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From the Moabite Ruth to Norly Filipino: Intermarriage and Conversion in the Jewish Nation State

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PART II



WOMEN'S AGENCY BETWEEN RELIGION
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CHAPTER 4



FROM THE MOABITE RUTH TO NORLY THE FILIPINO: INTERMARRIAGE AND CONVERSION IN THE JEWISH NATION STATE

*Daphna Hacker**

INTRODUCTION

In Israel, unlike in other countries, the vast majority of Jews marry other Jews. Interreligious marriages are not common, comprising about 5 percent of all marriages (The Jewish People Policy Planning Institute 2006: 11). Most interreligious families in Israel are those in which both spouses are immigrants from the former Soviet Union.¹ However, some of them are comprised of a native Jewish-Israeli and a non-Jewish immigrant, and thus are international, intercultural, and sometimes interracial, as well as interreligious families.² This article focuses on the latter. Through these families' experiences, and the sociolegal regime in which they are shaped, I shall discuss the relations between gender, religion, and citizenship in the country that defines itself as the Jewish nation state.³

Though we know very little about intermarriage in Israel, preliminary data I received from the Ministry of the Interior suggest that it is a gendered phenomenon. During 1998–2006, 21,379 requests for citizenship were submitted to the Ministry of the Interior by spouses of Israelis: 7,428 by men and 13,738 by women.⁴ Since, as will be elaborated below, Jewish immigrating spouses receive automatic citizenship and hence do not need to submit such a request, these figures are

mostly of requests made by non-Jewish men and women who wish to join their Israeli spouse.⁵ These quantitative figures suggest that more women than men leave their cultural group and follow their Israeli spouse to his homeland.

Moreover, the data I received from the Rabbinical Courts Management on conversion to Judaism in Israel suggest that the citizenship request figures do not tell the whole gendered immigration story of interreligious couples. In 2001–2006, 5,682 men and boys and 19,026 women and girls were converted to Judaism by the Orthodox state conversion tribunals—that is, 77 percent of those who convert are females.⁶ While about three-quarters of those converted are immigrants from Ethiopia⁷ and the former Soviet Union, the remaining converts immigrated from all over the globe, and it is reasonable to assume that many of them came to Israel to live with a Jewish-Israeli spouse. This shows that the conversion of immigrants, which in some cases is related to intermarriage, is also a gendered phenomenon.

In this chapter I wish to expand on these crude quantitative data and inquire into a few of the stories behind them. These stories shed light on the gendered motivations for converting to Judaism and on the costs and benefits of conversion as shaped by the interrelation between gender, religion, and citizenship in Israel.

THE STUDY

This article is based on a sociolegal study aimed at exploring the realities of interreligious families living in Israel.⁸ The study included 28 interviews with 14 interreligious heterosexual couples who have at least one child under the age of 18 (each spouse was interviewed separately). In seven cases the female spouse immigrated to Israel and in seven cases the immigrating spouse was male.⁹ I was interested in two metaquestions: how do two adults from different places and religions create and maintain a family; and how does the fact that Israel defines itself as a Jewish state affect this ongoing process of family creation.

I discussed a range of issues with the interviewees, including the circumstances under which they met and their decision to create a family, the names of their children, the holidays they celebrate, and the funeral they would like for themselves when the time comes. The interviews taught me about the variety of circumstances surrounding interreligious families that differentiate them from one another and make each family unique. Notwithstanding the particularity and uniqueness of each interreligious family, one repeated pattern did emerge from the interviews. Listening to the stories told by each spouse, I realized that negotiations over the issue of conversion to Judaism, and the decision whether to convert or not, were conducted along gendered lines. While four out of the six women who joined their Jewish-Israeli spouse converted to

Judaism, only one out of the seven men in a similar position did the same.¹⁰ These findings motivated me to approach the state authorities and obtain the quantitative data presented above that placed the unrepresentative sample of interviewed couples in a broader context, and indeed proves that conversion in Israel is a gendered phenomenon.

The interviewees' stories also directed me to a legal investigation of the civil and religious laws, rulings, and guidelines governing conversion to Judaism in Israel. Though formal law was hardly mentioned by the interviewees, and they rarely approached a lawyer or went through an adverse legal procedure related to their interreligious family, it is clear that their lives are shaped before the law, with the law and against the law (as conceptualized by Ewick and Silbey 1998). Accordingly, their accounts of their motivations to convert, and the costs and benefits of conversion in the Jewish state, are presented here together with a discussion of the legal framework of religion and citizenship that hovers over the everyday lives of interreligious families in Israel.

FINDINGS

The Gendered Pressure to Convert

Only in a small number of cases does a non-Jew who comes to Israel convert to Judaism from an inner motivation that is independent of social or familial pressures (Bass 2007: 30). This was the case with only one of the converts in my study: Julio came to Israel as a student, and was exposed to academic studies of Judaism during his time at university. Judaism and Jewish-Israeli society fascinated him, and he decided to join the Jewish people through conversion. Only after he had started the conversion procedure did he meet Lilach and decide to establish a family with a Jewish-Israeli spouse. And so Julio's conversion was, in his words, driven by "true faith."

In other cases, the male immigrant non-Jews did not consider the option of conversion seriously, even when they married a Jewish spouse, and were not significantly pressured to do so. For example, Anthony, who was born in Greece but lived in Israel as a child owing to his father's diplomatic career, never considered converting to Judaism, not even after meeting and marrying Dana. As he explains:

Q: Was the option of conversion brought up?

A: No, Dana never asked for such a thing.

Q: And if she had asked?

A: No. I mean it would have surprised me. If she had asked she would really have had to explain her argument, because I don't think it fits with our everyday philosophy. It is hard to justify a change of religion if I do not believe in God.

In the interview, Dana confirmed that she had never asked Anthony to convert, though as far as her parents are concerned, “marrying a non-Jew is not optimal,” and she believes that they would have been happier with her marriage to Anthony if he was Jewish. However, they never brought the subject up with her, and she thinks that given the option of her remaining a spinster or marrying a non-Jew, her parents would have chosen the latter.

