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Gender, Power and Conversion in the Everyday Lives of New Jewish Women in the Netherlands

Lieke L. Schrijvers¹

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Abstract

This article analyses the experiences of Dutch women who became Jewish via a *giyur* process. While the past decade has seen an increased interest in the ethnographic study of women's conversion, little is known about the process of *giyur* from a gender and everyday perspective, which is what this article focuses on. This is based on ethnographic research and interviews with 20 (Orthodox and non-Orthodox) converts. The main focus of this article is on the negotiations of gender and power in the process of *giyur*. The role of gender difference seemed to be one of the most important experienced differences between Orthodox and Liberal/Progressive forms of Jewish life. Not only is there an impact in the decision to join one or another community, but notions of gender and sexuality also influence the whole process of *giyur*, from first attraction to continued learning, implementation, and practicing of a "Jewish life." Women have to deal with the power of the rabbinic court, who eventually can decide whether a candidate is allowed to become Jewish. However, questions of authority and individual choice played a role in different gendered areas as well: the position of women in the synagogue, reflections on the impact of relationships and the implementation of certain commandments in their everyday lives. Analysing these dynamics offers insight into the intersections of gender, power and conversion, as well as the role of gender in contemporary Jewry.

Keywords Judaism · Gender · Conversion · Lived religion · The Netherlands

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Introduction

Becoming Jewish is not because you want to philosophize about who God is, and all of that. The Orthodox don't care about that. What matters is that you're willing to live Orthodox, to *live* Jewish. (Channah, Orthodox Jewish)

[Becoming Jewish] is a gradual process and it concerns so many aspects. There is the love for the language, a fascination with Israel... but that does not even mean you should become Jewish straight away. It's just very complicated. (Deborah, Liberal Jewish)

Channah and Deborah are two Dutch women who became Jewish via a conversion trajectory called *giyur*. The process to become Jewish, to cite Deborah, is very complicated indeed. However, little is known about this process from an everyday perspective, let alone with a particular focus on gender. The past decade has seen a rise of ethnographic studies of women's conversion, especially in the context of Islam (e.g. Galonnier 2015; Ter Laan 2021; Vroon-Najem and Moors 2021). Gender and Judaism is at times discussed in the context of feminist theology and social movements (e.g. Fuchs 2018; Raphael 2019; Ross 2004). However, ethnographic research into female converts in Judaism is less common (e.g. Czimbalmos 2021). Existing studies usually do not analyze *giyur* experiences from a gender perspective; they mainly focus on the context of Israel (Egorova 2015; Kravel-Tovi 2017) or Germany (Rau 2023; Steiner 2016); or focus on "secular Jews" who become Orthodox, which can be called a "conversion" but is usually not a *giyur* (Davidman 1991; Mock-Degen 2009). The lack of in-depth research into gender and *giyur* is surprising, especially because the importance of research into the intersections of religion and gender is increasingly recognized. To further the understanding of women's conversion processes as well as the role of gender in contemporary Jewry, this article analyzes the experiences of Jewish women in the Netherlands who did *giyur*: the formal process of becoming Jewish (according to Halacha) for those not born to a Jewish mother.¹

The process of becoming Jewish is impacted by gender in different ways. The question of gender seemed to be one of the most important experienced differences between Orthodox and non-Orthodox forms of Jewish life. In general, Orthodoxy was considered to be more "traditional," "authentic" or "conservative" (in the view of non-Orthodox Jews) with regard to gender roles, whilst Liberal Judaism was labelled as "progressive" or, by some Orthodox women, "less authentic." However, my research shows that these labels are flexible and context bound and I aim to deconstruct such normative binary schemes. Moreover, all processes of *giyur* are impacted by gender, not only in the decision to join one or another community. Notions of gender and sexuality also influence the whole process of conversion, from

¹ There are only a few publications about *giyur* in the Netherlands. Most notable are the non-academic book by rabbi Hannah Nathans (2021), *Joods worden in Nederland*; and the autobiography *Just Jew It* by Suzanne van Bokhoven (2009, see also Van den Brandt 2021). Minny Mock-Degen (2009) wrote a doctorate thesis about Dutch Jewish women "returning" to Judaism, also called *ba'lat teshuvah*.

first attraction to continued learning, implementation, and the living and “doing” (Avishai 2008) of Jewish lives. In all instances, women experienced a balancing act between on the one hand fulfilling inner desires and individual choices, and on the other hand conforming to certain authority structures in place. The main focus of this article is on these negotiations of gender and power in the process of *giyur*. A particular point of interest in the case studies that follow is their ability to reflect upon the tension between notions of authority and autonomy: Who decides who is authentically Jewish, and how do women negotiate such questions? What steps do women take to feel and perform ‘authentic’ Jewishness in relation to different bodies of power? How do they reflect on notions such as submission and commandments, and how do they talk about the influence of others? In what follows, I first provide further information about the case study. Second, I focus on the process of *giyur* and the power dynamics involved. The subsequent three sections each highlight an area of negotiation amongst my interlocutors: gender discourses in the synagogue, women’s role in the household, and the implementation of certain commandments in their everyday lives.

Dutch Jewry and Conversion

This article is based on a qualitative, ethnographic study of women who became Jewish, which was part of my PhD research about gender and religion in women’s conversions in Judaism, Christianity and Islam (Schrijvers 2022). Jewish conversion has been most studied in the context of the USA, for example in the seminal work by Lynn Davidman (1991). In Israel, conversion becomes entangled with questions of the state, as described by Michal Kravel-Tovi (2017). In Germany, Jewish conversion can be connected to questions of guilt and Nazism (Rau 2023; Steiner 2016). In still other contexts, conversion can take the form of reclaiming tradition, for example for the Indo-Burmese community Bnei Menashe who claim the descent from the Lost Tribes of Israel (Egorova 2015). This article and research should therefore be considered within the specific Dutch context and history, as each context shapes the process of conversion differently.

