Why Reform Conversions to Judaism Are on the Rise in Israel

A year after a landmark High Court ruling, the Reform movement in Israel has enjoyed a 63 percent increase in participants to its conversion programs, and may have the Haredim partly to thank for those numbers.

Participants attending a conversion program at the Beit Daniel Reform movement center in Tel Aviv. Credit: Ilan Assaya

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Apr. 20, 2022

Cindy Shakuri was not born Jewish. She grew up in Mexico and later moved to the United States, where she acquired American citizenship along with many Jewish friends.

“I really loved the Jewish holidays and identified with them,” says the 39-year-old photographer and illustrator. “I always thought it would be great to be part of a Jewish family.”

In the United States, she met an Israeli who would eventually become her husband and open that door for her. She followed him back to Israel, where she has been living for the past seven years. In the process, she acquired Israeli citizenship as well.

Shakuri, who lives in the Tel Aviv suburb of Holon, decided it was time to officially join the tribe late last year, and signed up for the conversion program run by the Reform movement in Israel.
What drove her decision, she says, was a landmark High Court of Justice ruling, handed down just over a year ago that recognized conversions performed by the non-Orthodox movements in Israel for the purpose of the Law of Return.

“When I knew I would get recognized, it made me want to do it,” she said over a recent conversation at the Beit Daniel Reform movement center in Tel Aviv, where she was attending her weekly conversion class.

Shakuri is far from alone. Ever since the High Court published its decision on March 1, 2021, the Reform movement in Israel has witnessed a significant jump in the number of participants in its conversion program.

“If in the past we were performing 200 to 220 conversions a year, last year we had about 270,” says Rabbi Gregory Kotlyar, who runs a special conversion track designed for Israelis who come from Russian-speaking families.

In the past, he notes, about 80 people a year, on average, would register for the Reform movement’s conversion program in Israel. “Last year, we had a total of 194, so what we are seeing is clearly just the beginning. I venture to say that this year alone, we’ll have more than 300 converts.”

Cindy Shakuri. “I always thought it would be great to be part of a Jewish family.” Credit: Ilan Assayag
About half the people who undergo Reform conversion in Israel in any given year are minors, largely children of mixed marriages and of surrogate mothers from abroad. Most of the others either have a Jewish father or a Jewish grandparent (they are often referred to as “seed of Israel”), and are therefore eligible for citizenship under the Law of Return.

Because they were not born to Jewish mothers, however, they are not considered halakhically Jewish and are prohibited from marrying in Israel and being buried in Jewish cemeteries. Spouses and partners of Israeli Jews account for another small group of converts through the Reform movement. This group tends to consist mainly of women, as Jewish lineage, according to halakha, is passed down through the mother.

The Reform movement runs a year-long conversion program, though an abridged track exists for members of the “seed of Israel” group as well as for minors.

About 90 percent of those converting through the Reform movement in Israel are already citizens, Kotlyar says, having immigrated under the Law of Return or having been born in Israel to parents who did. Under the Law of Return, it is enough for an individual to have one Jewish grandparent to be eligible to immigrate to Israel and obtain automatic citizenship. As a matter of practice, neither the Reform nor Conservative movements in Israel convert tourists or asylum seekers.

Last year’s High Court ruling recognized the right of individuals converted in Israel by the non-Orthodox movements to automatic citizenship under the Law of Return. Individuals converted outside Israel by the non-Orthodox movements have long enjoyed that right, thanks to a much earlier High Court ruling.

Considering that the overwhelming majority of those converting in Israel through these movements are already citizens, the ruling is only relevant for a tiny group of people – no more than a few dozen people a year. These are mainly spouses and partners of Israeli citizens who have temporary residency status.
‘As good a time as any’

What, then, explains the sharp rise in the number of Israelis converting through the Reform movement?

“The way I see it, the High Court ruling gave us great PR,” says Kotlyar. “People suddenly heard that Reform conversions were getting recognized in Israel, and this was a good enough reason for them to sign up with us. It didn’t matter that most of them already had citizenship and had nothing to gain in terms of status by going through a conversion.”

Those who choose to undergo state-sanctioned Orthodox conversions in Israel are able to marry in the country and be buried in a Jewish cemetery. But that is often not enough of an incentive for choosing the Orthodox track. As Kotlyar notes, the Orthodox rabbinical courts also require converts to commit to Shabbat and kashrut observance, which can serve as a strong deterrent.

“Many of those coming to us said they had no intention of leading an Orthodox lifestyle and didn’t want to have to lie about it,” Kotlyar says.

Ken Hennrick’s young daughter sits quietly at his side while the U.S. physician attends the weekly English-language conversion class at Beit Daniel.

Ken Hennrick with his daughter at the Beit Daniel Reform movement center. Credit: Ilan Assayag

After living in New York for many years, he and his Israeli husband moved back to Israel 10 months ago. Shortly thereafter, Hennrick, who has temporary residency status, enrolled in the Reform movement conversion program. It wasn’t citizenship he was after so much as the benefits that come with being a new immigrant to Israel, says the 41-year-old doctor, who recently began working at a large hospital in Tel Aviv.

“After uprooting our lives, we could really use some of the financial assistance that is available to new immigrants,” he says. New immigrants who qualify for the Law of Return are eligible for rental subsidies and other benefits meant to assist with their relocation.
Originally from Ohio, Rachel Eviston is also married to an Israeli. Since meeting her husband six years ago in Mexico, she has been contemplating conversion. “My husband could really care less, but I saw it as a way of becoming a real part of the Jewish community,” says the 31-year-old high-tech worker.

When the High Court published its landmark ruling, she adds, “it seemed like as good a time as any to act on my impulse.”

Rachel Eviston. “My husband could really care less, but I saw it as a way of becoming a real part of the Jewish community.” Credit: Ilan Assaya

Reform yes, Conservative not so much

Mia Flor, originally from the Philippines, has been married to an Israeli for five years but has yet to obtain her citizenship papers. That was not a factor, however, in her decision to convert now.

“I have always loved Jewish culture, and I have a friend who recently converted through the Reform movement and had a very positive experience, so I decided to do it as well,” says the 34-year-old marketing executive. “I knew I would not feel comfortable doing an Orthodox conversion.”

Mia Flor. “I have always loved Jewish culture.” Credit: Ilan Assaya
Although the High Court ruling applies to all the non-Orthodox denominations, the **Conservative movement**, which converts somewhere between 70 and 80 people a year in Israel, has not experienced the same sort of windfall that the Reform movement has in its aftermath.

That might have to do with the fact that the two non-Orthodox movements are often lumped together as “Reform” and most Israelis are not aware of the distinctions between them. Although both movements are egalitarian and grant equal status to women, Conservative Judaism, unlike Reform Judaism, embraces halakha. As such, it is closer to Orthodoxy.

The fact that the Reform movement is always singled out for derision by the **ultra-Orthodox** establishment has in this case worked in its favor, notes Rabbi Galia Sadan, director of the movement’s conversion program in Israel.

“When the ruling was announced, the ultra-Orthodox made a big stink about ‘Reform conversions’ – and that was when many Israelis suddenly realized that having a Reform conversion was actually an option in this country,” she says. “It was great advertising for us.”

Sadan, who teaches conversion classes designated for English speakers, saw the effect of the High Court ruling almost immediately. “Within a matter of weeks, our class sizes grew from an average of 20-to-25 students to 40-to-50.”

The recent **aliyah wave from Ukraine and Russia** has brought thousands of immigrants to Israel in the past few months, many of whom are not Jewish, even if they are eligible for aliyah. “It may not happen immediately, but this is sure to drive our numbers even higher,” predicts Sadan.