Two of the non-Jews’ female spouses also reported that they had never considered conversion and had never experienced pressure to do so. One of them, Johanna, even mentioned that Amnon, her Jewish-Israeli spouse, used to joke that “if you were to become Jewish I would kick you out.” Indeed, in his interview Amnon presented a very strong atheistic position, as well as what he called an antiethnocentric stand, arguing that he is “happy to be part of the assimilation figures of the Jewish people.”

These cases demonstrate that interreligious marriages are no longer taboo in Jewish-Israeli society, and that a non-Jewish spouse can live in Israel without being exposed to social demands to convert. However, the interviews revealed that this is truer when the non-Jewish spouse is a man. When the non-Jewish spouse is female, on the other hand, she will most likely be pressurized to convert. Michelle’s story illustrates this gendered pressure.

Michelle was born in France to a Catholic family. She met Yoel in Jerusalem in 1981 while studying for an MA degree. Yoel introduced Michelle to his parents, whom Michelle labels as “close to religion” but “not hysterically religious.” Yoel’s father reacted very strongly to their relationship and demanded that Michelle convert. The pressure on her increased when, after a lot of thinking, Yoel told her that it was also important to him that she convert. Michelle felt connected to her Christian heritage, while at the same time feeling a deep attachment to Israel and the Jewish people. However, she felt that she did not need formal approval for this attachment. She referred to the biblical story of Ruth the Moabite, saying:

This is exactly what happens in the book of Ruth. I learned the book of Ruth properly and there was no conversion there, she just said, “Your people is my people and your God is my God” and that’s it, so why do I need the stamp of the Rabbinat? To me it seems absurd.

Even though this was her considered opinion, Michelle ultimately acceded to Yoel and his father’s request and converted to Judaism.

The pressure on women to convert was also evident in the story told by Sonali, who came to Israel in 1996. Sonali had met Asael when she was 19 years old and he was traveling in India. She lived in a small village and was a member of a very traditional tribe. Sonali did not inform her parents about her relationship with Asael, knowing that

they would object and try to prevent any contact between them. Like every other girl in the tribe, she was expected to marry a man from the community and to have no romantic relationships until then. After a year of separations and hesitations, Asael and Sonali decided to marry and live in Israel. Sonali fled her village without saying goodbye to her parents, who disowned her after discovering that she had disobeyed the tribe's traditions.

Sonali arrived in Israel with very little knowledge about the country, its inhabitants, language, and customs. She also lacked basic practical skills such as managing a bank account and using modern kitchen facilities. When she arrived, and while still trying to adjust to her new environment, Asael, and more so his father, who had discovered religion at the age of 30, let her know that they wanted her to convert. Since Asael's father was dying, he used his connections with the conversion authorities to speed up Sonali's conversion, and after a relatively brief study of Judaism, her conversion was ratified.

At the time, Sonali did not give much thought to the conversion and did as she was told. She claims to have been "ignorant," "indifferent," and "preoccupied with other things." But after a while she realized that she had been pushed into something that she did not fully understand and to which she had not given her full consent:

I think that I chose to come to this country, . . . and I chose Asael and what belongs to Asael but it does not have to chain me. It does not have to mean that I have to change my religion. Though it was not very difficult and I am not forced to keep Kosher at home. But it is my choice, and in my choice there is no room for state intervention and Asael's relatives'. It harms your free choice.

A third example of this gendered pressure to convert can be found in the story of Christina. Christina was brought to Israel from Russia at the age of 13. Her Jewish father and Christian mother returned to their homeland, and Christina was raised by her grandmother who immigrated with her from Russia. Christina met Benny when she was 16 years old and he was 25. After seeing each other for a year they began to live together. Although she is not religious, Christina wanted to convert, because "if you chose to live here you need to live by the laws of this country." However, she did not want to go through the long and demanding conversion course. Benny tried to find ways to get Christina converted more easily, but failed. Meanwhile, he refused to marry Christina, because marrying a non-Jew went against his religious beliefs. Benny's opinion did not change even after Christina gave birth to their son and daughter. When I met her a year after the interview she was holding her recently born third child. She told me happily that she had managed to convert and that she and Benny had recently got

married. In this case, Christina's conversion was, among other things, a condition for marriage posited by her spouse.

The stories of Michelle, Sonali, and Christina include male family members who pressured these non-Jewish women to convert. In two of the cases the father of the Israeli spouse felt a strong affinity to the Jewish religion, and in the third case it was the spouse himself who considered himself a traditional Jew who believed in God. In contrast, in the two cases in which the non-Jewish women were not pressured to convert, both their spouse and his family were only weakly connected to the Jewish religion. Nonetheless, some of the interviewees argued that the gendered pressure to convert is not limited to religious social circles. Anthony, who had never felt socially pressured to convert, said:

Every woman I know who came to Israel and was not Jewish and had a relationship with an Israeli guy, eventually converted or they left the country because of the demand to convert. This is a critical point. I think no one arrives here with the notion that this will be the demand, but at a certain stage [because of] pressure from friends, or pressure from the family or broader social pressure, it is eventually demanded.

The gendered dimensions of the pressure to convert are clearer when the pressure put on women is compared to the pressure put, if it is put, on men. As mentioned above, not one of the seven non-Jewish male immigrants I interviewed reported significant pressure to convert. The only two who reported any pressure at all were Yorchan and Don. Yorchan came to Israel from Holland as part of a student exchange program. After a while he met Yael and was introduced to her family. Yael's mother decided to conceal the fact that Yorchan was not Jewish from Yael's religious grandmother. But, as Yorchan says, "The grandmother is old but not stupid." She quickly figured out that her granddaughter's blond, blue-eyed, non-Hebrew-speaking spouse was not Jewish, and applied pressure on Yael to make Yorchan convert. In order to placate Yael's grandmother and other family members, Yorchan and Yael started to look into conversion. Yorchan approached a conversion institute and had a long talk with one of its representatives. During this talk he admitted that he was only interested in converting for practical reasons and that he did not believe that conversion would turn him into a Jew. To his surprise, the conversion institute's representative, who Yorchan thought would pressure him to convert, responded by saying that in that case he should not convert—because he had no intention of being an observant Jew, his conversion would therefore be hypocrisy.¹¹ This meeting ended the conversion chapter in Yorchan's life: "On the spot I decided that I cannot do it. And that's it, it was never brought up again. I never thought about it again."

