

JEWISH CONVERTS, THEIR COMMUNITIES AND EXPERIENCES OF SOCIAL INCLUSION AND EXCLUSION IN POST-APARTHEID SOUTH AFRICA

By

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Always in-between; and in-between home.

- Neela Vaswami -

Abstract

Set in a small minority community in South Africa, the Orthodox Jewish community in Johannesburg, this study explores why a person would actively and voluntarily seek minority status by converting into an ethnic-religious minority group. Taking a social constructionist approach to understanding religious conversion, it is argued that religious conversion to Orthodox Judaism is also a social process of becoming ethnically "Jewish". In this study, two types of converts are considered, namely converts who come to Judaism through marriage and converts for religious purposes. Through in-depth-interviews with rabbis and converts, experiences of social inclusion and exclusion, and the meaning of conversions is understood. This study finds that regardless of the path to conversion, belonging and identity are key reasons for conversion, and that it is an ethnic process that serves group and individual needs reciprocally. At an individual level, becoming Jewish through conversion helps avoid social exclusion and achieves other social inclusions by acquiring membership in new communities and by forming new social identities. At a group level, the research shows that religious conversion is part of the group's broader concern for maintaining ethnic boundaries and is therefore an element of the politics of belonging. The research shows how conversion to a minority ethnic group in a plural environment becomes a social means to protect ethnic identity and avoid assimilation. By understanding conversion as the politics of belonging, the research explores the subjective experiences of citizenship at a group and individual level.

Declaration

I undertake that all the material presented for examination is my own work and has not been written for me, in whole or in part, by any other person. I also undertake that any quotation or paraphrase from the published or unpublished work of another person has been duly acknowledged in the work which I present for examination.

Signed by candidate

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Introduction

The terms social inclusion and social exclusion refer to "acts of social stratification" that reflect "the ordering that occurs within societies to determine social position, and as a narrative to explain and at times justify why one or more groups merit access to the core or the periphery, to the benefit or expense of others" (Allman, 2013:7). In these terms, as Allman (2013) shows, societies over time, geography and space have been divided into different forms of inclusion and exclusion societies. "Exclusion societies...tend to be associated with differential access to social and economic well-being...Inclusion societies, however, evolve from within such contexts. They are characterized by movements toward greater social justice, equality, and collectivism in response to the kinds of global oppressions exclusion societies embody and perpetuate" (Allman, 2013:2). Post-apartheid South Africa, and its multicultural democracy were born out of a social justice and human rights movement to quash the former exclusions of apartheid and the legacy of colonialism. It was envisaged to be - and still aspires to be - an inclusion society in which its citizens may feel they have a rightful place to belong. However, today there are still significant differences in social and economic realities in South Africa. Given the history of racial discrimination and oppression, the multicultural, democratic state in a rapidly transitioning and globalised environment, still faces many challenges in overcoming multiple, intersecting exclusions in various forms. Much like in the past, contemporary South Africa has very important issues to deal with when it comes to majority and minority relations. However, what differs is that minorities are equally included in the Constitution. Yet the feeling of belonging in South Africa, the feeling of inclusion, of being 'at home', is not readily and equally felt by all. As minority groups jostle for their inclusion and power over their domains, how does this in turn affect who may belong to them? And as they are stratified, how in turn do they stratify? This study explores the aforementioned questions by focusing on an ethno-religious minority group in South Africa -

the Jewish community. Today the Jewish community is understood to be a minority group¹ on the basis of its religion (non-Christian religion in a Christian majority country) and size.

The Jewish community is a very small group and accounts for 0.17% of the total population, or approximately 80,000 individuals² (Herman, 2007:24; Kaplan, 1998:73). Jews have occupied a delicate social and political place in the development of South Africa since the late 1800s – some of the early formative years of the country. Issues of ethnicity, religion and race have and continue to be important to the identity of this group. The integration of a potentially diverse set of new entrants from the broader South African population at a time when the community itself is trying to find its feet in a fundamentally different environment is an interesting question. Judaism “has been the dominant marker of Jewishness for many centuries” (Herman, 2007:23) and therefore joining the Jewish community, outside of birth and adoption, is achieved through religious conversion. Conversion to Judaism in South Africa is not a major phenomenon, rather Christian megachurches and Islam are far bigger, and attract many more members. The Jewish community has been chosen for this study because it is a religiously defined ethnic group, because of its unique attitudes to conversion, its race dynamics and because few studies of conversion have been conducted in South Africa. Those

¹ In the most simplistic terms, a minority group may be defined as “A small group of people within a community or country, differing from the main population in race, religion, language, or political persuasion” (Oxford Dictionaries, 2016) and/or other characteristics such as ethnicity, culture, sexuality, gender, or age. A minority group is not necessarily determined by size. For example, black people in South Africa during apartheid were a minority group although they were the numerical majority. Minority groups may be stigmatised, discriminated against or oppressed on the basis of these characteristics and therefore perceive themselves as needing or deserving special treatment that the majority does not (Scott & Marshall, 2005:415). In the decades leading up to apartheid (particularly 1930s and 40s) up until the 1970s and 1980s, anti-semitism towards Jews was prevalent to varying degrees and (Shain, 2000). Anti-semitism towards Jews in South Africa is covered extensively in the work of Emeritus Professor Milton Shain.

² Although Jews were recorded to have been in South Africa as early as 1652 (Kaplan, 2001:5), Jews have been a part of South African life since 1725 when they arrived with the British settlers (DellaPergola & Dubb, 1988:59). However, from the late 1800s, the community started rapidly expanding as Lithuanian Jews, escaping the pogroms of Eastern Europe, started steadily immigrating to South Africa. This immigration wave continued until the 1940s (Herman, 2007:24; Dubb, 1994; DellaPergola & Dubb, 1988). Having started out in 1880 as a community of 4000 Jews, the community grew to 104,156 in 1946. Over the decades, the Jewish population continued to expand until it reached its peak in 1970 when it was estimated to consist of 118,200 individuals (Dubb, 1994:7). Thereafter, the community started decreasing as a result of emigration (due to political reasons) and ageing. By 1991, the community was estimated at 105,711 (Dubb, 1994:7). However, by 1996 the population had dropped to 68,058 individuals (Statistics South Africa, 2001). The 2001 census estimates the Jewish community at 75,555. It is the last census in which the people of South Africa were counted by religion. There have been a number of community surveys of the Jewish community, the last one being in 2005. Therefore it is difficult to find accurate and updated statistics of the Jewish community today.

studies are written from a religious perspective rather than a sociological perspective (see Kaplan, 1995; Zekry, 1998, 2000).

