

# In Ruth's footsteps

Israeli converts tell their stories

• SHERYL ABBEY

In honor of Shavuot, the festival that celebrates Ruth, the most famous convert to Judaism, the *Magazine* and Giyur K'Halacha, Israel's leading nongovernmental conversion court, present personal stories of Israelis who have recently converted to Judaism. These individuals represent some of the thousands of Israelis who convert each year. Most are immigrants or children of immigrants from the former Soviet Union. Some are adopted children or children of surrogacy. All have moving stories to tell about reclaiming their Jewish heritage, embracing their Jewish identities and ensuring the Jewish future.



MICHAEL, ORLY and their two sons recite the Shema prayer before a Giyur K'Halacha conversion court. (Giyur K'Halacha)



*'Jewish history demands that we embrace children of immigrants from the former Soviet Union. Halacha provides the way'*

— Rabbi Seth Farber



MARK: I knew, deep down, I was Jewish. (Photos: Courtesy)

### Mark

My parents immigrated to Israel from the former Soviet Union. My mother's father was Jewish, and my father's mother is Jewish. I was born here. I grew up and have spent all my life living as a Jew, quite a traditional one.

When I was in kindergarten, my grandmother became haredi (ultra-Orthodox), and I began spending Shabbat and holidays with her. My mother is a secularist and my father is an atheist, but they have never interfered in my religious pursuits. We always have kiddush and havdalah with my grandmother, and, in fact, my parents insist on being present for it.

When I reached the age of bar mitzvah, I was told I was not Jewish according to Halacha (Jewish Law), but it didn't bother me much, because I knew, deep down, I was Jewish. I have always loved the Jewish holidays. Every Yom Kippur, I pray during the day at a Chabad synagogue, and attend the Moroccan community's Ne'ilah service. Each year, I help build a sukkah for a friend's father. I often host seder on Pesach.

During my Army service, I began the Nativ conversion process. I was introduced to great teachers and lovely rabbis. I was exposed to different streams of Judaism, and deep religious concepts. I read the Torah, kept kosher, and laid tefillin.

But I was not ready to complete the conversion process without learning more. I studied Talmud and read Maimonides and Yehuda Halevi. Each night, before I went to bed, I read Psalms. I was exposed to Modern Orthodoxy through the teachings of Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, and learned about religious Zionism from Rabbi Benny Lau and Yochi Brandes. I have even become something of a teacher. When a friend who was living abroad was missing Jewish content in his life, I began sharing my thoughts on the weekly Torah portion with him every Friday via WhatsApp.

When I felt ready to move forward with my conversion, I contacted Giyur K'Halacha, which I had learned about via social media. I did not consider converting through the State, because I am all too aware of the way the Chief Rabbinate of Israel treats children of immigrants from the former Soviet Union when they try to marry or convert. I feel the Rabbinate is more political than religious.

The staff and rabbis of Giyur K'Halacha were amazing. From our initial meeting to my "to-do list," dozens of emails, and my appearance before the *beit din* (rabbinical court), every person involved treated me with respect and understanding. It is not easy, but they do it. It is inspiring.

I am pleased with myself for having converted. I feel I have always been Jewish, but now I have the satisfaction of knowing I can be part of a minyan, or I can open a bottle of kosher wine for my grandmother.



SETH: NOW my children can unequivocally say they are Jewish.

### Seth & family

I am a single father of three children, all nine years old. How is this possible? Well, it's complicated.

When I turned 40, and hadn't yet found the woman I wanted to share my life with, I decided to have children through surrogacy. I had always wanted to have a family, and this was the best way to do it, given the circumstances. I was blessed with a daughter and twin sons, just seven months apart.

In Chicago, where we lived, I sent the children to an immersive Hebrew-language school with Israeli teachers, and we were deeply connected to the Orthodox community. The laws and rituals of Judaism guided my parenting, and reinforced my belief in the centrality of family and community. I raised my children as Jews, and they felt they were Jewish.