The Netherlands has a small yet thriving Jewish community that is mainly based in Amsterdam.² The nation-state is widely considered to be secularized (Arab 2018; Lauwers 2022). Furthermore, the process of secularization went hand-in-hand with the ideals of a “sexual revolution”: Secular feminist movements adopted the idea that to be “liberated,” one had to leave religion behind (Beekers and Schrijvers 2020; Mepschen et al. 2020). This assumed connection between gender oppression and religion continues to shape public perceptions of religion. Whilst Christian churches initially were considered the main source of oppression, the attention

² It is estimated that there are around 52,000 Jewish people in the Netherlands, or 0.3% of the Dutch population (Van Solinge and Van Praag 2010). This estimate includes anyone with at least one Jewish parent. The number of halachic Jews, meaning those born to a Jewish mother or with a recognised *giyur*, is estimated at around 30,000 (De Vries 2004).

today has shifted to Muslims (Sunier 2010). The comparative analysis within my research confirmed that Muslim women had the most prejudice to deal with in their conversion trajectory. Even though antisemitism continues to impact Dutch Jewry (Ensel and Gans 2016; Vellenga 2018), Judaism is less discussed in public debates. However, the study showed that new Jewish women often encounter stereotypes similar to Muslim converts, which figure around the idea that women give up their agency when they decide to convert. In this light, it can be understood why so many interlocutors emphasized their individual choice in conversion—which I touch upon later in this article: Women who become religious are often perceived as being less “emancipated” than others, underpinned by a strong secularist narrative. In other words, Dutch media tend to construct a religion/secular binary on the basis of supposed gender difference, respectively, conservative/progressive or oppressive/liberating (Van den Brandt et al. 2023). Women who, through conversion, challenge this religion/secular binary, simultaneously challenge these other connotations. This broader dominant discourse shaped, to some extent, the experiences of women in all the three groups I studied.

Specific for the Jewish group, as compared with Muslim or Christian converts, is the generational trauma of the Shoah, which left a deep impact on Dutch Jewry, and in which 75% of the Jewish population was murdered: 104,000 of the 140,000 Jews did not survive, which is the largest percentage and highest number of victims in Europe (Ensel and Gans 2016; De Haan 2010). This left many synagogues empty, and what was left of Jewish religious and cultural life became focused in Amsterdam. Furthermore, many historians have noted how the threat and shame of being Jewish became internalized after the war—referred to as ‘Jewish self-hate’—and led many Jews to disguise their Jewish identity (De Haan 2010; Smelik 2004). As a result, the Jewish community in the Netherlands became very small and marginal. Many synagogues were closed, whilst others only had attendee numbers in the tens or hundreds (ten being the minimum number needed to hold a service). Each community responded in its own way to the immense trauma of the Shoah and their desire to rebuild the community. Whereas some groups deemed it necessary to include people with only a Jewish father to ensure the continuation of the community, others saw the arrival of those without a Jewish mother as threatening to dilute “true” Jewish identity (Michman 1999). However, the Jewish community has seen a steady growth since its near annihilation. One reason for the growth of the population is that more people discover their previously hidden Jewish ancestry and seek to explore and renew this bond of kinship. About one-third of my research participants had such a formerly unknown Jewish family relationship through a grandparent or, in two cases, a father. Another reason might be an increase in the number of converts without any kinship relations with Judaism.

Research Setting

The continuation and resilience of the Dutch Jewish community can partly be explained by an innate suspicion towards newcomers and a clear management of group boundaries, which was experienced by many of the women who wished to

join a Jewish community, Orthodox communities in particular. At the same time, whilst there are no absolute numbers available about the number of converts, my conversations with rabbis and other members gave the impression that the interest in *giyur* is increasing, the number of converts being slightly higher in Liberal and Progressive communities.³ There are newcomers in all Jewish denominations, and for this research I interviewed new Jewish women from three different types of communities: Orthodox communities connected to the *Nederlands Israelisch Kerkgenootschap* (NIK, “Orthodox” going forward); the non-Orthodox *Liberaal Joodse Gemeente* (LJG or “Liberal”); and other independent progressive Jewish communities (“Progressive”). The Orthodox NIK includes 26 congregations, 30 synagogues and around 3700 members.⁴ This includes a wide variety of orthodoxies, including Modern Orthodox and Chassidic Jews (the largest Haredi subgroup in the Netherlands). The group of “strictly” or ultra-Orthodox people is estimated to be around 500 and was not included in the research.⁵ The second largest denomination is the Dutch Union for Progressive Judaism (*Het Verbond*), which encompasses (amongst others) the eight Liberal Jewish Congregations (LJG). The LJG Amsterdam is the largest community, with around 2000 members.⁶ In addition, I undertook fieldwork in different progressive or liberal communities that are not connected to the Dutch Union but function as independent congregations. The two Masorti communities were not part of the study.

The reason to separate the LJG from other progressive groups is due to their different ideas of who is considered “authentically” Jewish, and hence, of conversion. The question of “who is Jewish,” *Mi Jehudi*, is age-old, complicated and part of ongoing discussions between different varieties of Judaism (Cohen and Susser 2009; Ellenson and Gordis 2012; Smelik 2004). This question is also crucial to understanding *giyur* in the different groups in the Netherlands, as it can be answered differently by authorities and individuals. The NIK and LJG follow the dominant halachic interpretations that understand the Jewish status to be given either through matrilineal descent or via a *giyur* approved by a recognized rabbinic court. The independent progressive communities also accept patrilineal Jews as full members. In all groups, access to a *giyur* trajectory is usually easier for people with some Jewish family connection, such as grandparents.⁷ While access to a *giyur* tends to be more difficult overall in Dutch Orthodoxy, patrilineal Jews (also called “father Jews”

³ There are no statistics available as to the number of approved *giyurs*: Conversions to religious traditions are not included in nation-wide census reports and communities themselves often do not register members as either converted to or “born in” a tradition. Moreover, not all converted Jews are considered Jewish by all religious authorities, which is why formal records—even if they were to exist—are inevitably limited.

⁴ As written on the website of the NIK: <https://www.nik.nl/wat-doet-het-nik>, accessed July 5, 2023.

⁵ Besides the small size of the Dutch Chassidic community, fieldwork access is quite difficult in this group and *giyur* is generally discouraged.

⁶ As written on the website of LJG Amsterdam: <https://ljpgamsterdam.nl/over-ons/>, accessed July 5, 2023.

⁷ This resonates with the halachic category of *zera Yisrael*, or “seed of Israel,” which refers to people with demonstrable Jewish descent who do not have the Jewish status: primarily offspring of Jewish fathers and grandfathers (Egorova 2015; Kravel-Tovi 2017). The notion *zera Yisrael* was not explicitly used by my interlocutors.

or *vaderjoden* in Dutch) do have the best chance to be accepted as a candidate in the Orthodox communities. The LJJ explicitly recognises the often profound connection to Judaism of this group and offers the option to have their Jewish status confirmed in a procedure that is somewhat different than a *giyur*. The question of recognition is even more complicated because Orthodox communities usually do not recognize non-Orthodox *giyurs*, whilst the LJJ does recognise Orthodox conversions. This can lead to difficult situations for those with a LJJ certificate wanting to participate in certain Orthodox communities. In turn, the LJJ often does not accept *giyurs* from the independent progressive congregations, but does offer some of their candidates the option to finalize their conversion with an LJJ rabbinate. With the exception of some individual synagogues, people with a non-Jewish spouse are usually not accepted, to avoid mixed marriages.