1.2 Citizenship, conversion and social inclusion of Jews in South Africa

Conversion to Judaism raises the question of the relationship between social inclusion and other identity markers important in the South African context, namely ethnicity, race, class, and nationhood. It also shows how in the past, religion was largely defined along racial lines in South Africa and how this ordering is undergoing change. This is evident when one considers the association between Jews in South Africa, as a minority group, and the South African state and the impact it had on conversions.

South Africa is a country where race and ethnicity have had, and continue to have, important consequences for social exclusion, inclusion and citizenship of its inhabitants. Since the birth of the modern South African state, as with all communities within its borders, race relations have impacted on the formation and establishment of the Jewish community in South Africa (Beinart, 1996; Herman, 2007; Kosmin, Goldberg, Shain & Bruk, 1999; Krut, 1987; Marks, 2004; Mendelsohn & Shain, 2008; Shain, 2011; Shimoni, 1988). The Jewish community emerged from an Anglo-German and Eastern European immigrant base deeply invested in creating and maintaining a uniquely blended but homogenous ethnic character and religious identity for all its members in a new and uncertain social landscape. It was from a wave of Lithuanian immigrants that the community derived its overarching identity as *Litvak* (referring to Eastern European, mainly Lithuanian³). The dominant identity of South African Jewry materialised into an amalgamation of Anglo culture with Eastern European (*Litvak*) religious values and political ideologies. The socio-cultural formation of the Jewish community, which is embedded within the contemporary community, developed not only out of various cultural backgrounds of South African Jewry, but also as a social and political reaction to the unfolding race and class dynamics within the State over the last century.

³ The term *Litvak* is derived from Yiddish terminology. Kaplan (2001:6) defines *Litvak* as "a Jew who came from pre-1917 Czarist Russian provinces of Vilna, Kovno, Grodno, and Northern Suwalki, areas that were Lithuanian-Polish in character; or from Vitebsk, Minsk, and Mogilev, areas that were Byelorussian in character" (Horowitz & Kaplan, 2001:6). It is claimed that most Jews who came to South Africa between 1880 and 1948 came from Lithuania and Byelorussia, and that of these, 80-85% came from a few regions from Lithuania (Horowitz & Kaplan, 2001:6).

Orthodoxy, the “most traditionally observant stream of Judaism” (Robinson, 2001:585) has existed in South Africa since the earliest days of the establishment of the Jewish community; other Jewish denominations entered much later. The Reform⁴ movement launched into the South African scene in 1929 and over the years attracted many congregants. The Reform community went into decline in the 1970s and 1980s as a result of emigration due to political reasons and the ageing of those who remained. In post-apartheid South Africa, the Reform community re-branded itself Progressive in order to regenerate its membership base and attract new, young members. The Conservative⁵ movement also entered the South African Jewish landscape, but later than the Reform movement. It arrived in the 1980s under the leadership of an independent, unaffiliated charismatic rabbi who grew a vibrant but small community in Johannesburg. At a certain point in time, Reform and Conservative merged to form one congregation but split again later. After the loss of the rabbi in the 1990s, and without the support of a larger international Conservative institution, the Conservative community dwindled.

Concern over the community’s survival - which revolved around the inclusion of Jews into a racially and ethnically divided society - was arguably the most acute during apartheid, by which time the community’s identity had already formed in response to the conflict between colonial and Afrikaner powers. Indeed, the ideology of apartheid further supported the separate and homogeneous development of communities and apartheid law created rigid boundaries between different ethnic groups. By that stage, the dominant identity of South African Jewry had materialised into that of a white, urban, upwardly mobile, middle-class community that is English-speaking, predominantly of Orthodox denomination, highly Zionist, and with communist leanings at times. It is unsurprising, therefore, that the community was invested in maintaining an ‘imagined’ homogenous white identity. Against this backdrop candidates for conversion were thus narrowly selected. It appears that, in South Africa, the issue of

⁴ The Reform movement may be described as a “Modern movement originating in eighteenth-century Europe that attempts to see Judaism as a rational religion adaptable to modern needs and sensitivities. The ancient laws are historical relics which have no binding power over modern Jews” (Robinson, 2001:588). In South Africa, Reform formed in 1929 and its first synagogue opened in 1933. Reform rebranded itself as Progressive in the post-apartheid era (SAUPJ, n.d.). Conservative Judaism was formed in 1985. For a full discussion of the rise and decline of Reform and Conservative in South Africa, please see Horowitz and Kaplan (2001) and Kaplan (1998).

⁵ “A modern development in Judaism, reacting to early Jewish Reform movements in an attempt to retain clearer links to classical Jewish law while at the same time adapting it to modern situations” (Robinson, 2001:571-572).

conversion has arisen for the Jewish community as it has attempted to strengthen its social, political and religious interests and boundaries.

Conversion in the Orthodox community has never been encouraged as the Jewish tradition has for many centuries been anti-conversion⁶, although there have always been requests for conversion to Orthodox Judaism. Marriage was considered an ulterior motive and not an adequate reason for conversion. Religious conviction was preferable as it was seen as the sincere motive of an authentic individual (Zekry, 1998). But, even so, converts for religious conviction were also discouraged. Requests for conversion during apartheid arose mostly for marriage (even though discouraged, if not prohibited by the Orthodox rabbinate) and less for religious conviction possibly because of the strong Christian indoctrination and rigid group boundaries of the South African state. The Reform / Progressive movement has had a steady stream of converts over the decades⁷. Unlike their Orthodox counterparts, there appears to have been no discouragement of conversion. The Conservative movement, although smaller, was also very open to converts⁸. The openness to conversion by both Reform and Conservative has much to do with the fact that they were both growing movements.