Don was the second man pressured to convert. His conversion was also jeopardized by the authorities, but in a different way. Don claims that he never wanted to convert to Judaism: "I wasn't really into this religious thing." He also believes that conversion should "come from your heart." Though Don argues that he never felt pressured to convert by Tuva, his spouse, or her family, Tuva claims that she did want him to convert because of her traditional background. However, when they looked into the matter, they realized that it was a long and demanding procedure. At the same time, Don and Tuva were preoccupied with the difficult procedure required for Don's citizenship: Don was an illegal migrant who had entered Israel as a member of a missionary delegation from Nigeria and stayed with no official permission. In order for him to be granted citizenship he had to go through a five-year procedure of state scrutiny in which he had to prove that his marriage to Tuva was lasting and genuine. Tuva told Don to leave the conversion issue aside, believing that after he got citizenship he would convert. However, when Don was finally given citizenship, they were so "mentally tired" that she relinquished the option of his conversion.

In both Yorchan's and Don's cases, the family pressure to convert was weaker than the pressure put on Michelle, Sonali, and Christina and collapsed in the face of the obstacles placed by the authorities.

The Reasons for the Gendered Pressure to Convert

Why are non-Jewish women immigrants exposed to greater pressure to convert than non-Jewish men who immigrate to Israel? The answer starts with the Jewish Orthodox religious rule determining who is a Jew, and ends with the social and legal embracement of this religious rule.

Yoel, who feels uncomfortable due to the pressure he put on Michelle to convert, excused his insistence by saying that his father was deeply offended by the possibility that he would marry a non-Jew. More than that, however, he admits that he himself had an independent wish that she would convert, because he wanted his children to be Jewish. Indeed, the Jewish Orthodox religious rule according to which a newborn is Jewish only if s/he was born to a Jewish mother paints the pressure to convert in its gendered colors. This rule was inspired by Ezra the Scribe, who came to the land of Israel in around 458 BC. Ezra was alarmed by the wide spread of interreligious marriages, and so he called a general assembly of the people that decreed that they were forbidden and that all foreign women and their children should be expelled. This decision was interpreted as ruling that a child's Jewish identity is determined by his or her mother. This interpretation went against the widespread norm of patriarchal dynasty, and significantly

deterred Jewish men from entering into interreligious marriages (Cornaldi 2001; Friedman 2002; Triger 2007).¹²

Yoel was not the only interviewee to have been influenced by a rule that was determined in ancient times. For example, Almog, who married James after he came to Israel from Ghana, is not concerned that he is and will remain Christian, because “the child is Jewish, nothing else matters to me.” Likewise, Rachel is happy she did not have to discuss the option of conversion with Naveen, who came from a British-based Indian family, because “the difficulty with a non-Jewish mother is the Jewishness of the children . . . in our case you can say the mother is Jewish so the children are Jewish.” Likewise, Yorchan, who decided not to convert, believes that if he had been a woman, things might have turned out differently. As he bluntly put it: “For a gentile woman in this country it is more problematic since this is a disease that is transferred to the children.” Indeed, Michelle summarized the connection between her conversion and the religious rules by saying that:

If I was a man it would have been totally different, because then you do not have the whole issue that everything comes from the woman. It complicates things. Maybe if I was a man I would not have gone through this whole process.

These statements are expressions of the adoption of the ancient religious rule determining who is a Jew, as well as of the common disregard, apparently due to ignorance, of religious rules that might also influence children of a Jewish mother and a non-Jewish father.¹³ It seems that at least the secular Israeli population believes that the Jewishness of the mother solves all religious complications related to the children, and it becomes clear that the Jewishness of the children is at the heart of the gendered pressure put on non-Jewish women to convert.

We are still left with the question as to why most of the interviewees feel that it is important that their children be considered Jewish. Indeed, we cannot understand the gendered pressure to convert without answering this question. The interviewees themselves offered three interrelated explanations. First, the children would feel more accepted within their social environment and would face fewer difficulties if they were Jewish. Norly, for example, wanted her children to be Jewish to save them the treatment she received as a Filipino teenager in an Israeli school in which she felt like “a stranger.” She wanted a “real family,” “so that my children will be treated well in school and the community, because here if you are not like everybody then you do not belong to the group.”

Almog makes another argument stating that non-Jewish mothers should convert for the sake of their children. She says that her mother converted to Judaism so that her daughters would be able to marry

Jews in Israel, and that this is also the reason why it is important for her that her own daughter be recognized as Jewish, though she is married to a Christian. This argument relates to the fact that the Israeli legal system allows only religious marriages in Israel (Shifman 1995). As we saw above, ever since the time of Ezra the Scribe, Jewish law, and thus the Jewish Orthodox Rabbinate in Israel, has prohibited interreligious marriages. Since marriages in Israel are subordinated to Orthodox religious law, interreligious marriages conducted in Israel are not legally recognized (Triger 2007). This legal regime explains the motivation of Almog and her mother to secure their children's Jewishness that will give them the option of fulfilling their most socially likely marriage option—namely, marrying a Jew in Israel. And so the monopoly over marriage granted by the state to Orthodox Judaism is yet another component of the pressure applied to non-Jewish women to convert.¹⁴

As can be seen, the welfare of their children, which motivates and pressures women to convert to Judaism, is not rooted in an intrinsic and essential quality of the Jewish Orthodox religion as perceived by the interviewees, but rather in the social and legal reality of the Jewish majority in Israel that is intolerant to non-Jews, as expressed by the Jewish children's treatment of "foreigners" and by the prohibition of interreligious marriages. This intolerance is not only religious but also national, and is related to the third explanation mentioned by some of the interviewees for the pressure placed on women to convert. Anthony argued that:

The ideology that there should be more Jews here, more Jewish children, maybe it is a secret to some people, but to me it is very clear . . . this policy combines several elements that are not new, but this is the idea, and if Judaism is determined by the mother then the crucial point is the mother, not the father. The father is just an instrument, in every sense of the word.