Methods

From 2017 until 2020, I conducted semi-structured interviews with 20 women with a *giyur*,⁸ expert interviews with five rabbis, informal interviews, and participant observation. The interviews were recorded and transcribed.⁹ The relatively small size of the group is related to the qualitative aim to offer in-depth analyses of Jewish women's everyday practices, rather than a statistical representation of the whole Jewish population. The interlocutors ranged in age from 22 years to 75 years, with an average age of 50 years. The time elapsed since their *giyurs* varied and they became Jewish in different decades, the longest being a 64-year-old woman who did her *giyur* 40 years before we met. Almost all of my interlocutors lived and/or participated in a synagogue in the broad urban area known as the Randstad, with a focus on Amsterdam. A few women had a Jewish family member, but only one participant (the child of a mixed Jewish–Christian couple) recalled having been raised with Jewish customs by her father. Six participants did their *giyur* in an Orthodox community, eight in a LJJ synagogue, and six had converted in an independent Progressive community. Their current levels of religious participation varied, as some women who were initially Orthodox are now active in a Liberal community—the converse also being true. Whilst it is widely known that not all Jews participate in religious rituals in the synagogue, the women I interviewed were all to some extent and in different ways involved with a *shul*¹⁰ and observed Jewish commandments

⁸ All interlocutors described in this article are cisgender women who use female pronouns. There were not many open non-binary people present in the communities I studied. I did interview one genderqueer Jewish person, but their data was not part of the final set because the main set focused on women.

⁹ All data are stored according to the latest privacy and data protection requirements on the research data management service Yoda. Access is closed to everyone but the author, and the data will remain private indefinitely. The metadata are publicly available under <https://doi.org/10.24416/UU01-SYZJPG>.

¹⁰ All interlocutors (Orthodox and Progressive, Ashkenazi and Sephardi) used the Yiddish word *sj Joel* (*shul* in the English spelling). A minority of Sephardic Jews used the term *snoge* (mainly to refer to the large Portuguese synagogue in Amsterdam). In my approach, *shul* refers to a building (the synagogue) and to the community, which is connected to that building but extends beyond the physical space.

in their everyday life. All interlocutors are anonymized by changing their name to a pseudonym and omitting details that might reveal their identity.¹¹ To not harm their anonymity, no details are provided about the interviewed rabbis, and I refer to them with gender neutral pronouns. In addition, I attended several synagogue services and meetings to more fully understand their context. Before continuing the analysis, it is important to note that the motivations to do a *giyur* are left out of this article but are included in the dissertation (Schrijvers 2022). The same counts for a more in-depth discussion of the Dutch context, reflections on the state Israel and experiences with antisemitism.

Becoming Jewish: Rituals and Rabbinic Courts

The meaning of *giyur*, its implications, and how the women concerned reflected upon it, varied enormously. Most agreed that Judaism cannot simply be captured by the word “religion,” and that becoming a Jewish woman encompassed far more than a narrow interpretation of “conversion” can capture, especially if only understood as a shift in religion or belief.¹² At the same time, “if you want to become Jewish, you have to go to a *religious* authority,” as a rabbi told me, who added “that seems so unfair to me.” It is not possible to “become a Jew secularly” (Stratton 2000, p. 9), even though many Jews do not identify with a religious interpretation of Judaism, considering this more an ethno-cultural belonging.¹³ The paradox lies in the fact that the authority to grant someone the formal Jewish status lies with a rabbinical court (*beit din*) and is not a matter of self-definition alone (see also Kravel-Tovi 2012). The implication is that the *giyur* process is characterised by a constant negotiation between authority and self-definition in determining the boundaries of “authentic” Judaism.

Those initially accepted as *giyur* candidates (*giyoret*, female or *ger*, male) often take several years of classes or self-study, connected to participation in their (future) synagogue. My interlocutors all experienced their *giyur* as an intense, life-altering, and at times difficult experience. Becoming Jewish, as one rabbi put it, “is not about knowing Judaism, it’s about feeling Jewish,” which connotes a form of identity that

¹¹ Everyone who participated in interviews signed an informed consent form. During participant observation, I always ensured that people were aware of my position as researcher and verbal or written consent was provided by individuals or representatives of a community (for example, when I attended meetings in a synagogue).

¹² The term “conversion” is used in academic discourse but was not the preferred terminology for my interlocutors. They were critical of the Christian connotations of the term and preferred the Hebrew term *giyur* (spelled *gioer* in Dutch). My interlocutors said “*gioer doen*” (“doing *giyur*”), “*uitgekomen als Joods*” (“coming out as Jewish”) or “*Joods worden*” (“becoming Jewish”). The English term “Jews by choice” was not frequently used in Dutch.

¹³ The question of “religious” or “secular” (sociological) conversion is also addressed by Asher Cohen and Bernard Susser (2009), who write about “non-Jewish Jews” in Israel: ex-Soviet people who are not considered Jewish according to Halacha, but are included in Israel’s Law of Return. While the majority of this group had no interest in the formal (“religious”) process of *giyur*, Cohen argues that most did undergo a degree of “sociological conversion” into Jewish society (Cohen and Susser 2009, 64; see also Kravel-Tovi 2012).

is learned as well as embodied. Once a candidate is considered to have studied sufficiently by the main supervising rabbi, a *beit din* of three rabbis of their denomination interview the candidate to determine whether they can join the Jewish people. When approved, the *giyoret* or *ger* enters the *mikvah* under supervision of a rabbi or *mikvah* and is immersed in the water whilst reciting prayers.¹⁴ The immersion in the *mikvah* is a major transition according to Jewish law, as it marks the conversion from “proselyte” to Jew.

Whilst the final ritual of *giyur* is largely the same, the process prior to this is organized differently across denominations. Studies from other national contexts (e.g. Finland: Czimbalmos 2021; Israel: Kravel-Tovi 2017; Germany: Steiner 2016) share an image that *giyur* in Orthodox-oriented communities tends to be more difficult than in reform/liberal communities. This concerns both the initial access to the trajectory and classes (Orthodox rabbis tend to reject those interested more often) as well as the requirements for granting the formal Jewish status. Because Orthodox rabbinic courts usually pay closer attention to the observance of Jewish practice and are more strict in what is deemed a correct practice, Orthodox conversions typically take longer. This image is confirmed by my own research project. In the Netherlands, there is a 2-year *giyur* learning programme in LJG and other Progressive communities. Although there are similar programmes in Orthodox congregations in (amongst others) the USA (Davidman and Greil 1993), such an infrastructure is absent in Dutch Orthodoxy, and those who are permitted to study for *giyur* often do so individually. My interlocutors widely considered *giyur* in this context to be the most strenuous and difficult, deemed almost impossible by some. Another important difference voiced by my interlocutors was that the NIK rabbinate tended to focus on proper observance of the commandments, whilst LJG or progressive rabbis focused more on intent and values. However, the view of Orthodoxy from a non-Orthodox perspective tended to be quite rigid and it was assumed that Orthodox women had less room to find their own form of practice. Importantly, my interviews with Orthodox women themselves refute this stereotype, a point I return to in the second half of this article.