⁶ Judaism is generally considered to be an anti-proselytisation religion compared to other religions such as Christianity and Islam. Judaism was not always so (Robinson, 2001:174) and in the early stage of its lifecycle, there were periods of proselytisation and forced proselytisation to Judaism (Magonet, 1988/89:45). With the rise of Christianity in the Roman Empire, it was forbidden to convert to Judaism and such act would be met with the death (Magonet, 1988/89:46; Robinson, 2001:175). The same occurred in medieval times in Christian Europe. It is not surprising that an anti-proselytisation attitude developed. Another explanation for this stance was provided by a rabbi interviewed for this dissertation: "The general stance and attitude of not looking for converts and not promoting converts, and in fact dissuading, is based on our belief that heaven is not limited to Jewish people only and that the only way people can be saved is by joining us. People can get to heaven otherwise and therefore there is no reason to motivate it which is an essential difference from other religions". The anti-proselytisation stance has become instituted as the de facto stance toward conversion - and while they are permitted, today they are still reluctantly performed. Out of this background, a practice that is still carried out today is that when an individual requests to be converted, the rabbi has the duty to 1) advise the individual that Jews are a persecuted people and 2) allow the individual the opportunity to re-examine their decision (Robinson, 2001:175-176). Today Orthodox Rabbis do both but also as a test of sincerity, they turn the person away three times the way Naomi did with Ruth (known as a righteous convert from the Book of Ruth in the Torah (Magonet, 1988/89:46)) and if they return after that, they will allow them to enter the conversion process.

⁷ A database to which I had access to for this study was in the process of being compiled, and although it was incomplete it already consisted of over 3 000 entries from across South Africa, mostly from Durban, Cape Town and Johannesburg for the period 1958-2012. This database provides evidence of the assertion that the Reform movement had a steady stream of converts.

⁸ Again this is evident in their files on conversion. Their records show that between 1980 and 2011 there were 489 conversions. The main period of activity was between 1987 and 1993 when 393 conversions took place. Many Conservative conversions were also handled by the Reform authorities when required (during a period when the two merged, and also when the Conservative group did not have a

However, apartheid impacted on conversion in terms of who could enter the community. Regardless of the denomination, conversion was inaccessible to people of colour. Because of apartheid, those of colour in South Africa who wished to convert had to leave South Africa and convert elsewhere, typically in Israel. As a result, a contracted cohort of only white candidates were permitted entry into the community via conversion (Zekry, 1998:197)⁹. The conversion of black individuals was especially difficult - if not impossible - given the legal restrictions on race groups, in terms of their interpersonal relationships, movement, where they could live, pray, congregate and attend school. Within the Orthodox conversion was very selective; inclusion was conditional on specific social demands even in the absence of conversion (such as raising children as Jewish and adopting a Jewish lifestyle) but formal acceptance in the community was nonetheless uncertain if not entirely lacking at times (Zekry, 1998).

The transition to democracy in 1994 was a pivotal moment in South Africa's history, and it impacted on the political outlook of the Jewish community in maintaining a place for itself in the 'new' South Africa. Further, democracy under black majority rule is unfamiliar territory for white minorities. Jewish community researchers assert that, despite the collapse of apartheid and almost two decades of democracy, the overall Jewish community in South Africa (dominated by Orthodox in Johannesburg) is becoming more insular and religiously conservative and that greater identity adaptation to a new social environment is still required (Herman 2007; Shain, 2011)¹⁰. It is also argued that the community continues to act to preserve its homogenous (*Litvak*/Orthodox) identity and character as the authentic tradition of Judaism (Herman, 2007) by linking it back to the practices of the first immigrant arrivals and how these practices were imagined to have existed in the *shtetls*¹¹ of their origin. At the

rabbi). Some Conservative conversions were performed by the Reform sector and were listed in their files.

⁹ The literature here may appear outdated to the reader. However, there is no other scholarly literature that exists on conversion to Judaism in South Africa. Zekry (1998) produced the first PhD thesis on the topic and at the time of writing this thesis, Zekry's 1998 study was the only available work to rely upon for trends of Jewish conversion in the country. Given the paucity of literature on Jewish conversion in South Africa, the impetus for this thesis is bolstered.

¹⁰ Again, it should be noted that there is very little scholarly work produced on the identity of the Jewish community in post-apartheid South Africa. The scholarly literature that is relevant to this thesis has been cited here and in other chapters. To the best of my knowledge, the most recent article on the issue of post-apartheid identity of the Jewish community is Emeritus Professor Milton Shain's 2011 article which is cited above.

¹¹ Lit. "villages". Yiddish word for small Jewish villages in Eastern Europe (Robinson, 2001:592).

same time, democracy and the repeal of legislation compelling closed communities has introduced a significant shift in conversion trends which reflects the multicultural nature of contemporary social relations in the country. Since the transition to democracy, converts from all race groups and language groups are presenting to the Orthodox and Progressive communities (Avidan, personal communication 2015, February; Hendler, 2011), either as a result of desire for marriage, or adoption of a minor, or for spiritual reasons. Apartheid contributed to the cohesiveness of the community, a homogenous identity and stiff boundaries: conversion occurred within this framework. It is interesting to consider whether there is a relationship between democracy and the arrival of 'new' convert types. It is also interesting to consider whether increasing mobility between groups, a central characteristic of pluralistic societies, accounts for the greater formalisation of conversion processes.

1.3 Conversion to Judaism in post-apartheid South Africa

Religiously affiliated¹² Jews remain broadly divided into two denominations in South Africa today namely Orthodox, and Progressive (previously known as Reform in South Africa)¹³. The third denomination – that of the Conservative Movement – once a thriving and active community in Johannesburg in the late 80s to mid-90s is now very small and has a low key presence. It consists of one community in Johannesburg and has never existed in any other part of the country at any time. The Orthodox constituency has the greatest presence in Johannesburg and dominates (Herman, 2007; Kaplan, 1998; Shain, 2011; Zekry, 2000:27) the overall South African Jewish population in terms of its size and values (Kaplan, 2006). In Johannesburg, it is estimated that the Progressive constitute 5% of the Jewish population¹⁴ (Kaplan, 2006:10). Despite the inequalities in size and openness to conversion, according to 2005 community study on Jews in South Africa, there are almost as many converts to Progressive Judaism (45%) as there are to Orthodox Judaism in South Africa (55%)¹⁵ (Bruk,

¹² There are also the secular and the traditional.

