARY TO THE REGISTRAR

בית דין צדק דק"ק יוהנסבורג והמדינה
BETH-DIN OF JOHANNESBURG
(JEWISH ECCLESIASTICAL COURT)

Telephone: (011) 485-4865
Facsimile: (011) 640-7528

55 Garden Road
Orchards, 2192
Johannesburg
P.O. Box 46559
Orange Grove, 2119

APPENDIX 6

Dear

ב"ה

We acknowledge receipt of your letter of

The following is the passage of conversion to the Jewish faith bearing in mind that the steps outlined are only a prerequisite to being granted an interview with the Registrar for conversion and does not constitute at this stage your admission to the conversion programme.

1. The candidate, together with the Jewish spouse/partner (if applicable) will be required to attend the services on Friday nights, Saturdays and Festivals as well as weekdays when possible at the following Synagogue.

.....

(Name of Synagogue and name of Rabbi)

2. The candidate and partner are expected to be in a position to observe Shabbat and major Festivals to the exclusion of all work and use of transport.
3. The candidate and partner are expected to acquire an introductory knowledge of Judaism. The following reading list will prove helpful:

To be a Jew – Rabbi H. Donin

Basic laws for a Kosher home – Rabbi M. Kossowsky

The Sabbath – Dayan Grunfeld

The Artscroll Daily Prayer Book

Once these conditions have been met please send the enclosed application form following which an interview will be set up with the Registrar.

We hope this will give you an indication of what is expected of you.

Yours sincerely

REGISTRAR

APPLICATION FOR CONVERSION TO THE JEWISH FAITH

Date of application Ref. No

A. APPLICANT'S DETAILS

First Names Surname

Date of Birth Place of Birth

I.D. Number Passport Number Nationality

Residential Address

Telephone Number (H) (B) Facsimile

(Please attach passport photographs of yourself, partner and children, if any)

Marital Status:

Married Single Widowed Divorced Separated

Occupation Educational standard achieved

Have you previously applied to this Beth Din or anywhere else for conversion?

Yes No

If Yes: When Where

Why did you cease the process

B. APPLICANT'S PARENTS

Full names of: Father Mother

Are parents still alive? Are parents separated or divorced?

C. Please complete whichever is applicable

1. To be completed by single candidate

Do you have a Jewish boyfriend/girlfriend Yes No

If "yes", please answer the following questions. If "no" continue with Section E

Details of Jewish partner

First names Surname Hebrew Name

Date of Birth Place of Birth

Address

Occupation Tel. No. (H) (B)

Is your boyfriend/girlfriend mother Jewish? Yes No

Is your boyfriend/girlfriend adopted? Yes No

Name of congregation of your partner's parents

2. To be completed by married candidate

Full names of spouse If Jewish Hebrew name

Date of Birth Date of marriage

Where married Religious ceremony Civil ceremony

Occupation of spouse Business address

Telephone Number (H) (B) Facsimile

In case of children from this marriage please furnish the following details

Name of child	Date of Birth	School attended
.....
.....
.....

Children from previous marriage
.....
.....

D. To be completed by divorced candidate

Date of marriage Date of divorce

Reason for divorce

If married more than once please supply details

Details of children from previous marriage

Name of child	Date of Birth	Custody arrangement
.....
.....
.....

E. To be filled by all applicants

If your Jewish boyfriend/girl friend or spouse is divorced

Does he/she have a "Get"? Yes No

If either of the parties are widowed please state former husband/wife's

Date of marriage Date of death

F. Religious information

Please state religion or denomination of the following:

Yourself Your mother Your father

Were you raised in a religious home? Yes No

G. General information

Are you under medical treatment presently Yes No

If "yes", please submit details

Have you ever had any major illness in the past? Yes No

If "yes" was the treatment: medical surgical psychiatric

Have you been arrested or convicted for any offence or crime? Yes No

If "yes" please furnish details

H. REFERENCES (Jewish references only)

(a) Name (b) Name

Address Address

Phone No. (H) Phone No. (H)

(B) (B)

Please attach letters of recommendation from the above.

I. Please attach a detailed letter giving your reasons for conversion.**ACKNOWLEDGEMENT**

I acknowledge that the information supplied on this application is, to the best of my knowledge, true and correct.

Signature Date

ULPAN MONITORING SESSION

MID YEAR REPORT ON PROGRESS

Name of candidate for conversion

Name of Jewish partner

Date of commencement

Number of lessons attended Of total

Attendance of Jewish partner

Syllabus

Module completed	Marks	Remarks
.....
.....
.....
.....