***Giyur*: Status or Identity?**

In the experiences of my interlocutors, two understandings of *giyur* often overlapped. There was the formal process in the synagogue and the recognition of the Jewish status by a *beit din*, and there was the experience of *giyur* as a gradual process of self-making. This resonates with the findings by Ellenson and Gordis, who analyzed nineteenth- and twentieth-century writings by Orthodox rabbis to understand how authorities have “gone about the task of defining the core of Jewishness” (Ellenson and Gordis 2012, p. 2). They make a distinction between “status” as something acquired through law and authorities, and “identity” as referring to

¹⁴ When meeting the *beit din*, women are typically asked whether they are pregnant, because only children conceived after the immersion in the *mikvah* are considered Jewish. In some cases, children under the age of *bar/bat mitsvah* can join their mother in the bath and become Jewish at the same time. In almost all congregations, men are asked to be circumcised prior to these rituals.

self-identification and a sense of belonging. Referencing the Dutch context, a similar distinction was made by rabbi Hannah Nathans who argued that the rabbinic court formally provides a Jewish status to people who already have a Jewish identity or “Jewish soul” (2021, p. 171). Whilst an analytic separation between these dimensions may be useful for understanding the interplay of individual and authority, my research shows that “status” and “identity” often overlap in everyday life. Although not everyone who identifies with Judaism decides to pursue this formal recognition (Cohen and Susser 2009), I focused on women who did.¹⁵ They all expressed a wish to be “fully” or formally Jewish, primarily because of the sense of belonging that came with this inclusion. Moreover, many pointed out that only after a *giyur* were they allowed to join in certain rituals in *shul* (Schrijvers 2020); have a Jewish marriage ceremony; and be buried at a Jewish cemetery. In addition, only children who are considered formally Jewish can attend Jewish schools.

Reflecting formal status, Orthodox Jewish Channah said: “As long as you haven’t entered the *mikvah*, you’re simply not Jewish. Even though you might observe all rules, you just aren’t.” Shoshanna is another woman active in an Orthodox community, but unlike Channah, she has not yet been approved by the court. For her, this means she is in a liminal state of being: “I’m in an in-between state right now. [...] I’m not really not Jewish, but neither am I one hundred per cent Jewish.” Reading both Shoshanna’s and Channah’s words beside one another, I noticed a tension. For some, there certainly is a strict distinction between being and not being Jewish. According to Halacha, there is no space in between (cf. Cohen and Susser 2009). Yet for others, such as Shoshanna, a sort of liminal space is possible, at least in their personal experience. Indeed, most of my interlocutors did not describe *giyur* as a clear change or a breaking point, but rather as a long process of religious and cultural learning without a clear beginning or end. For most, this was a life-altering process, whilst others regarded their official *giyur* more as a confirmation of an already well-established identity. Generally, *giyur* was experienced as more demanding for people without any prior affiliation with Judaism or Jewish life. For this group, spending 2 years in a synagogue was considered the bare minimum: “You have to live it, you can’t just do an online course,” Eva reflected. However, being immersed in a Jewish community and participating in classes is by no means a guarantee that one will ultimately be granted the formal inclusion by the *beit din*.

In the process of preparing for their *giyur*, my interlocutors frequently felt they had to prove themselves, because were expected to do a lot of study without any guarantees of acquiring the formal status in the end. Karen, who is a member of a LJG synagogue, reflected:

Looking back at my process, I don’t have any regrets. But when I was in the middle of all of it, I felt the insecurity. It’s like hanging by a thread and the *beit din* has to decide if you’re good enough or not. That feeling was omnipresent those two years. (Karen)

¹⁵ People who identify as Jewish without (aspiring to obtain) the formal Jewish status (the “non-Jewish Jews” of Cohen and Susser, 2009) were not included in the research. I did not meet anyone who started the trajectory, but was rejected by the rabbinic court in the end. At the time of my research, three women were in the process of *giyur*, of whom two had completed the process at the time of writing.

Karen can now look back on her process with gratitude but remembers the “omnipresent” sense of insecurity whilst in the midst of it. This resonates with the story of Sara, a woman in her 30s who did an Orthodox *giyur*. Sara is the child of a Jewish father and Christian mother and she was raised with Jewish customs.¹⁶ In her 20s, she sought recognition for her Jewishness via *giyur*. Even though she was already active in the community and had been socialized with Jewish practices via her father, she was still discouraged to convert, albeit not outright rejected. Her childhood offered her at least some status recognized by the Orthodox authorities, but not the formal Jewish status she desired. In the period that the rabbinate considered Sara’s *giyur* candidacy, she was closely monitored. She described to me how “they would follow me to the supermarket and check my basket, to see if I was properly *kosher*.” Sara had the feeling she was under constant surveillance:

There were moments when I thought—which was near the end—that I thought “I’m not doing it, I just can’t take it anymore.” It’s also physically just exhausting, because you’re under constant tension, like “who is looking at me now”... [...] But I just really wanted it, and there was no other option for me, than to follow that desire. (Sara)

Whilst Sara sometimes wanted her desire to fade, it did not, and there “was no other option” than to follow it. This is slightly different than the discourses amongst the non-Orthodox women, who emphasised their individual conscious choice. For Sara, it was less of a matter of choice, but rather of inevitability, which I recognized amongst other Orthodox women. Because of the tension she experienced, Sara eventually decided to take a more pragmatic approach, and to do things “for the rabbis,” in her words, to cope. Once her *giyur* was eventually certified, she felt more space to explore her personal preferences within Orthodox Jewish practices. Even though non-Orthodox women also experienced *giyur* as intense, they did not experience the same level of surveillance or suspicion. Sara reflected that part of this suspicion is related to her gender, as she realized that there “is more wariness towards women. I think that’s partly because women, they will pass it [Judaism] on.” The next section explores the role of gender in *giyur* more concretely.