¹³ Other denominations do exist such as Reconstructionism and Liberal. Reconstructionism, which is "indigenous" to the United States (Schulweis, 1987:755), is "an outgrowth of Conservative" (Rich, 2015) that "attempts to see Judaism as a civilization and culture constantly adapting to ensure survival in a natural social process" (Robinson, 2001:588). Liberal Judaism in the United States refers to any of the non-orthodox forms of Judaism whereas in the United Kingdom it refers to the "British equivalent of Reform Judaism in the United States" (Robinson, 2001:581).

¹⁴ The Progressive constituent has a stronger presence in Cape Town (13%) than in Johannesburg (5%) according to the last community survey conducted in 2005 (Kaplan, 2006:10).

¹⁵ Note that the community survey did not offer Conservative conversion as an option.

2006:140; Kaplan, 2006:9). All three denominations offer conversion programmes. However, at the time of data collection for this study (2013), the Conservative authorities had not had any conversions for the two years prior and prospects of new converts coming forward looked slim. It is indicative of how the Conservative constituent in South Africa is fading. In contrast, the Orthodox and Progressive programmes were thriving.

A number of different types of candidates present for conversion to Judaism in South Africa, albeit Orthodox, Conservative or Progressive. Families and couples who wish to adopt non-Jewish children and raise them within the Jewish tradition often seek conversion of their children. Individuals who wish to marry a Jewish partner, those who have a non-Jewish mother and would like to consolidate their identities as Jews, and those who seek the religion purely for spiritual motives all pursue religious conversion too. These conversion types are common to all three denominations in South Africa. Conversion is desired as it is the only formal mechanism for achieving recognition and inclusion within any particular Jewish community of the same denomination in South Africa and in the world. From the above types of conversion candidates it can be seen that identity is as much a key factor in conversion as inclusion.

Throughout the period in which Jewish conversions occurred in South Africa, most converts were women engaged in intimate relations with a Jewish partner and seeking the rites of Jewish marriage¹⁶. It was rare to encounter an individual who sought Judaism purely for spiritual conviction, but those conversions did occur. A proportion of converts to Judaism in post-apartheid South Africa continue to be non-Jewish partners of a Jewish individual, and/or their children (as shown in this dissertation in chapter 5). Today, in post-apartheid South Africa, the racial and ethnic composition of Jewish converts in both these groups is changing. Now inter-racial couples are less unusual in Orthodox and Progressive but this transition started happening late (in the second decade after the collapse of apartheid) and has been slow. Similarly, there are racial and ethnic changes among those converts who choose Judaism out of spiritual conviction in both Orthodoxy and Progressive.

In order to explain these changes, the study focuses on two types of conversion candidates, namely those whose motivations have been ignited by a Jewish partner, and two unusual groups (discussed below) among those who wish to convert for spiritual reasons. The new types of converts in the spiritual category will be referred to as 'new spiritual converts'.

¹⁶ Statistics on Orthodox, Conservative and Progressive conversions were gathered for this dissertation and the dominant reason for conversion across all three groups was marriage.

1.3.1 Conversion and marriage

Conversion precipitated by the desire to marry a Jew is an issue among Jewish communities all around the world. Because in most Jewish communities, either Orthodox, Conservative or Progressive, the identity of children is based on matrilineal descent, it is mostly women who seek conversion. Earlier, it was noted that most Jewish converts in South Africa have been women, and/or children born of Jewish fathers. Generally these converts came as individuals and sometimes as religiously incongruent family units (i.e. father Jewish and mother and children disaffiliated or affiliated to another religion). This applies to the period during apartheid and after. To this day, as this dissertation will show, a large proportion of converts to Judaism continue to be non-Jewish partners of an individual, and/or their children. Marriage through conversion raises the point that conversion to Judaism is not just about religion (Judaism), but it is also about identity and ethnicity (being Jewish) and is therefore a social process of gaining entry into a group that one is not born into.

As will be seen in this study, conversion among those who seek marriage is primarily about securing a single religious identity which they hold of value and on that basis gaining inclusion into an environment to which they have been exposed and are loosely and informally connected. Their conversion is therefore also about avoiding exclusion for themselves and their children. Conversion can be viewed as a process of acquiring citizenship in a new community. However, after conversion and receiving full recognition, the participation of converts in their communities differ. These differences can be noted according to the denomination in which the conversion occurs, but also within the denomination in which conversion occurs. For example, within Orthodoxy, some women transform completely, adopting religious lifestyles and religious networks and become integrally involved in their new communities, at the same time discarding their former connections. These women are usually celebrated within their Jewish communities and generally referred to as a 'righteous convert'. Over a period of time following their conversion, other converts return to their former lifestyles distancing themselves from the religious way of life while retaining the 'titles' and privileges for themselves and their children. These converts are generally considered to have betrayed and misled the religious authorities and their communities who supported them through their conversion. They are thought of as insincere and instrumental and classified by those who invested in their conversions as 'unsuccessful converts'. There is a third group of converts here who remain somewhat involved in their new communities, balancing a more 'moderate' approach to religion with their former ways of being. These converts tend to remain on the margins of their new communities. All are converts that generally retain ties with their families

and in those cases, are likely to straddle both their former and new universes - to varying extents - for some time after their conversion. What these different participation schemas illustrate is that conversion to Judaism is not just about religion (Judaism), but it is also about identity and ethnicity (being Jewish) and is therefore a social process of gaining entry into a group that one is not born into. Some converts, while prepared to accept the religious fundamentals of Judaism, want to be Jewish without the religion, while others are happy to accept both. From the perspective of the religious authorities, particularly Orthodox, they cannot be separate and tensions result between converts and the authorities, and some part of the communities. Progressive takes a different approach and relies on the decision of the individual. However, the approaches to conversion differ with each denomination and expectations of the converts differ. These could impact on experiences of inclusion and exclusion and what parts of their communities converts will participate in.

Inclusion is something that should better understood for Jewish converts. The Jewish population in South Africa, through their community structures, may portray themselves as homogenous, but in reality it is far from that. Politically, there are great differences among sectors of the population with regard to their stances to apartheid and the state of Israel and these political viewpoints tend to cohere with religious affiliation. Religiously there is also a great divide between Progressive and Orthodox although the population is so small that it is not unusual to find Orthodox, Progressive and secular all in one family. There are also other ideological differences within Orthodoxy plus political monopoly of a particular form of Orthodoxy associated with the *Litvak* tradition - that being the *Mitnagdim* way (discussed further in chapter 4).