Observance of Judaism

- 1. Shul attendance Regular Satisfactory Seldom
- 2. Shabbat observance Fully Partly Non-observant
- 3. Kashrut observance Fully Partly Non-observant

Name of Synagogue **Name of Rabbi**

Please fill this section based on your knowledge and the Rabbi guiding candidate

Remarks.....
.....
.....

General Report on Candidate

.....
.....



Recommendation of the Ulpan director

.....
.....
.....
.....

Name of Ulpan director

Date **Signature**



Chief Rabbi Cyril K. Harris

Chief Rabbi of the Union of Orthodox Synagogues of South Africa

Office of the Chief Rabbi
Union of Orthodox Synagogues of South Africa
55 Garden Road, Orchards
Johannesburg 2192
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APPENDIX 9

20 December 1998
1 Tevet 5759

ORTHODOX CONVERSION IN SOUTH AFRICA : AN OVERVIEW

Policy

A normative Jewish approach to the issue of conversion does not exist, due primarily to historical fluctuations between positive encouragement to win over people of other faiths and marked reluctance to attract proselytes.

In that Jewish religious laws accepts non Jews - after an established procedure of conversion - into the Jewish faith, the crux of the problem in any given country at any given time is the extent to which applicants ought to be encouraged.

Clearly, if the policy were to be completely 'open' with any and every applicant being initially acceptable, this may be construed by the younger generation as an incentive to originate relationships with those of another faith. Conversely, if the procedures were to be made intensely difficult, a virtual 'closing of the doors', the truly sincere candidate with no motive other than to espouse Judaism may be dissuaded.

Ideally the midway stance between the two should be adopted, whereby the process is by no means automatic but the genuine candidate is able to succeed.

The new dispensation in South Africa offers greater opportunity for mixing on the part of diverse ethnic and religious groups and fears have been expressed that tendencies towards assimilation will accelerate and the number marrying out of the faith increase.

In these circumstances, a more cautious approach towards conversion might be expected but so far, since full democracy has been in operation, no noticeable increase in the marrying-out rate has been experienced nor has there been any increase in the overall number of persons seeking conversion. The current policy of the South African Jewish religious authorities may thus be vindicated.

Standards

More stringent regulations for the acceptance of proselytes and more comprehensive tuition in Jewish principles and practice have been introduced in South Africa during the past twenty years. This has produced superior spiritual dividends in that, whereas previously a large

percentage of converts failed to adhere to proper standards, the situation today is that many of those admitted to the faith display a high level both of Jewish knowledge and Jewish practice.

Methods of tuition vary considerably from place to place and progress is obviously dependent on the candidate's aptitude but experience across the Jewish world suggests that a combination of individual tuition on specific commandments and group courses on Jewish belief yield the best results.

The motive for wishing to become Jewish in the first place impacts considerably on the standard eventually reached.

Support mechanisms to assist newly qualified proselytes to integrate into the local Jewish community and to help them maintain high standards of observance are unfortunately a rarity. In this connection, the Durban Jewish community's support system for new converts deserves to be replicated elsewhere.

A sad statistic concerns a number of those who convert for marriage purposes only, in that not only is the desired standard not reached but, not infrequently, the liaison ends in divorce.

Acceptance

Sociologists differentiate objective public identity – a person's Jewishness as perceived by others – and subjective public identity – his/her perception of how their Jewishness appears to others.

Regarding converts this distinction can be acute. A Jewish convert is not always regarded by other Jews as a 'full Jew', a generation gap difference in attitude often being discernable, the older generation looking with disfavour on the whole issue of proselytisation, the younger generation usually accepting it.

Similarly, while the individual sees himself/herself classified as a Jew, the value other Jews attach to the conversion and how they view the strength of Jewish identity may be open to question and thus a cause of real anxiety to the convert.

In the South African context, it may be safely asserted that the vast majority of converts gain acceptance by the community. Indeed, in not a few cases, the convert is recognised as an example of how a 'good Jew' should behave.

CONVERT'S PRAYER

O, Lord, my G-d, Sovereign of the Universe, Lord of all flesh and Creator of all things, I stand before Thee this day to take the most important step in my life.

I do solemnly swear before Thee this day that from this day forward I accept Thy Oneness and undertake to perform Thy will with a perfect heart.

I repudiate finally and forever the faith in which I was born and I accept upon myself the yoke of Thy commandments as revealed by Thee unto Thy people Israel in the Holy Torah.