The policy Anthony refers to is the one aimed at securing Israel as the homeland of the Jews. This ambition is at the heart of the Zionist movement, the national expression of Judaism. Much has been written about the attempts of the Zionist movement to distinguish itself from the Jewish religion on the one hand, and its de facto reliance on the Orthodox religious components of Judaism for the legitimacy and uniformity of the Jewish national identity on the other (for examples focusing on the gendered implications of this ambivalence, see Triger 2005; Boaz 2002; Berkovitch 1999). The study reported here demonstrates one manifestation of the interrelation between Judaism as a religion and Judaism as a nationality. The desire among some of the male Israeli spouses, including some who are not religious, that their partner should convert is rooted in the motivation of the Jewish national collective

to secure its existence, and to do so within the borders of Israel. In that sense, women's conversion to Judaism is not only for the sake of their children themselves but also for the sake of the Jewish family and the broader Jewish collective, whose national future is believed to be dependent on the Jewishness of its children.

Two out of the three explanations for the gendered pressure to convert provided by the interviewees also affect the kind of conversion women are channeled toward in Israel. All the female converted interviewees underwent an Orthodox conversion. Michelle states that at the time, she was the one to insist on an Orthodox conversion because, as she puts it:

[I]n this screwed-up country, Conservative conversion does not count, so if you convert then do a real conversion. The whole idea is to give the children a true Jewish status here.

Michelle's claim, as well as the fact that most converting women in Israel undergo Orthodox conversion,¹⁵ should be understood in light of the ongoing debate in Israel over "who is a Jew" and "who is a converted Jew" (Lifshitz and Sapir 2006). The question at the center of this debate is whether to recognize Reform and Conservative definitions of a Jew and Reform and Conservative conversions, or only the Orthodox definition and conversion (Maoz 1997; Shachar 2000; Corinaldi 2001). In fact, accepting the Reform definition of a Jew might have made the non-Jewish spouse's conversion unnecessary, as some parts of this stream of Judaism recognize children born to Jewish fathers as Jews (Maoz 1971: 22–27).¹⁶ As we shall see, Israeli civil law adopts the Orthodox definition and does not recognize a child as Jewish unless s/he was born to a Jewish mother.

As for conversion, at the time when Michelle underwent hers, Orthodox conversions were indeed the only kind recognized by Israeli law. However, in the last 25 years, the Israeli Supreme Court has recognized Reform and Conservative conversions conducted abroad and ordered the authorities to register the converts as Jews in the population registry.¹⁷ Moreover, in 2002, the Supreme Court ruled that the registration clerk must also register as Jews those who were converted by the Reform and Conservative communities in Israel. However, the Supreme Court emphasized that this registration is only statistical and not substantial—that is, it is not evidence for the validity of the conversion for any other purpose.¹⁸ The nonrecognition of the Jewishness of the mother and her future children when she converted through a non-Orthodox conversion has substantial ramifications on her and her children's ability to marry a Jew in Israel. This is so because Israeli law recognizes religious marriages of Jews—that are, as mentioned above the only recognized marriages in Israel—only if they are recognized by

the Orthodox Rabbinate.¹⁹ Since the Orthodox Rabbinate does not recognize non-Orthodox conversions, those who were converted by the Reform or Conservative movements cannot marry in Israel.

In 2005, the Supreme Court further broadened the recognition of non-Orthodox conversions when it acknowledged the right of Reform and Conservative converted Jews to come to Israel under the Law of Return that, as will be elaborated below, grants automatic citizenship to Jews.²⁰ Still, the Supreme Court has not yet intervened in the state's refusal to recognize those who were converted by the Reform and Conservative movements in Israel as Jews according to the Law of Return.²¹ The legal situation thus narrows the connection between the Jewish religion and Jewish nationality, which was mentioned by the interviewees as one explanation for the gendered pressure to convert, to a connection between the Jewish Orthodox religion and Jewish nationality. Though the Supreme Court has broadened the recognition of non-Orthodox conversions compared to the legal situation that existed when Michelle converted, in present-day Israel only Orthodox conversions grant the convert full legal recognition as Jewish. The fact that even after the rulings of the Supreme Court that allowed the registration of Reform and Conservative converts as Jews, the vast majority of converts choose an Orthodox conversion,²² proves that the recognition of Orthodox conversion as the only "true conversion" is not only legal but social as well.

The legal and social preference of the Orthodox definition of a Jew and Orthodox conversion directs non-Jewish women who want their children to be Jewish to the most strict and patriarchal stream of Judaism and the conversion procedure that it insists upon.²³ The Orthodox conversion in Israel includes about 500 hours of Jewish studies, in which the spouse of the conversion student is also expected to participate. In addition, the converted student must be "adopted" by a religious family that hosts her/him for the Sabbath and Jewish religious holidays. Further, the graduates of the conversion course must face a special Orthodox conversion tribunal that interviews the candidate and approves or denies the conversion (Britberd 2005). The conversion tribunal has to be convinced that the candidate genuinely wants to join the Jewish religion and follow its rules. The conversion includes circumcision for men²⁴ and a "Tvila" (submersion in rain or spring water) for both women and men (Finkelstein 1993; Tor-Paz et al. 2004; Britberd 2005). Most of the interviewees related to the Orthodox conversion process as very demanding, claiming that it is hard to follow it and still be able to work for pay or care for children. As we saw, in some of the cases of the female non-Jews, efforts were made to get permission for shorter procedures. In the case of non-Jewish men, these difficulties were another deterrent that weakened their motivation, and that of their spouses, to undergo the conversion procedure.

The story of Norly, to which we now turn, brings our attention to those women who wish to undergo Orthodox conversion not because of social and familial pressure exerted on them in the name of their future children's interest, but in order to find refuge in Israel for themselves and for their children. This story deepens the discussion of the connection between conversion and gender, religion, and nationality in Israel and points to this connection's economic, racial, and ethnic dimensions.

Conversion and Citizenship

Norly arrived in Israel from the Philippines at the age of 10, with her mother who worked in Israel as a private nurse. At the age of 17 she returned to the Philippines to give birth to a baby girl conceived during a relationship with another Filipino living in Israel. Six years later, she returned to Israel to work as a caretaker for a disabled child. Her daughter remained in the Philippines and was very miserable. It transpired that the thousands of dollars that Norly sent to her family over the years were not spent on her daughter, who was kept in a tiny room in her grandmother's house with very little material and emotional attention. Norly started to look into the option of conversion, with the hope that as a Jew she would be granted citizenship and therefore be allowed to bring her daughter to Israel:

A: All I wanted was to convert and settle in Israel, I did not mind if this would be with or without a man, to marry or to live alone.