Gender and Giyur: Synagogues, Homes and Commandments

“But I am of Equal Value”: Gender in the Synagogue

Becoming a Jewish woman is characterized by a negotiation of gender norms and discourses.¹⁷ The research outcomes show that for many women, the desire to be “authentic” in their Jewishness—both in the sense of being recognized by the

¹⁶ For a study on this type of “intermarriage” see (Czimbalmos 2021).

¹⁷ Male or non-binary converts were not included in the research. I only received a little information about men’s conversion through participant observation and expert interviews, where it was often suggested that the need for circumcision can be a major hurdle in the process towards *giyur*.

authorities as well as expressing an authentic identity—was related to a performance of “correct” Jewish womanhood. However, the meaning and expression of such Jewish femininity differed (see also Schrijvers 2020). About half of the interlocutors had a view of gender as a “complementary difference” (Scott 2017), which understands men and women to have equal value, but different roles and tasks in life. In such a framework, men and women are considered to be essentially different—on the basis of biological determinism and/or creation—but do have equal value. This discourse was prominent in all congregations, despite the often-heard statement by Liberal or Progressive women that this is a typical “Orthodox thing.” Women who had such a perspective considered equal access to spaces of ritual performance to be important, but they distanced themselves from a mode of equality that sought to eliminate gender difference. Esther, who is a member of an independent progressive community, said: “I have equal value as a man. I won’t say that I’m equal, because a woman is different than a man. But I am of equal value, and I’m treated as such.” In this perspective, gender difference is essentialized, but at the same time, the equal value of both men and women is emphasized. This is not unique to this case study, but has often been described in relation to other religious groups as well, where it is also called an “equity discourse” (in the case of Islam, see Jouili 2011, pp. 51–52; Van Nieuwkerk 2014) or a “complementarity discourse” (in the case of Christianity, see Bowler 2019; Martin 2007). Although beyond the scope of this article, this was one of the common threads in my broader comparative research project about women becoming Jewish, Christian or Muslim in the Netherlands (Schrijvers 2022).

Gender dynamics were often a factor in deciding to pursue an Orthodox, LYG or other Progressive *giyur*, since the position of women was (at least according to my interlocutors) an important difference between these types of Judaism.¹⁸ In Orthodox synagogues, only men perform certain ritual tasks during services (such as reciting part of the Torah), and the group of ten needed to hold services (*minyan*) consists of men only. Orthodox women are not expected to attend services but can do so at their convenience. Men and women tend to sit separately, and in traditional synagogues women spectate from a balcony separated by a *mechitza*. Many Orthodox women saw value in this separation, such as Shoshanna, who valued the traditional separation of men and women as a sign of authentic Judaism:

If, after centuries of segregation during service, you all of a sudden let men and women mix... that’s a step too far for me. [Orthodox Judaism] is respectful, more authentic, and it’s just such a long tradition. I do think it’s good if men and women just get along and mingle after service, but you do need to respect and continue the tradition. (Shoshanna)

My broader research findings show that a similar physical segregation between men and women in the religious building was a concern for some Muslim women (Schrijvers 2022, pp. 173–181). This was not the case for Orthodox Jewish women, who did not object to the *mechitza*. The reason for this absence of critique is probably because there are other options available within Judaism. It is

¹⁸ See Brasz (2016) for a historical overview of Dutch Progressive Judaism.

thus expected that women who would have an issue with that would join a different type of Jewish denomination. Another explanation is that Orthodox women were often active in different ways and did not aspire to perform the ritual tasks that men do. To give an example, that Orthodox women cannot read the Torah during services does not mean that they are absent from the *shul* altogether. On the contrary, across the various denominations, many women take on tasks such as preparing the *kiddush* at the end of service, offering childcare, teaching and organizing events outside of the services.

Conversely, in most Progressive and LYG synagogues, people of all genders can make up the *minyan* and can be called for ritual tasks during services. This change in gender roles was one of the most controversial developments in progressive Judaism in the early twentieth century and continues to be disputed today (Fuchs 2018; Peskowitz and Levitt 1996; Schrijvers 2020). For many interlocutors active in these denominations, gender equality in *shul* was of the utmost importance and often a motivation to join this type of community. However, despite the formal equality, I frequently noticed how this was not necessarily reflected in practice. In some LYG and other Progressive communities, either written into policies or simply part of the common norms of a given community, there was a limit on the roles women can perform:

There are still communities where a woman, for example, wouldn't be called upon to read the Torah ten years ago. They would sit together but there were many things a woman was not allowed to do during service. And that is still the case in some communities. (Bracha)

In my participant observation, I witnessed that whilst women might be officially permitted to carry the Torah scrolls or wear a prayer shawl, they often did not. Similar to Orthodox communities, women took on the majority of care work and teaching responsibilities. Interlocutors in LYG communities often appreciated these roles and considered women to be particularly capable of the emotional labor necessary for parochial work. They often expressed that they would not feel comfortable taking on “men’s tasks,” as several would call it. As such, participating actively did not contradict their notion of gender as “equal but different” and many found great reward in caring for others. A minority was critical towards this gender difference and strived for more equality in the synagogue by, for example, allowing women to wear a *yarmulke* (which is not permitted in the LYG, but is in other Progressive communities); or changing the liturgy to be more gender inclusive. These practices were considered inauthentic by some women, who considered this a “step too far” and “inauthentic” towards Jewish tradition (see also Schrijvers 2020).

Whilst equality and complementarity discourses might appear oppositional, in reality, the distinction was not clear-cut, and many combined aspects from both sides, negotiating their own position on the matter. Rachel, for example, had initially joined a Liberal synagogue, but decided to join Orthodox Judaism with a second *giyur* trajectory. She described how the change in gender dynamics between the LYG and Orthodox groups affected her:

It was quite a challenge at first. Going to an Orthodox synagogue, the position of women is very different, and I was unaware of that. So instead of contributing—even though women were active in their own way—I couldn't do much anymore. You're just upstairs behind a fence, and I really had to get used to that. (Rachel)

Today, Rachel values the separation of men and women, and sees its benefits, such as the opportunity to bond with other women. Her story is but one example of how perceptions of gender norms and roles can change, and how these practices are negotiated by women converts. Joining a different type of Jewish community came with a renegotiation of her position in the synagogue, in which Rachel eventually found a way to be active in a way that did not clash with the overall gender norms. The synagogue is, however, not the only place where gender, power and Judaism intersect. Many interlocutors, in all denominations, located women's most important role in the informal ritual sphere of the family and home.