In keeping with a constructivist definition of ethnicity, the elements of ethnicity (cultural identity and identifications, and attributes such as systems of belief, practices, and language) are "fluid, flexible and subject to constant redefinition" where the "appropriation of identity is a means to an end" (Kubeka, 2015:51). In this sense converts who make up this cohort can be defined as 'ethnic converts' because they are seeking conversion for identity and communal belonging within an ethnic group. They are prepared to change their current identities, identifications, belief systems and practices, as well as adopt a new language (Hebrew), in order to achieve a goal - that being a Jewish lifestyle and citizenship - demonstrating that ethnicity is a fluid, socially constructed process rather than a fixed ascriptive feature of social life. To refer to them as ethnic converts recognises that there is more to their decision than just marriage and to refer to them as converts for marriage implies that conversion is purely instrumental which casts the converts in a negative light. Many converts reject this classification for that reason but also because religion and culture may not be completely

irrelevant to them. Indeed, some of these converts find religious observance and Jewish culture valuable and enjoyable. Often the primary reason for conversion is based on the social benefits associated to being formally recognised and included in the Jewish faith and in a Jewish community, for them and their children as attained through marriage. Therefore, to refer to them as ethnic converts recognises the importance of ethnic belonging and is more apt. Overall most of these converts have been successful in achieving inclusion in their new communities and for this reason they form part of the study.

While exploring the topic of conversion for a PhD dissertation, an interesting and unusual phenomenon was encountered that departed from the above. This is unprecedented in the history of conversion to Judaism in South Africa and has gained strength over time.

1.3.2 A new citizenship, a new identity

“The exclusion of the excluded by the excluders” (Castells, 2010:9).

In the late 2000s, an unexpected group of newcomers started appearing before the conversion authorities. A particular type of Afrikaner began seeking a new identity and religion: that of Jew and Judaism. These Afrikaners were different from the *boerejode* (plural; literally translated as Boer Jews) who were the offspring of the marriage between an Afrikaner and a Jew during the apartheid years. In his book titled the same, Herman Roup describes a boerejood as having an identity “with a divided heritage, [and] split loyalties” which arose from being derivative of two opposing religions and cultures (Roup, 2004:12). There were also the Dutch Jews¹⁷ (see Le Roux, 2003:23). The Afrikaner converts I encountered were fundamentally different to the *boerejode* and the Dutch Jews. They are white Afrikaners, from the former minority ruling class of Afrikaners; they are devoutly religious and originally from staunch Christian (Calvinist) backgrounds¹⁸. The appearance of religious Afrikaners at the doors of a rabbi is perceived to be a curious occurrence and one that has aroused the

¹⁷ Dutch Boers refers to the identification of Boers by the British as having stepped directly out of the Old Testament, and imagining themselves as the “chosen people”, and that the trek was their exodus. They were identified as “a kind of frontier Judaism” (Le Roux, 2005:23).

¹⁸ Note that Afrikaners are a diverse group who in post-apartheid South Africa have come to be defined as *Afrikaanses* (plural). A full discussion of the multiple identities of Afrikaners and their classes and can be found in Davies, R. (2009). Afrikaners in the new South Africa: Identity Politics in a Globalised Economy.

attention and incredulity of many religious Jews within the Orthodox community. The relationship between Jews and Afrikaners has been a strange one. While they had many religious ideological commonalities, there has been an underlying distrust between them over the course of history. Nonetheless, the Jewish community could owe its survival much to the tolerance of the former ruling party - the National Party (Beinart, 1996; Marks, 2004). That there are now Afrikaners joining the ranks of Jews is a surprising and interesting phenomenon to research.

When investigating the case of Afrikaner converts, I became aware that there have always been Afrikaner men and women who had converted, but this was primarily done for their Jewish partners. I consider the latter unlike the current wave of Afrikaner converts who have come to Judaism for reasons other than marriage. So too have their journeys and experiences been vastly different. I also discovered that during apartheid a handful of religious Afrikaners (individuals and families), much like the current religious Afrikaners, had converted to Judaism and moved to Israel decades ago. In post-apartheid South Africa, however, the conversion of devout Afrikaner Christians to Judaism, and subsequently emigration to Israel, has become more of a trend. The conversion of Afrikaners begs the questions: Why Afrikaners? Why Judaism? The former white minority-majority, those from the group responsible for the exclusion of other races and ethnicities during apartheid, are converting to another minority group, the Jews, whose religion can be seen as the antithesis to their religion of birth.

1.3.3 De-racialising Jewish identity/ethnicity

The separateness of apartheid, which drew divisions between people primarily on the basis of their race, capitalised on Calvinist theology to justify power in the hands of Afrikaners while at the same time drawing tight boundaries around them (McEwen & Steyn, 2016). As apartheid was dismantled, and Afrikaner churches simultaneously lost their stronghold, Afrikaners started to respond to their identity in new ways in post-apartheid South Africa. However, the movement of religious Afrikaners into the Jewish community seemed 'out of place'. Their 'strangeness' in the outwardly homogenous Orthodox community - when they first started entering - could be attributed to the separateness that had been fostered by the Afrikaner government during apartheid. Just as they may have seemed out of place, so too was another group of converts that were not previously seen from the time of the formation of the Jewish community, and through the apartheid years: black, Coloured, Indian and Asian converts.

The racial and ethnic delineations imposed by the apartheid state cohered with religion. Christianity was seen as a predominantly European phenomenon brought by the Dutch East India Company to South Africa during its colonial exploits (Egan, 2014:246). It was therefore, in crude terms, the religion of white people, while Islam and Hinduism were seen as the religion of Asians and Indians. Like Afrikaners, and other ethnicities of European origin, Jews were classified as whites (although they were outside the pale, making Jews part of the 'other' even if they were located among the white privileged classes). Because the Jewish community was defined in racial terms as white, Jewish identity in political terms concretised around this racial classification. As a result of the legal restrictions between groups, Judaism in South Africa became inaccessible to black persons during apartheid even if in Jewish law (referred to as *halachah*)¹⁹ makes no distinction on the grounds of race. It appears that conversion of black individuals was not performed during apartheid in any sector of the broader Jewish population in South Africa. This appears to be true in the Orthodox, Conservative and Progressive communities.