Q: Why did you want to convert?

A: Because this was the only way I could bring my daughter Evelyn, because if I would convert I would receive citizenship. With citizenship I could bring my child.

Norly's hope for citizenship through conversion was based on the Law of Return, which grants Jews who come to Israel, including converted Jews, automatic citizenship (Corinaldi 2001). In 2003, the state tried to exclude people who had converted after entering Israel from the rights granted by the Law of Return. The state's argument was that Israel was becoming a desirable destination for non-Jewish immigrants, and that granting them citizenship because they had converted contradicted the public interest. The Supreme Court rejected the state's arguments and interpreted the Law of Return as applying to anyone who converted, either before or after entering Israel.²⁵ Notwithstanding, in 2005, the Supreme Court upheld the practice of the conversion tribunals to refuse conversion requests of illegal aliens.²⁶ This practice recently became official when the Chief Rabbi responsible for the conversion tribunals issued directives stating that a person who is not

an Israeli citizen and does not hold a valid permanent staying permit would be allowed to convert in Israel only under “special circumstances” and with the approval of a special “exceptions committee.”²⁷ Hence, the state is gradually narrowing the possibility of citizenship through conversion, which Norly wished to utilize.

Norly’s attempt to attain citizenship through conversion, that took place before the rules narrowing this option were enacted, soon reached a dead end when her employers refused to allow her to take Fridays off so she could participate in the conversion course: “I was hurt by my employers because after I had worked with their child for 7 years they would not give me one day so I could get a life.” Eventually Norly turned for assistance to Erez, an Israeli man with a legal education. Norly had met Erez four years earlier when he helped a friend of hers to gain citizenship. After a while Erez asked Norly to marry him, and she agreed:

We did not have great love between us . . . but it worked well, he needed someone socially, and I needed someone who would support me, and he supported me all the way since I left my job.

Here Norly is referring to the support in her struggle to attain Israeli citizenship for herself and her daughter. Indeed, Erez helped Norly with the formalities in bringing her daughter from the Philippines and later on adopted that child. After Norly realized she was pregnant with Erez’s child, they got married in Cyprus in 1999. But Norly’s marriage to Erez, Erez’s adoption of her Filipino child, as well as her giving birth to their Israeli child, did not grant her Israeli citizenship. To secure her status in Israel she had to convert to Judaism, which she, her Filipino daughter, and Israeli son, all did.

Norly’s decision to go through with the conversion process even after she had married Erez can be fully understood only through the legal framework that governs it. The first case that dealt with inter-religious marriages in Israel and reached the Supreme Court was that of Benjamin Shalit, an Israeli Jew who got married in Scotland to a woman whose Scottish father came from an “old Zionist family” and whose French mother came “from a family that is known for its lack of any religious identification.”²⁸ Therefore, according to Jewish law, she was a non-Jew. The couple moved to Israel and had two children. In 1968, Shalit turned to the Supreme Court after the registration clerk, to whom every citizen has to report the birth of a child, refused to register his children as Jews under the nationality rubric (the children were registered as belonging to no religion under the religion rubric).²⁹ In 1970, the court accepted the petition and stated that nationality is a subjective feeling and that the clerk ought to register a person’s nationality according to his or her statement, unless the clerk has a reasonable suspicion that the statement is false.

This decision created a huge political commotion, and the law was immediately amended. The Population Registry Act was changed so that a person was not allowed to be registered as a Jew by nationality if s/he is not recognized as a Jew according to the Law of Return. At the same time, the Law of Return was altered to include a definition of a Jew as a person “who was born to a Jewish mother or converted, and is not a member of another religion.”³⁰ These changes narrowed the definition of a Jew to the religious one and blocked an independent definition of Judaism as a secular national identity (Lahav 1998). And so, when Shalit petitioned the Supreme Court to order the registration clerk to register his third child’s nationality as Jewish, the petition was rejected.³¹ Like Shalit, Norly’s husband, Erez, would have failed to convince the state to recognize his adopted daughter and biological son as Jews, by nationality as well as religion, since they were born to a non-Jewish mother.

The change to the Law of Return affected Norly and her family in another way. In addition to the narrowing of the definition of a Jew in the Law of Return, the law was amended to grant the right to enter and stay in Israel to a Jewish person’s spouse, as well as to the children and grandchildren of Jews and their spouses. For many years the Ministry of the Interior interpreted this change as implying that the benefits received by new Jewish immigrants,³² the most important of which is automatic citizenship, should also be granted to the non-Jewish spouses of Jewish-Israeli citizens (Shachar 2000). Hence, if Norly had married Erez between 1970–1995, she would have been granted automatic citizenship, as was the case, for example, with Yorchan, who married Yael in 1984, and Anthony, who married Dana in 1995.

However, in 1996 the Ministry of the Interior changed its mind and began to interpret the Law of Return as nonapplicable to non-Jewish spouses of Jewish-Israeli citizens. According to the ministry’s new policy, a non-Jewish spouse of an Israeli (Jewish or not), would not receive automatic citizenship and would have to undergo a long and strict process in order to attain it. The Ministry of the Interior explained the new policy as the outcome of a new and widespread phenomenon of fictitious interreligious marriages between Israeli citizens and foreigners.³³ This explanation, as well as the refusal of the state to allow conversion of non-citizens mentioned above, should be understood in light of the profound demographic changes caused by large numbers of migrant workers who came to Israel during the 1990s. In 2000, it was estimated that 240,000 documented and undocumented migrant workers were living in Israel, about 10 percent of the Israeli labor force (Kemp and Reichman 2003). Undocumented migrant workers are perceived as a severe social problem that should be handled first and foremost by deportation (Kemp 2007). Another measure, relevant to interreligious

couples in Israel, is to prevent illegal migrants from acquiring legal status through marrying an Israeli citizen and through conversion.