“The Cement of the Household”: Homes, Motherhood and Marriage

The majority, although not all, of interlocutors reiterated the traditional (and not uniquely Jewish) distinction between men's (public, ritual) and women's (private, family oriented) spaces. Whereas most—especially LJG and Progressive—women sought to participate in *shul* alongside men, all confirmed that the home was primarily their domain and did not question this as much as they questioned the masculine focus of public ritual places. This had an impact on conversion trajectories for women, primarily because women located their role with the family and in the home, whereas men had more requirements in *shul* and with prayers. The segregation of tasks such as these was the most noticeable and explicit expression of the gendered differences between men and women. Sara reflected: “It's common to see the home as the place where women experience Judaism. It's she who is most at home, so she's in charge.” I came across such understandings and evaluations of women as mothers and caregivers across the different denominations. Many women appreciated this view towards the ideal role for women—which has been criticized by Jewish feminist scholars (Fuchs 2018; Plaskow and Ross 2007; see also Avishai 2023, pp. 104–128). Hanneke was in the process of studying for a LJG *giyur* when we met, but lived her life more in line with Orthodox practices. She said:

I see that there is a special role for women within Judaism. The wife is treated with high esteem. [...] In a way, she keeps the family together, she's like the cement of the household. (Hanneke)

Being “the cement of the household” is by no means a small responsibility, and the family and more domestic rituals were regarded as equally important as the more public synagogue. This sense of responsibility related to motherhood was felt by the majority of women in my study, not only among Jewish women. However, the dominant rule of matrilineal descent is unique to the Jewish case.

Naomi is a Jewish woman in her 30s. She is a member of a LJG community, where she finished her *giyur* at the age of 18. Although she was single at the time,

her potential future family life did play a role in pursuing a *giyur*. When I asked her whether she thought that *giyur* was different for men than for women, she replied:

Oh, absolutely, at least for me. If I were a man, I'd never have considered to do it, because it wouldn't have had any implications. But for me, I have a certain kind of responsibility since I will have Jewish children, so I have to think about the steps I take until then. (Naomi)

For Naomi, *giyur* was connected to her responsibility to raise Jewish children, as well as her ability to continue the Jewish matrilineal family line: the “implications” she mentions, which are largely unaffected by a man’s religious status. Overall, the research findings gave the impression that more women than men wish to convert to Judaism, which is similar to the observations of Michal Kravel-Tovi (2017, p. 22) and Nethanel Fisher (2015, pp. 51–51) regarding the Israeli context. This tendency seemed apparent in the Muslim and Christian communities I studied as well (Schrijvers 2022). Scholars gave several reasons as to why there seem to be more female religious converts: religion may offer a social network and support system (Martin 2007), or women are more inclined to join the religion of their male partner than the other way around (Cerchiaro 2022).¹⁹ One additional reason might be that women are overall considered to pass on the tradition to their children, in Judaism symbolically as well as through their body, by giving birth. This complicates the question of marriage and conversion: whilst all women stressed their individual choice in conversion, the relational dimension cannot be denied—something which I focus more on in another publication (Schrijvers 2023, see also Czimbalmos 2020).

Naomi’s story complexifies the stereotype that women primarily convert for a husband. When Naomi met her partner David many years after her *giyur* was finalized, both participated in a LYG community. David was raised with the Jewish customs and in a Jewish family, but his mother did not have the Jewish status. This meant that based on the principle of matrilineal descent, he was formally not considered Jewish. This was not considered a problem for the couple until they decided to get married, because their congregation did not allow a Jewish wedding ceremony (*chuppah*²⁰) for “mixed” couples. Because David and Naomi wished to have such a ceremony, David underwent a “confirmation” procedure to be recognized as Jewish. In this case, Naomi came from a non-Jewish family and undertook a *giyur*, but David (who did come from a Jewish family) eventually acquired the Jewish status to be able to get married. For the couple, this was mainly a technical issue and not a question of identity. This shows that the relationality of conversion is complex and multi-layered, and problematizes the assumption that women primarily convert for a prospective marriage. At the

¹⁹ In studies about interreligious marriages, the relation between gender and conversion is sometimes addressed, and the impression is that more women convert to their partner’s tradition than the other way around. However, these intersections of gender, marriage and conversion are only rarely thematized (cf. Cerchiaro 2022, 5; Collet 2015, 142; Schrijvers 2023).

²⁰ Specifically, *chuppah* refers to the Jewish wedding canopy. However, my interlocutors used the term to mean “Jewish wedding” in more general terms.

same time, significant others and family aspirations played a role as well. Within Orthodox communities, Jewish women's maternal responsibility was seen as one of the reasons why rabbis were hesitant to allow women to convert (see also Kravel-Tovi 2017, p. 75). The fear, I was told, is that if such women become Jewish, but then don't live a *frum* (religiously observant) life, their children will be Jewish, but not raised in an Orthodox way. This makes rabbimates ever more strict with regards to *giyorets*, but since my research did not include male converts, it is difficult to say whether the process is experienced as more strict for women than for men (cf. Czimbalmos 2020; McGinity 2014).

At times, the impact of marriage and motherhood sat uncomfortably with my interlocutors' initial narratives of autonomous choice. The ambivalence is found in this excerpt from an interview with Ruth, who became Jewish in a LYG community after first encountering Judaism via her husband, with whom she had two children:

Ruth: I brought two kids into the world, who are connected to their family, to my family, but also to the family of their father. Their father who is Jewish in all of his family.

Lieke: Yet your children were not officially Jewish when they were born?

R: I do think so, honestly. I think they're Jewish with a Jewish father. [...] I was the first non-Jewish woman in the family... and then to have children. But that family, with all that Jewish input, that interested me. What do they get from it, why do my children have a Jewish look in their eyes every now and then, what's that about? It's in their blood. (Ruth)

Again, a tension exists here between the *halachic* interpretation of Jewish status—according to which her children were not Jewish—and the more performative and experienced notion of Jewishness: as a “look,” or identity, a feeling. Half an hour later, Ruth remarked: “I did [*giyur*] for me, for myself. With the feeling that I had to be able to pass something on to my children, but that was what I wanted. I didn't do it because I had a Jewish family.” When I asked her how that was related to her earlier statement that she wanted to respect her husband's family, she responded: “Well, yes, though it wasn't about respecting them...” before falling silent, searching for an answer:

Hm. Well... It was more out of respect for the blood pumping through the veins of my children. Does that make sense? I didn't do it for other people. I did it for me, although to me this was one of the most important motivations. But most important is that I did it for myself, because you shouldn't do a *giyur* for any other reasons. (Ruth)

All interlocutors strongly held the ideal of autonomous and authentic choice, rejecting the stereotypical view that they only converted “for their husbands.” Yet in reality, a Jewish partner, as well as the wish to pass on the Jewish tradition to their children, were often significant (although not causal) factors in the choices made by the women. In all cases, the gendered negotiation of power balances between a recognition of relationships, and the importance of a narrative of

authentic individual choices. To explore this dynamic further, I will now turn to a few different ways in which my interlocutors implemented Jewish practices in their everyday life. This illustrates not only the relational aspect of *giyur*, but the lived and embodied aspects as well.