As regards Orthodox conversions during apartheid, "the issue of converting blacks, Coloureds or Indians was never remembered to arise"²⁰ (Zekry, 1998:198). Scrutiny of the Conservative conversion files also show that conversion was limited to whites. Among Reform conversions, "there were no conversions of non-whites during that period, not because of

¹⁹ *Halachah* refers to "[t]he complete body of rules and practices that Jews are bound to follow, including biblical commandments, commandments instituted by the rabbis, and binding customs". (Rich, 2015) or "[a]ny normative Jewish law, custom practice, or rite - or the entire complex" (Robinson, 2001:575).

²⁰ The issue of conversion for marriage across race groups did arise prior to apartheid although the information is scant. The first known record is from 1897 in the mining town of Kimberly (Simon 2002:12). After that, in the same year, the Witwatersand Old Hebrew congregation resolved that black converts and anyone who had married black converts would not be permitted into any synagogue (Simon, 2002:13) showing that the issue of marriage and conversion of non-whites had been a topical issue. Political and social sensitivities connected to being an immigrant minority from previously hostile environments such as Lithuania and Russia, as well Anglo-Boer tensions are argued to be at the heart of the issue (Zekry, 1998:199). In the later period after colonialism, during apartheid, interracial marriages were not permitted, so persons of colour who wished to marry a South African Jew had to do so elsewhere. A well-known case in point, was that of Ilana Skolnik, formerly known as Ellen Nester Peters, who in 1973 was South Africa's non-white (sic) representative for Miss World contest in London. During her career abroad, she met her Israeli husband and decided to convert in order to marry him in the Jewish faith. Knowing the restrictions at the time, she converted in Israel, remaining there for many decades until after her husband's death. She has since returned to Cape Town, the place of her birth, where she currently lives (talk given by Skolnik, 5 May 2013). During my interviews, I met a number of other people whose parents either did not convert as a result of apartheid laws, or they converted and settled in countries such as Canada to avoid reprisal.

prejudice but due to the nature of South African society at that time” (Avidan, personal communication 2015, February). Today, just as religious Afrikaners of formerly devout Christian background are becoming more commonplace in the Jewish Orthodox conversion programme, so are black individuals, as well as Indian, Asian and Coloureds. Those who were classified as non-white (sic) by the apartheid government, are entering the community for the same reasons converts have always done, namely marriage, adoption and spiritual reasons. There is nothing unusual about their motivation for conversion. What is unusual, is why those spiritual seekers have chosen Judaism. Apart from marriage and adoption, what has prompted black, Coloured and Indian individuals to seek out Judaism for spiritual purposes?

Christianity is the faith of 80% of South Africans (Statistics South Africa, 2001²¹). In each population group, 86% of whites are Christians; 86% of Coloureds; 79% of blacks; and 24% of Indians (Statistics South Africa, 2001). The remainder in each group are either irreligious, undecided or of another religion. For example, Coloureds are also Muslim; Indians are mostly Hindu and some are Muslim. If one compares the census data for 1996 and 2001, membership of Pentecostal/Charismatic Methodist, Presbyterian and various African churches has increased in post-apartheid South Africa. Jewish converts of colour appear to be going against the grain in terms of broader faith trends in the South African population. Jewish ethnicity and religion during apartheid became intricately tied to race, that of being white²², even if Judaism is not exclusive to any one people on the basis of their race or ethnicity (Bleich, 1997:297 cited in Parfitt & Egorova, 2006:48). Hence, like Afrikaners, the appearance of black converts in the Jewish community, despite the dismantling of apartheid, caused some surprise among many members of the community. It was unusual and unprecedented.

Conversion occurs at an individual and a collective level. The post-apartheid conversion of black individuals appears to be the conversion of unconnected individuals on their own.

²¹ Although a census was conducted in 2011, it does not contain any information about religion. The last census to have collected data on religion in South Africa was in 2001.

²² The specific racial dynamics of South Africa during the colonial and post-colonial period contributed to the formation of white identity and privilege among South African Jews - in contrast to Europe from where they had come. In Europe, Jews had been subjected to a 'long-tradition' that Jews are black "metaphorically as well as literally" (Parfitt & Egorova, 2006:45). The point to be made here is that in South Africa the state was in its early stages and the age-old anti-semitism in Europe had not manifested itself in the South African state, although it was on the mind of the immigrants and in their fears, but that is also not to say that Jews were treated equally - but one could say they were treated better than in Europe.

They are separate from other black or African groups who are cohesive units with loose connections to Judaism (through oral history and/or religious practices that appear to be like Jewish religious practices)²³ who have sought collective conversions. These individual converts need to be differentiated from self-identifying black Jewish communities, both in South Africa and in other parts of the world. There have been a number of black groups in Africa (and North America), since the colonisation of Africa, that in reference to (Christian) biblical narratives claim to be descendants of the Lost Tribes of Israel²⁴ (Introvigne, 2009:1; Lyons, 2014:2; Parfitt & Egorova, 2006:46; Parfitt & Semi, 2002:ix). According to Parfitt (cited by Lyons, 2014:2):

The biblical narrative of world history was so dominant for the colonizing Christians of Europe that they could only conceive of the African peoples they encountered as descendants of Lost Tribes. The colonizers interpreted practices native to Africa, like circumcision and animal sacrifice, as 'Jewish' in origin.

According to Le Roux (2003:15):

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, comparativists (colonialists, observers, missionaries and others) who came to southern Africa imposed the idea of a Semitic heritage on almost all the indigenous people - from the 'Hottentots' to the Dutch Boers - instead of considering them in their own contexts.