The new restrictive interpretation of the Law of Return and its effects on the Law of Citizenship were ratified by the Supreme Court. However, it also ruled that the policy established by the Ministry of the Interior, according to which a non-Jewish spouse of a Jew has to wait six years for citizenship, is not reasonable.³⁴ This decision caused the Ministry of the Interior to issue fresh regulations that established a new process by which non-Jewish spouses could request citizenship. A Jewish-Israeli spouse who marries a non-Israeli and non-Jewish spouse must submit a request for citizenship for his/her spouse. If the authorities are convinced that the marriage is not fictitious, the non-Israeli spouse receives a permit to stay and work in Israel. Each year, for the next four years, the non-Israeli spouse has to report to the authorities and convince them that s/he lives in Israel with her/his spouse. Only then will s/he receive Israeli citizenship (Feller 2004; Minister of the Interior, Procedure. 4.4.0004).³⁵

Norly's decision to convert to Judaism thus becomes clearer. Before she met Erez, she realized that conversion was the only way she would be granted citizenship and be able to bring her daughter to Israel. Without an Israeli spouse, her only hope was the option opened up by the Law of Return and the Law of Citizenship that grants citizenship to Jews, including converts. Her employers' refusal to allow her to participate in the conversion course left her with two equally unattractive options: either to stay with her employers and leave her daughter to suffer in the Philippines, or to leave her employers in order to participate in the conversion course, thus becoming an illegal migrant and risking deportation.³⁶ In this context, marrying Erez became an appealing alternative. Marrying an Israeli allowed her both to leave her employers while gaining a new legal status and to bring her daughter to Israel from the Philippines. However, the new Ministry of the Interior policy meant that, for Norly, conversion remained an attractive path to secure Israeli citizenship, even after marrying Erez. Norly preferred the demanding yet relatively short conversion process that would grant her citizenship according to the Law of Return rather than wait four years and be exposed to the scrutiny of the Ministry of the Interior in the process of attaining citizenship through marriage. In addition, and in accordance with the gendered motivations mentioned above, Norly's conversion, together with the conversion of her Israeli and Filipino children, also secured these children's and Norly's future children's Jewish identity.³⁷

Norly refers to the period of her conversion course in very positive terms: "I loved it . . . I was happy during that time." She found the conversion course "very interesting" and enjoyed the hospitality of the

religious “adopting family” and the time she spent in the synagogue, during which she could peacefully pray to God. It seems that the conversion course was a time in Norly’s life during which she felt accepted and embraced by her surroundings. The teacher at the conversion course, the Rabbi at the conversion institute, and the family she met accidentally at a bus station and who agreed to “adopt” her, all gave her recognition for her efforts to become a Jew. However, Norly soon learned that while her Jewishness may grant her citizenship, it does not guarantee social acceptance. She was still bullied by the immigration police in its searches for illegal immigrants in the streets (Kemp 2007), and once she was accused of shoplifting just because of her ethnic look, in particular the shape of her eyes. She relates sadly:

All the conversion effort was for the children, not just for me, because it does not matter if I am Jewish or not—I receive the same treatment here in this country. They only see my eyes, and with my eyes you are no longer considered Jewish.

In contrast to Norly, Michelle and Christina who have a Western appearance, reported no social suspicion that they were not Jewish. Moreover, even Sonali, with her relatively dark skin, said that not everybody questions her Jewishness as they believe she belongs to the Jewish Hindu community that immigrated to Israel. Others ask her if she is Jewish, and she believes that her answer that she converted shields her from their “negative behavior.”

And so, in addition to the dimensions of gender, religion, and nationality, Norly’s story adds considerations of citizenship, economic class, and race to the issue of conversion. The Law of Return is one of the most substantial symbolic and practical manifestations of the definition of Israel as the state of the Jewish people (Corinaldi 2001). The discrimination between Jews and non-Jews in Israeli law—granting automatic citizenship to Jews while subordinating non-Jews to a long procedure and the scrutiny of the Ministry of the Interior—is a powerful mechanism for securing a Jewish majority in Israel (Shachar 2000). This discrimination marks conversion to Judaism as a way of joining the Israeli national collective and constructs it as a ticket to Israeli citizenship. This ticket becomes crucial to the economically disempowered, who yearn for a permit to live in a developed country such as Israel in order to escape the hardships they face in their homeland. However, as more and more economically disempowered immigrants enter Israel in search of employment, the Israeli law reacts by narrowing the option of citizenship through conversion and allowing conversion in Israel only to those who already acquired citizenship or a permanent staying permit. Hence, the fear of migrating workers, who in most cases are

perceived as the ethnic and racial “other” even if converted, is so great that the state is willing for the first time to break the historical legal bond between Judaism and automatic Israeli citizenship.

CONCLUDING DISCUSSION

My decision to interview interreligious spouses was at least partly motivated by my personal desire to hear the stories of couples who have managed to stay together despite the differences between them. Having previously studied divorcees (Hacker 2005), I wanted to be inspired by stories of spouses who have managed to create and sustain a family while bridging cultural, religious, and national differences. In this respect, my desire was fulfilled. I learned about the love, compassion, and care that people from different countries, religions, and cultural backgrounds can share, and about the fruitful negotiations that can help them shape their familial space.³⁸

Nonetheless, the personal and familial stories of interreligious spouses were not disconnected from the conflict-ridden public sphere. This was most bluntly expressed in the accounts related to conversion. It is hard to imagine a more personal and private process than changing one’s religion. However, my findings support the conclusion drawn by others (Rambo 1993; Buckser and Glazier 2003) that conversion is hardly ever a process between the converting person and his or, especially in the Israeli and Jewish context, *her* God(s) alone. As can be learned from the interviewees, the decision whether or not to convert to Judaism in Israel is shaped by the social and legal reality surrounding interreligious couples. In that sense, conversion becomes a prism through which we can critically observe the contradictory trends and conflicting interests characteristic of contemporary Israeli society.

On the one hand, non-Jewish spouses can enter Israel and live with their Jewish spouse without feeling any threatening pressure to convert. After about 4 or 5 years, the non-Jewish spouse can be granted citizenship if s/he so wishes. The phenomenon of interreligious couples and the social and legal tolerance toward it are expressions of the enhancement of liberal, individual, and postnational norms influenced by global changes that open national borders and bring people from different nations, religions, and races together. However, these norms do not replace the local, ethnic, and national norms held by the Jewish majority in Israel (see also Kemp 2007; Ram 1999). As I have shown through the above discussion on conversion and the relationship between conversion and citizenship, these are excluding norms that separate Jews and non-Jews; men and women; Orthodox Jews and Conservative or Reform Jews; citizens and noncitizens; rich and

poor; and “white” non-Jews and “colored” non-Jews. By placing the tales of inter-religious couples in the sociolegal regime in which they are shaped, they appear not only as stories about bridges that overcome differences, but also about walls that divide.