“To the Rabbi with Your Panties...”: Commandments in Everyday Life

The third theme to understanding gender and power in *giyur* processes focuses on the way women started to implement Jewish practices in their everyday lives, or, more specifically, began to observe commandments. The way that power played into these decisions varied: Some pointed to the commandments in reference to God, framing their practice as an expression of submission to an external power. Many also anticipated the reactions of the *beit din* and assumed that implementing these foundational Jewish practices early on would make them more acceptable towards this body of power. A third reasoning was that these practices could be implemented without and prior to formal acceptance by the *beit din* and was an important means to developing a sense of embodied Jewishness in their everyday life.

Keeping *kosher* was an important change throughout the day prior to the official permission by the *beit din*. It can be considered one of the more accessible steps towards becoming Jewish, in the sense that it is up to each individual to implement and offers women agency in their self-making process (Avishai 2008; Neriya-Ben Shahar 2019). Information about *kashrut* is also widely accessible both online and in printed form via large encyclopaedia on permitted foods. For Orthodox women, eating completely *kosher* is often a prerequisite to gaining the desired recognition of the rabbinate and often closely monitored. Most LJJ or Progressive (and indeed, some Orthodox) women have their own interpretation of how the *kashrut* should be implemented, of which not eating pork and not eating shrimp were the most common.²¹ Some women chose to follow a vegetarian diet for this reason. Not being raised with a *kosher* diet could be a challenge for the interlocutors, especially those aspiring to follow the *kashrut* more closely. Others found great value in preparing Shabbat meals, although most were unfamiliar with traditional Jewish recipes: Many women who are raised within Jewish families learn, for example, how to prepare *challah*, whilst this was completely new for many interlocutors. Channah told me that only after she moved to an Orthodox Jewish neighbourhood was she really able to live her desired *frum* life, which for her included a strict observance of *kashrut*. A last difficulty for her and other converts came with the principle of *bishul Yisrael*, the (usually Orthodox) prohibition of sharing food with people who do not keep *kosher*, or consuming food prepared by a non-Jew. Whilst other food negotiations might not be unique for converts, this proved to be a challenge for Channah and other Orthodox women because they came from a non-Jewish family and social circle. It also clashed with important ideals of Jewish life, such as the centrality of sharing meals with family. Channah found a solution to this problem, namely, when

²¹ It was generally accepted that food practices should be an expression of *tikkun olam* (healing the world), specifically with regard to an environmental consciousness.

she visits her mother during the summer, she simply “takes over the kitchen,” so she doesn’t have to cook for two weeks! “I have my own pots and pans at my mother’s place.” This way, she found complementarity between her new Jewish status and its implications for her existing social network and family, and this offered a resolution to the potential conflict between these two aspects of her life.

The second practice where gender played an important role is related to the menstrual rites (also called family purity laws) of *niddah*.²² Observing *niddah* is limited to married women (because unmarried women are not supposed to have sexual relations) and was primarily practiced by the Orthodox women in my study. For them, becoming Jewish went hand in hand with a changing perception of their monthly cycle.²³ In general, *niddah* guidelines consider a woman to be “impure” during her menstruation and 7 days after.²⁴ During this time, spouses have no, or limited, physical contact and usually do not sleep in the same bed. This implies a regulation of sex in such a way that intercourse only happens during the (two, on average) weeks a month when a woman is most fertile (Avishai 2008).²⁵ After a woman has had no discharge for 7 days, she is expected to visit a *mikvah* for a ritual cleansing. When women doubt whether they are still bleeding, they can visit a rabbi (or, preferably, rabbanit) to check their underwear. This practice was most difficult for Channah:

The relationship with the rabbi can be that intimate; you’ll even go to the rabbi with your panties to check for blood. [...] I’ve always been quite a private person, you know. [...] And coming from that, to have to go to the rabbi with your panties all of a sudden... is absolutely terrible for me. (Channah)

When I spoke to her, Channah had been divorced and since she was not expected to have sex, she did not adhere to *niddah* anymore and experienced this as a relief from one of the most difficult aspects of being an Orthodox Jewish woman. Sara, in contrast, did not share this feeling of discomfort. She told me that limiting (sexual) contact kept her marriage exciting, with the visit to the *mikvah* creating a form of sensual tension. Whilst she also had to get used to the practice, it enhanced a sacralized status of her sexuality, although she did find ways to negotiate the limits of the *niddah* to fit her own context (e.g. Ner-David 2009). When we met for the first time, she had a 3-month-old child and the rule

²² *Niddah* can refer to menstruation itself, the laws and practices around menstruation, or to a menstruation.

woman. A woman can thus be “a *niddah*,” “in *niddah*,” or “observing the *niddah*” (Ner-David 2009, p. 117; Avishai 2008; Cohen 2009).

²³ I did not speak with any women about this topic who said they do not have a menstrual cycle, being mindful that not all women, and not only women, menstruate.

²⁴ It should be noted that regulation of female sexuality and the coding of menstruation as impure is a worldwide and cross-cultural phenomenon based on the association of femininity with nature, chaos and pollution. This logic is also present in wider (secular and religious) Dutch society, where there is still—albeit often subtle and implicit—a taboo on menstruation.

²⁵ Although the *niddah* directs sexual intercourse towards procreation, many interlocutors pointed out that mutual sexual pleasure was considered important within Jewish teachings as well (specifically, in the Talmudic *onah*). Many women used contraceptives and told me that this is quite common in Orthodox Judaism, despite the stereotypically large families.

not to pass something to her husband appeared untenable when it came to their baby. Not following the strictest interpretation of the touch rules, Sara does pass her baby directly into the arms of her husband when she is having her period. This motivated the couple to reconsider some other aspects of this rule. In her words, Sara and her husband now “treat each other as if we were good friends during those weeks,” meaning they would give a kiss on the cheek or hug, but not have sex and not sleep in the same bed.