Some of these groups have consequently identified as Jews and claim recognition of their heritage although "these claims have never been even remotely credible from the point of view of the South African Jewish community" (Shimoni, 2003:177). The Lemba of South Africa and Zimbabwe believe they are descendants of Yemenite Jews, have the religion of Abraham, came from a city called Sena and migrated by sea to Africa (Le Roux, 2005:25; Parfitt & Semi, 2002; Parfitt & Egorova, 2006). In contemplating why the Lemba identify and seek acceptance as Jews while many others did not, Le Roux argues that they did so "probably because it confirmed and reinforced their own ancient customs and traditions" (2003:15). Their oral history is supported by genetic tests, conducted in 1998, which have confirmed a

²³ According to Shimoni (2003:177-178) there were different black groups in South Africa who, over time, have claimed to have Jewish descent. They were deemed to be not *halachically* Jewish (Jewish according to religious law) and therefore rejected by local Jewry. One reason for their rejection during apartheid was because of the community's fear of contravening the apartheid system and thereby destabilising their position in South Africa.

²⁴ Such as among others the *Felashas* also known as *Beta Israel* (Ethiopia), *Igbo* (Nigeria), *Abayudaya* (Uganda), Tutsi-Hebrews (Rwanda).

link of the Lemba to Semitic and Jewish populations (Parfitt & Egorova, 2006:57). However, the majority of Lemba in South Africa practise Christianity and some practise Islam.

What the Lemba and other African groups claiming Jewish heritage raise is the notion of a Jewish ethnicity that is not defined in strictly religious terms, especially those of normative Orthodox practice. The fact that a Lemba can be Christian and Muslim while at the same time Jewish does not pose a problem for the Lemba. This was regarded as impossible for the former Chief Rabbi who reacted cautiously to the results of the genetic tests of the Lemba and did not encourage their group conversion (Parfitt & Egorova, 2006:83-84) - even though the Lemba were not seeking conversion (in their view they were already Jewish).

While Jewish law around conversions is unspecific about race or ethnicity, Jews at the same time believe that the religion cannot be separated from the Jewish people. The religion Judaism cannot be independent of Jews. Jews cannot be anything but Jewish. In South Africa - like in many other parts of the world - this has also meant being white. Race, ethnicity and religion all collide with competing narratives, spaces and places of belonging that facilitate inclusion only if it is in line with the broader organised community.

This study deals with the reasons that individuals (rather than collectives, groups or communities) choose Judaism, what conditions in post-apartheid South Africa have led to their desire to be Jewish and how black Jewish converts challenge notions of identity and religion within the South African Jewish community. The challenge is important to look at because it raises to what extent inclusion occurs, the boundaries and limits and the conditions for acceptance. The issue is complex given the racial issues connected to a black individual moving into a tight knit and insular historically white community even if the new political environment makes provision for such. I am interested in black individuals outside of collective units such as the Lemba, individuals who have never claimed any genetic or historical link to Jews and yet wish to convert to Judaism. Issues of race are pertinent still in post-apartheid South Africa and are a marker between ethnic and religious groupings. The presence of black converts is likely to be a challenge to South African Jewish identity and deconstructs the ethnic character of race. In this context the acceptance of persons of colour may be difficult or require some time - especially because Judaism (according to its law) does not discriminate on the grounds of colour.

The converts that form the focus of this dissertation are not the communities that claim to be already Jewish, but individuals and family units - like the Afrikaners - who have no prior connection to Judaism. The organised Jewish community in South Africa has an identity of being white that has endured for over a century. Whereas law in apartheid South Africa made provision for the entrenchment of a white identity among Jews, law in post-

apartheid South Africa makes provision for a multicultural identity among Jews. It creates the environment for Jewish identity to exist separate from race bringing notions of ethnicity under review, if not contestation. According to Jewish religious law, anyone born into the people or who converts into the group will be Jewish. Without apartheid and its legal limits on who can marry who, where they may live, and what they may do together, the identity of the Jewish community opens up to whomever is interested in the people and/or their religion. A challenge to Jewish identity and ethnicity in post-apartheid South Africa is derived from religion; each black convert raises the issue of the 'whiteness' of the community. Jewish identity in these circumstances should be destabilised, as it makes race, a key identity marker for Jews in South Africa, irrelevant.

1.4 Research question

Conversion as an issue in the Jewish community in South Africa has always been treated with importance but it has not been a very topical issue in the community. This is reflected in the lack of studies on the topic of conversion in South Africa. Only two major studies relating to conversion have been conducted in South Africa. The first, a historiographic study entitled "The Nature and Development of Orthodox Judaism in South Africa, circa 1933" (Simon, 1996), contains a chapter dedicated to conversion. The chapter examines the topic from its earliest beginning in South Africa but ends in 1933. The second study is a 1998 PhD study entitled "Conversion in South Africa" by Rabbi Pinchas Zekry. It is arguably the most comprehensive contribution to the topic of Orthodox conversion in South Africa, also covering the early²⁵ (Jewish Ecclesiastical Court) records, but focusing quantitatively on the issue mainly from the 1950s through to the mid-1990s. While the study is important in understanding the establishment of the Orthodox conversion process historically and contextually in South Africa and provides the reasons for conversion, the characteristics of the converts and the views of some converts in the Durban Jewish community towards conversion (the author is the Rabbi of this community), it was concluded in 1998, almost two decades ago. To my

²⁵ Lit. "house of judgment". The Beth Din is a Jewish court of law made up of three rabbis (Robinson, 2001:570) who deal with "religious matters affecting religious life and ceremonial law" (Cohen & Mendes-Flohr, 1987:1080), "resolve business disputes and determine when a convert is ready for conversion" (Robinson, 2001:570). In some countries there is only one Beth Din (e.g. South Africa, Australia and England). In other countries, there are many (e.g. Israel and the United States of America). This depends on the size of the communities / local factors / diversity of Jewish community. A Beth Din takes on the character of those who create it (i.e. Orthodox Beth Din is different to a Progressive or Conservative Beth Din).

knowledge, while numerous studies have been conducted on the South African Jewish community, no further study has since been conducted on Orthodox conversion.

Both studies show that in South Africa conversion is as much about who is a Jew as it is about the 'Jewish Question', namely the question of the citizenship rights of Jews in emerging modern states with the rise of Western democratic systems. Though focused on different time periods, the two studies show that conversion has reflected the issues with which the community was contending as the South African state developed and modernised. Indeed, it appears from the aforementioned studies, that the conversion trends of the last century have been very sensitive to the 'mood' of the community. Authorities throughout the community's development were influenced by anxiety relating to acceptance in South Africa and the same could be expected of today's situation. The views of conversion seem to have been an extension of the feelings of insecurity of the community which had initially originated in Europe and were trying to settle and adapt to a new (safe) environment at the same time that the South African state was emerging. The situation is neatly summarised by Simon (1996:135) who argues that:

[b]y and large, it seems that the Jewish attitude towards proselytism has always been inversely proportionate to prevailing feelings of comfort of security and self-confidence. When the community felt itself under threat spiritually or physically it closed ranks and resisted the would-be proselyte. A community sure of itself and its strength (even practice mistakenly so) was more likely to be willing to receive new adherents.