With its ethnorepublican regime (Peled 1993; Kemp 2007) that explicitly combines religion and nationalism, and does not hide behind alleged neutral legal terms, the case of Israel might seem unique. However, the growing anxieties of receiving countries all over the globe regarding the religious, cultural, and ethnic implications of immigration prove that the tension between liberal notions of rights and freedoms on the one hand, and republican notions of nationality, religion, and ethnicity on the other, are a challenge Israel does not face alone. By observing conversion through the eyes of interreligious couples in Israel, I am contributing to the efforts being made to point out the gendered dimensions of these anxieties, as well as the antiessentialist feminist quest of exploring these gendered dimensions through their interplay with other constructed social identities (Van Walsum and Spijkerboer 2007).

Let me end this paper by going back to one of the most famous interreligious marriages in Jewish tradition—namely, that of Ruth the Moabite to Boaz from the tribe of Judah. The ancient story of the widowed Ruth, who insisted on traveling with Naomi, her Jewish mother-in-law, to her homeland, reverberates even to the present day: the Scroll of Ruth is read each year during Shavuot (a Jewish festival); her name is sometimes given to converted women³⁹ and was given to an NGO that assisted interreligious couples; her story was referred to by one of the interviewees, as cited above; and recently mentioned in a newspaper article criticizing the Israeli Orthodox conversion authorities for the difficulties they cause those who wish to join the Jewish people (Golan 2007). Indeed, the story of Ruth is often given as an example of what used to be an easy way to join the Jewish people. Allegedly, all Ruth needed to say to Naomi in order to become Jewish was, “Thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God.”⁴⁰ What a huge difference from the long, demanding, and suspicious procedures conversion candidates undergo in Israel today!

However, we must go on reading the Scroll of Ruth to fully understand the conditions set for joining the Jewish people that existed then. Only by offering herself to a man—Boaz, a relatively wealthy man who was also a relative of Naomi’s—could Ruth guarantee her economic survival and female companionship with Naomi within the Jewish community. This sacrifice is evidence that the separating gendered, racist, and economic sociolegal walls described above are not a modern invention, and that the story of Ruth and some of the immigrating non-Jewish female spouses share a common ground.⁴¹

However, Ruth was not only the victim of a patriarchal and racist legal system that objects to interreligious marriages. She was also an interpreting subject who used the law in a creative manner to achieve her goals and to mobilize herself from being a poor, immigrant Moabite widow to being the founding mother of the dynasty that would lead to the birth of King David (for a detailed feminist and legal analysis of the Scroll of Ruth, see Bilsky 2004). Here again we find similarities between Ruth's story and those told by non-Jewish women who immigrated to Israel not long ago, and who are maneuvering within the religious and civil laws to make a better life for themselves and for their children.

NOTES

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1. During the 1990s about 850,000 immigrants came to Israel from the former Soviet Union; by 2000 they constituted 13 percent of the Israeli population. Of these immigrants, 23 percent are not considered Jewish (<http://www.cbs.gov.il/statistical/immigrants.pdf>). (Hebrew) (All internet sites were last viewed during January 2009.)
 2. A third group of interreligious families, which will not be discussed here, is of an Israeli-Palestinian and an Israeli or an immigrating spouse that do not share the same religion. This group also faces substantial social and legal difficulties. See, for example, Algazi (2007).
 3. The Declaration of the Establishment of the State of Israel, May 14, 1948. For an English translation, see http://www.knesset.gov.il/docs/eng/megilat_eng.htm
 4. Letter to the author from the Ministry of the Interior, March 22, 2007.
 5. According to the letter from the Ministry of the Interior to the author dated March 22, 2007, about 17 percent of requests are from residents of the occupied territories and Arab countries who are most likely the spouses of Muslim or Christian Israelis.
 6. Letter to the author from the Rabbinical Courts Manager, September 27, 2006. See also Rozen 2007. As will be elaborated below, the number of non-Orthodox conversions in Israel is very low and cannot change the statistical gendered pictures described above. See note 15.
 7. Many of the Ethiopian immigrants are not recognized as Jews by the Israeli orthodox Rabbinate (Corinaldi 2001, chaps. 11 and 12).

8. The term “interreligious families” is used here to include cases in which one of the spouses converted to his/her spouse’s religion.
9. The interviews were carried out during 2005–2006. All couples were recruited through the snowball technique, with the exception of one couple, whom I approached in a public playground. In all the couples but one, the Israeli spouse was Jewish and the migrating spouse was not Jewish or had converted to Judaism. One couple comprised of an Israeli-Palestinian Muslim man and a Jewish woman who had immigrated from Belgium. The interviews were recorded and transcribed. Three were conducted in English and the rest in Hebrew. All the names and some other identifying characteristics of the interviewees are concealed to protect their privacy.
10. Interestingly, the seventh immigrating woman I interviewed, who joined her Israeli-Palestinian Muslim spouse, was the only Jew in my study who mentioned the option of considering conversion to the non-Jewish spouse’s religion.
11. Yorchan’s case corresponds with what is detailed in an information booklet on conversion published by the Israeli government (Tor-Paz et al. 2004). The booklet states that the conversion process includes an interview with a representative of the conversion tribunal. The following is stated during the interview: “Falling in love with a Jewish spouse is a legitimate cause for the preliminary motivation to get close to Judaism, but the representative will expect to hear other reasons and to make sure that after the beginning of the study of Judaism, you would have chosen it for itself, even if the connection with the Jewish friend had ended” (p. 11). The conversion tribunal expects the convert to adopt a traditional way of life, including the study of the Torah, praying, and the preservation of Kosher food (p. 20). See also Bass (2007).
12. The religious sources do not provide an explanation for the move from the patriarchal norm to the matriarchal rule. The speculations regarding this uncommon shift include the argument about the stronger bond between a child and his/her mother and hence the importance of the mother’s religious and cultural origin; the fact that there is never a doubt about who is the child’s mother (unlike the uncertainty of the father’s identity); and a possible motivation to use this rule to cope with births that were the outcome of rape of Jewish women by foreign men (Maoz 1989).
13. I was also ignorant of the fact that a daughter of a non-Jewish father and a Jewish mother is not allowed to marry a Cohen (Bass 2008).
14. The fact that today one can overcome the legal demand of religious marriage, among other ways by having a civil marriage abroad, see H.C. 143/62 *Fonk Slezinger vs. Ministry of the Interior*, P.D. 17, 225 (1963); CA 8256/99 *Roe vs. Doe*, P.D. 48(2), 213 (2003); and living in cohabitation (Lifshitz 2005), lead to the assumption that the motivation to secure the children’s ability to be married according to Jewish religious law is embedded in a deep social perception of the legitimate way of marrying and living as a couple.
15. For example, in 2003–2004, the Reform Movement in Israel conducted only 150 conversions and the Conservative Movement only