The majority of women in LJJ or other progressive synagogues do not observe *niddah*, and many synagogues do not have a *mikvah*. The LJJ *shul* in Amsterdam does have one, but I was told by the rabbis that only a limited number of women use it monthly, one of its other uses being *giyur* rituals. In my fieldwork I did not meet any non-Orthodox women who observed *niddah*, but some of them did have a small ritual cleansing ceremony at home after their menstruation. Thus, for all interlocutors, becoming Jewish did, to varying degrees, entail relating to these prescriptions. The regulation of women’s menstrual cycles when mediated through a religious framework was most unfamiliar for women who grew up in an irreligious environment. Before conversion, menstruation was often considered a mundane week of the month. Now, the menstrual cycle became emphasized, monitored and sacralized. This can lead to discomfort or enhanced spirituality, but in most cases women find their own preferred form of practice.

The third type of practice I highlight for this article relates to modesty. There are not many explicit requirements for women’s dress in LJJ and other progressive communities, but there are some distinguishing habits in Orthodox communities to which Jewish women are expected to adhere. This includes a so-called modest attire of skirts or dresses, and the covering of their knees, elbows, and collarbones. Moreover, married Orthodox women are expected to cover their hair, either with a wig (*sheitel*), headscarf (*tichel*), or simple headband. This was often an important point of change for women who converted in an Orthodox community and began to cover their hair during or after the *giyur* process. Channah was not married at the time of her *giyur* and started to wear a *tichel* after her marriage. However, wearing a headscarf she became the victim of Islamophobic assaults, as people assumed she had converted to Islam. This became so untenable that she eventually decided to wear a *sheitel* instead (Schrijvers 2022, pp. 250–254). She told me she had to get used to the new dress codes and did not feel comfortable from the beginning. For her, covering her hair was mainly related to her marriage, similar to Sara, who said: “Your hair becomes a part of you that you keep specifically for you and your husband.” This was different for Hanneke, who described her motivation as follows:

It’s written in the Torah that the woman covers her hair out of respect for God. It’s on your head, and by that you acknowledge that God is above you and is greater and higher than you. [...] This is how I express that my life has become dependent on the Eternal. (Hanneke)

For Hanneke, a *tichel* was not so much a confirmation of her status as married Jewish woman, but rather motivated by her belief in God. She was the only one I spoke to who decided to wear a headscarf prior to the certification of her *giyur*, which is allowed but not required.

Wearing a *tichel* or *sheitel* is not common in non-Orthodox communities. Neither is wearing a *yarmulke*, which is traditionally only worn by Jewish men. In certain smaller progressive communities, women are also permitted to wear one, although this is not compulsory as it is for men. In this context, I spoke to different women who actually resisted the option for women to wear a *yarmulke* (often called *kippah*) as being inauthentic. Reflecting on her progressive synagogue, Judith reflected: “The [female] rabbis all wear a *kippah*, including the women. Personally, that bothers me. Strange as that may seem.” Similarly, Karen said that “it’s a feeling, I don’t find it necessary at all and I even reject those practices.” In LJJ synagogues, wearing a *yarmulke* is generally not allowed for women, and the majority of LJJ women do not wear any head coverage at all, although a few might wear a hat. Here, a small minority strived for the option to wear a *yarmulke*, but the majority did not. These reflections show that women’s head coverage continues to be a debated issue in non-Orthodox communities and interpretations vary widely, despite of and beyond formal rules.

Conclusions: Gender, *Giyur* and Power

This article analyzed women’s *giyur* from an everyday gender perspective and explored certain negotiations of power. At some point during their *giyur* trajectories, either on their own or under the guidance of their rabbis, all of the newcomers had to think about their attire, what they ate, the people they interacted with, the implications of starting a family and many more issues besides. I noticed during our conversations about gender dynamics at home, in *shul*, or in the regulation of one’s body, that these negotiations cannot be separated from broader societal tendencies and processes, however, nor can it be assumed that community-wide discourses on gender and the position of women are directly mirrored in the day-to-day lives of converted women themselves.

On the basis of my research outcomes, I argue that *giyur* is a gendered process of negotiation that takes place within the intersections of, and relations between, authority and individual. Some found a distinction between men and women to be outdated and contrary to their emancipatory ideals, other women did find solace in such a marked difference within Judaism. Most LJJ women, for example, found it important to be able to participate in synagogue services and to take on responsibility for rituals outside of the home. For them, Jewish gender difference was more subtly marked by the emphasis on the importance of women’s emotional labor at home and in *shul*;, or by rejecting the option for women to wear a *yarmulke*. Orthodox Jewish women were most likely to have an understanding of gender difference as “complementary,” finding value and joy in segregated roles and tasks, such as taking on the responsibility for the care of children, preparing Shabbat meals, or forming women-only groups to study the scriptures. This also came up among some LJJ and other Progressive Jewish women. A minority of Progressive Jewish women, however, would be on the other end of this spectrum, advocating for a more thorough form of equality in which gender differences were eliminated. In

this group, I found examples of liturgical change to include the feminine form of God; women taking on ritual tasks in service, such as carrying the Torah scrolls; and wearing a *yarmulke*. Yet, there are many instances of overlap and the official discourses and regulations regarding women's roles were often not taken on uncritically. This negotiation becomes apparent when analyzing gendered commandments in everyday life: food, family rites and modesty were all negotiated and localized, finding a connection between personal desires, and structures of power.

These analyses point to the tension between autonomy and authority in women's *giyur* trajectories: Who decides what "authentic" Jewishness looks like? For most women in all groups, the relationship of dependency with their rabbi and the eventual *beit din* was one of the most difficult aspects of *giyur*. This also makes the experience very different from conversion to Christianity or Islam, where no formal permission is needed to confirm the sense of religious self. At the same time, doing *giyur* can be seen as a way to formalize a sense of inner desire or authentic self. This can potentially clash with the reality of the relationship of dependence between the rabbi and the *giyur* candidate. Throughout my interlocutors' stories, I noticed a tension between the wish to fulfil an "autonomous" desire to become Jewish on the one hand and demands from the community on the other—from rabbis and, although this was not experienced as pressure, from spouses or family. Especially in LJG and Progressive communities, the emphasis was on personal intent and a person's inner motivation. Orthodox Jewish women, on the contrary, would point to an inevitability of *giyur*: There was no real choice and they simply "had to" follow their inner desire. Moreover, practices were widely regarded as losing their legitimacy when they were not the result of authentic choice. This language of authenticity was reflected in all of the women's stories. Progressive women would consider *giyur* a confirmation of a pre-existing "authentic" selfhood. Some Orthodox women used the terminology of authenticity to explain their choice for Orthodoxy as the most "authentic" form of Judaism. For this last group, the community, tradition and family tended to be more important than individual motivations or spiritual desires. Conversely, some women aspired to such a status of being, in which guidelines provided them with a greater sense of self, history and belonging. Becoming Jewish thus implied the negotiation of different power dynamics, different positions of women in *shul* and at home, and different relationships to others.

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