O my G-d, with humble and contrite heart I pray unto Thee to make me worthy of membership of Thy Covenant. Grant me, I pray Thee, the strength and fortitude to do Thy will. Grant me, I pray Thee, health and length of days in which to consecrate Thy Name through the nobility of conduct which marks the life of a committed Jew. May I never bring shame or reproach to Thy people or to Thy Holy Name. May my life be a living example to others and my actions a light unto the nations.

As I stand before Thee on this day, from the depth of my being do I beg Thee to account it unto me as though I am reborn. When I emerge from these cleansing waters may it be in Thy sight as though I enter into a new life in the House of Israel, purified in mind and spirit, worthy of Thy infinite love and the respect of my fellow men. May this be Thy will.

AMEN

PRAYER TO BE RECITED ON EMERGENCE FROM MIKVAH

As I have been spared to the magnificent experience of being welcomed into this Covenant, so may it be Thy will to spare me and all that belong to me for many years of joy and happiness and dedicated service. Preserve me and all who belong to me in life and health so that Thy will may be done and Thy commandments pursued with a perfect heart.

I do solemnly pledge unto Thee my uncompromising commitment and unending love.

AMEN

בית דין צדק דק"ק יוהנסבורג והמדינה
BETH-DIN OF JOHANNESBURG
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Orange Grove, 2119

APPENDIX 11

ב"ה

DECLARATION BY CONVERT (MALE)

IN THE NAME OF THE ALMIGHTY, THE G-D OF ISRAEL

I, the undersigned,

of

herewith solemnly promise to be a sincere Jew from now on in the spirit of traditional Judaism, a true son of the Jewish people in accordance with the Laws of the Jewish Religion. I solemnly declare that I believe in ONE G-d as conceived and believed in by the Jewish people and undertake to observe the Jewish religion with all my heart and soul. I further undertake to live in accordance with the Laws which govern Jewish life and the Jewish home, to observe the Sabbath and Festivals in accordance with their strict laws, Kashrut and Tefillin as it beseemeth a Jewish man and generally to live in the spirit of Judaism which I now embrace.

SO MAY G-D HELP ME

SIGNED AT ON THIS THE DAY OF 19

SIGNATURE

בית דין צדק דק"ק יוהנסבורג והמדינה
BETH-DIN OF JOHANNESBURG
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ב"ה

DECLARATION BY CONVERT (FEMALE)

IN THE NAME OF THE ALMIGHTY, THE G-D OF ISRAEL

I, the undersigned,

of

herewith solemnly promise to be a sincere Jewess from now on in the spirit of traditional Judaism, a true daughter of the Jewish people in accordance with the Laws of the Jewish Religion. I solemnly declare that I believe in ONE G-d as conceived and believed in by the Jewish people and undertake to observe the Jewish religion with all my heart and soul. I further undertake to live in accordance with the Laws which govern Jewish life and the Jewish home, to observe the Sabbath and Festivals in accordance with their strict laws, Kashrut and Tevillah as it beseemeth a Jewish woman and generally to live in the spirit of Judaism which I now embrace.

SO MAY G-D HELP ME

SIGNED AT ON THIS THE DAY OF 19

SIGNATURE

בית דין צדק דק"ק יוהנסבורג והמדינה
BETH-DIN OF JOHANNESBURG
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ב"ה

CONVERSION OF CHILDREN

IN THE NAME OF THE ALMIGHTY, THE G-D OF ISRAEL

We, the undersigned,

of

herewith solemnly undertake to bring up our son/daughter / adopted son/daughter
.....(born
(Hebrew name) in the spirit of traditional Judaism, to be a true
son/daughter of the Jewish people in accordance with the Laws of the Jewish
Religion. We undertake to teach him/her the laws and customs of our Religion, in
order that he/she shall believe in ONE G-d as conceived and believed in by the
Jewish people and live, when he/she shall grow up and reach maturity, in
accordance with the Laws of the Torah which govern Jewish life and the Jewish
home, particularly, the Sabbath and Festivals and the laws of Kashrut and
Tefillin/Tevillah and generally to live in the spirit of Judaism which he/she now
embraces.

SO MAY G-D HELP US

SIGNED AT ON THIS THE DAY OF 19

(.....)

SIGNATURE

.....

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- 6 TB Pesahim 87b
- 7 TB Yebamoth 109b
- 8 TB Shabbat 31a
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- 10 Ethics of the Fathers 3:1
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- 12 Genesis 12:1-2
- 13 Maimonides Mishnei Torah
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- 15 Maimonides Isurei Biah 13:14-16
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- 29 Psalm 119:126
- 30 TB Menahoth 44a
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- 32 Deuteronomy 16:18

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- 2 Mekhilta Amalek 3
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- 4 Tosafoth on Yebamoth 47b