- 130 conversions. See petition in H.C. 5336/03 *The Religious Action Center vs. Ministry of Welfare*.
16. The Israeli Reform movement requires that a child of a Jewish father and non-Jewish mother be converted, though it might allow a shorter conversion procedure (<http://www.reform.org.il/Heb/Services/Giur/Court.asp>) (Hebrew).
 17. H.C. 230/86 *Miller vs. Ministry of the Interior*, P.D. 40(4) 436 (1986); H.C. 264/87 *The Religious Sepharadi Movement vs. Minister of the Interior*, P.D. 43(2) 723 (1989); H.C. 1031/93 *Pessaro (Goldstein) vs. Minister of the Interior*, P.D. 49(4) 661 (1995); H.C. 2597/99 *Rodriguez-Tosbaim vs. Minister of the Interior*, P. D. 59(6) 721 (2005).
 18. H.C. 5070/95 *Naamat vs. Minister of the Interior* (Unpublished, 20.2.2002).
 19. Rabbinical Courts Jurisdiction (Marriage and Divorce) Law, 5713–1953.
 20. H.C. 2597/99 *Rodriguez-Tosbaim vs. Minister of the Interior*, supra note 17.
 21. These days, there are petitions pending in the Supreme Court arguing for the recognition of those who are converted by the Reform and Conservative movements in Israel as Jews according to the Law of Return. Moreover, the Ministry of the Interior does not accept the Supreme Court recognition of non-Orthodox conversion that was already achieved and is working on new guidelines related to conversion.
 22. Supra note 15. Since, unlike the Orthodox conversion tribunals, the Reform and Conservative movements are not state organs, their conversion certificates are recognized as valid for the change of one's religion in the population registry only if approved first by a district court.
 23. Rabbi David Bass, who is a judge in a Conversion Tribunal, claims in a conversation we held that the Israeli Conversion Tribunals are less strict than some Orthodox communities abroad: in Argentina a Rabbinate order prohibited conversion all together and in France conversion takes up to six years. Interestingly, in Israel there is a special and less strict Orthodox conversion procedure available only to soldiers (Amikam 2005).
 24. The demand for circumcision might be another reason why men are less willing to consider conversion. If the man is already circumcised, as was the case with Julio, then he has to undergo the relatively easier procedure of drawing blood from the penis (*Hatafat Dam Brit*). For more details on circumcision and the conversion procedure in general in Israel, see <http://www.itim.org.il/?CategoryID=208&ArticleID=547&Page=1> (Hebrew).
 25. H.C. 2597/99 *Rodriguez-Tosbaim vs. Minister of the Interior*, supra note 17.
 26. H.C. 552/04 *Gozman vs. The State of Israel* (Unpublished, 3.7.2005). In this case, a Ukrainian woman married an Israeli in Ukraine, came to Israel as a tourist, and started the procedure for citizenship. A year later the couple separated and the husband notified the Ministry of the Interior that he was about to divorce his wife and that the state should not issue her any staying permit. The woman then approached the conversion tribunal and was refused access because she did not hold a valid staying permit.

27. Rules of Decisions in Conversion Request, *Yalkut Hapirsumim* 5500, February 27, 2006, article 4.
28. H.C. 58/68 *Shalit vs. Minister of the Interior*, P.D. 23(2), 477, 504 (1970).
29. The minister of the Interior does not include “Israeli” in his list of nationalities. Petitions arguing that an old Supreme Court decision that legitimized this practice should be overruled have not yet succeeded. (http://www.faz.co.il/story?id=3615&force_skin=print0).
30. Law of Return (Amendment no. 2), 5730–1970, article 4B. On the implications of the amendment to the law, see Maoz (2000).
31. H.C. 18/72 *Shalit vs. Minister of the Interior*, P.D. 26(1) 334 (1972).
32. On some of the current benefits received by new Jewish immigrants, see http://www.moia.gov.il/Moia_en/FinancialAssistance/AbsorptionBasket.htm?SearchText
33. H.C. 3648/97 *Stemka vs. Minister of the Interior*, P.D. 53(2) 728 (1999).
34. Stemka, supra note 33. The court also ruled that the demand posed by the Ministry of the Interior—that in cases in which the couple married while the non-Jewish spouse was resident in Israel without legal permission, s/he should leave Israel and be allowed to return only after the sincerity of the marriage can be examined—should be abolished.
35. Since 2003, Israeli law severely limits the ability of Palestinians living in the Occupied Territories and several Arab countries to join their Israeli spouse. This new discriminatory law was harshly criticized by academics (Davidov et al. 2004), and was also attacked in court by human rights activists and organizations. Unfortunately, the scope of this paper does not allow elaboration of this point.
36. According to Israeli law, a migrant worker who leaves the employer who “invited” him/her to Israel loses his legal status (Dahan 2001).
37. On the conversion of children and the dependency of their conversion on the Jewish practices of their parents, see Finkelstein (1993), ch. 5.
38. It is important to note that I am not idealizing interreligious marriages. During my research I heard stories about interreligious couples who divorced or left Israel due to the hardship imposed by their surroundings and encountered cases in which the Israeli spouse took advantage of his relative power and exploited the non-Israeli spouse.
39. See <http://mikranet.cet.ac.il/pages/item.asp?item=3246> (Hebrew).
40. Ruth, 1:16.
41. For a fascinating reading of the Scroll of Ruth as part of a symbolic politics of immigration, see Honig 1997.

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