But, technically, they were not Jewish, because the women who helped bring them into the world were not Jewish (surrogates rarely are). I began the process of converting them to Judaism. Rabbi David Wolkenfeld, who knew I was considering making aliyah, recommended that I contact Rabbi Seth Farber, which I did.

In 2018, we made aliyah. We hadn't yet completed the children's conversions. We settled in Zichron Ya'akov, where we joined the Ohel Ya'akov Synagogue, and became part of the Orthodox community. According to the Chief Rabbinate, I was Jewish, but my children officially had "no religion." Given our commitment to Orthodox Judaism and to Israel, this was confusing to them, and painful for me. To make matters worse, I could not convert the children to Judaism through the State, because the Rabbinate will not convert children of single fathers.

I followed up with Rabbi Farber, and began the process of converting my children through Giyur K'Halacha. Our Zichron Ya'akov community supported us completely. I was nervous about bringing the children before the Giyur K'Halacha *beit din*, but the rabbis were warm and accepting. The kids actually enjoyed it.

I can't thank Rabbi Farber and Giyur K'Halacha enough. Now my children can say, unequivocally, they are Jewish, and I can feel that this chapter of my life's journey has reached a happy ending.

For further information about converting to Judaism through Giyur K'Halacha: [giyur.co.il](http://giyur.co.il) or (02) 547-0591.

### The Giyur K'Halacha option

In 2015, when hopes for an expanded State Conversion Authority were dashed by a new national government, prominent Religious Zionist rabbis, including the (now deceased) Rabbi Nahum Rabinovitch, Professor Benny Ish-Shalom, Rabbi Seth Farber, Rabbi David Stav, Rabbi Shlomo Riskin and Rabbi Haim Amsalem, established Giyur K'Halacha, a nongovernmental, Orthodox conversion court network. Giyur K'Halacha is based on the writings of Rabbi Rabinovitch, its founding president, who believed that the conversion of minors with Jewish roots is an imperative, given the realities of the Jewish State. It operates on the premise that conversion is a moral obligation and a demographic solution, particularly for children of immigrants from the former Soviet Union.

Initial funding for Giyur K'Halacha was provided by the UJA-Federation of New York. Since 2015, Giyur K'Halacha has become Israel's leading alternative conversion court network. There are 60 Orthodox rabbis who now serve as its conversion court judges in Alon, Be'erot Yitzhak, Efrat, Kibbutz Lavi, Ma'aleh Gilboa, Shoham and Tel Aviv, and its conversions account for 18% of all Orthodox conversions in the country.

— S.A.



Yael BELENKY, manager at Giyur K'Halacha.

### The state of conversion in Israel

Conversion in Israel is more complicated today than it was in the time of Ruth, or even in the early days of the State. From the founding of Israel until 1995, twelve State rabbinical courts and municipal rabbis oversaw conversions. Since 2004, a State Conversion Authority, consisting of thirty rabbis under the guidance of the Chief Rabbinate of Israel and under the auspices of the Prime Minister's Office, has overseen State-sanctioned conversions, including those performed by the Army.

The Conversion Authority is reluctant to perform conversions, particularly of the country's nearly half-million immigrants from the former Soviet Union who are not Jewish according to Halacha (Jewish Law). As a result, the Orthodox, Conservative and Reform movements have each established alternative, nongovernmental

conversion courts in recent years.

A 2016 Supreme Court decision required the State to recognize Orthodox, nongovernmental conversions carried out in Israel, both in the State's official Population Registry, and for purposes of aliyah under the Law of Return – thus giving them equal legal status as State conversions. The Chief Rabbinate, however, which has legal jurisdiction over Jewish marriages in Israel, has refused to recognize these conversions for purposes of marriage registration.

The Supreme Court has also ruled that the State must recognize Conservative and Reform conversions carried out in Israel in the Population Registry, but has not yet handed down its verdict regarding recognition for purposes of aliyah. A petition has been before the court since 2005.

— S.A.



FORMER JEWISH Agency chairmain Natan Sharansky speaks at an ITIM Annual Conversion Conference with Rabbi Nahum Rabinovitch (to his right) and Farber (to his far right). (ITIM)