While both Simon's (1996) and Zekry's (1998) studies reflect on the early post-apartheid period, which is when they were published, racial issues are neglected possibly because the emerging trends were not yet evident in the conversion process and also because it was not the focus of their studies. A brief report on conversion in the community magazine, *Jewish Affairs* (2011), indicates that "(f)rom Ghana to Krugersdorp, from Newcastle to Ethiopia, Israelis, Indians, English, Afrikaans or Sotho speaking singles, and entire families, there seems to be an increasing demand for conversions to [Orthodox] Judaism in South Africa" (Hendler, 2011:30). It is time therefore that the topic be reexamined. Why has interest in Orthodox Judaism supposedly increased in the above mentioned ways? Why especially given that empirical and anecdotal evidence suggests that the Orthodox process of conversion has become stricter in the decades of democracy (which has introduced reconciliation, diversity, multiculturalism and non-racialism)?

A number of other gaps are also apparent. Firstly, both studies exclude the Progressive community. In the case of Simon's (1996) study the Progressive movement (or Reform as it

was known then) was not yet a relevant issue as it was only formed in 1929. The lack of research on Progressive conversions generally may be attributed to a number of reasons including the marginality of the Progressive community, the newly centralised nature of its conversion process or the unwillingness to share information with Orthodox authorities who refuse to acknowledge them. According to Zekry (1998), attempts were made to include the Progressive community in his study; however, he was unsuccessful in this. Initially this study also attempted to address the gap; however, the data for the Progressive element was not consistent and therefore a comparison between Orthodox, Progressive and Conservative was not possible (discussed fully in Chapter 3).

Secondly, the studies that exist offer a limited view of conversion from the perspective of converts. That which does exist is of a quantitative nature and is drawn from a closed-ended questionnaire. It is also based on only a few converts in the Durban community which skews the data as the Johannesburg and Cape Town dynamics are different and the converts were not exposed to the same level of stringencies as converts in other regions. Again, while Cape Town conversions in the Orthodox and Progressive sectors of the community was at first included in this study, the lack of data from both the authorities in Cape Town thwarted this possibility of understanding conversion trends in the Cape in comparison to Johannesburg.

More than a decade has lapsed since the aforementioned studies. In the interim, the trends in conversion seem to be changing (Hendler, 2011) and a number of gaps exist in what is known about conversion to Judaism in South Africa. Therefore, despite the two previous studies, an updated sociological analysis is required in order to understand conversion as a community process and whether/how the post-apartheid environment is changing the kinds of applicants to the process, the nature of conversion, the converts' experiences of social inclusion and conversion as an expression of the community's participation in South Africa's democracy.

In the last two decades, there have been a number of multidisciplinary studies into the extent to which transformation of former racially segregated spaces of apartheid such as corporations, residential areas, public recreational spaces, and educational institutions has occurred in post-apartheid South Africa (McEwen & Steyn, 2016). These studies generally tend to indicate that racial segregation appear to continue, however in "reinscribed and re-configured" ways in the democratic era. McEwen and Steyn (2016) find that while much research exists in urban, suburban and rural spaces, very little has been conducted in relation to religious or faith communities. Furthermore, because of the role religion played in segregating spaces racially during apartheid, they raise the importance of questioning whether diversity is being achieved in religious communities. One of the questions they pose is how

religious communities account for and make sense of diversity in their own spaces (and they look exclusively at Christian communities). In questioning the racial identity of the contemporary Jewish community in relation to the history of colonialism and apartheid as relevant to conversions today, this study of Jewish conversion therefore makes a contribution to the lack of literature in South Africa in understanding the transformation of religious communities in post-apartheid South Africa.

It is also important because it will be the first to give a more inclusive and in-depth voice to converts. The assumption here is that the narratives of converts are critical in understanding how identity transforms through conversion.

This study will focus only on 'ethnic converts' and 'new spiritual converts' (Afrikaner and black) within Orthodoxy in Johannesburg. Overall it investigates whether the reasons for conversion to Judaism and the process of identity transformation through conversion are changing in post-apartheid South Africa and it questions converts' experiences of social inclusion and exclusion - their 'citizenship' - in the broader South African Jewish community. If conversion to Judaism is in essence more than a religious experience, and rather - or also - a social process of community citizenship and the regulation of whether (and which) new entrants may be received, then it is apt to research how converts may come to fit into the community - particularly when the community no longer defines itself in racial terms. In this regard, the main research questions are:

What explanations do ethnic and new spiritual converts (such as Afrikaners and blacks) provide for conversion to Judaism in Johannesburg in post-apartheid South Africa?

How do converts to Orthodox Judaism in Johannesburg experience social inclusion and exclusion in their Jewish communities in post-apartheid South Africa?

The underlying concern of the above research questions relates to why individuals (both from secular and religious backgrounds) are choosing to convert to Judaism, and how a convert is able to achieve approval and gain entry into the community. The experiences and agency associated with a new way of being after conversion, from the convert's perspective, will be important. Ultimately, these questions focus on those who cross an imaginary boundary into the broader South African Jewish community and explore the adoption of a perceived identity as a Jew. It also relates to how religious conversion can be understood

with reference to the community's experience and perceptions of their social inclusion in the 'new South Africa'²⁶.

1.5 Conceptual framework

In order to fully grasp the research questions, a conceptual framework that embraces the eclectic social nature and the turbulent political environment of post-apartheid South Africa from the 2000s onwards was sought. The formal breakdown of racial and ethnic group boundaries with the fall of apartheid, the democratic redefinition and reconstitution of pluralism, the increasing globalisation of this formerly politically isolated nation, coupled with a perception of the imminent collapse of state infrastructure, lack of key service delivery in the areas of basic needs, and repeated outbursts of xenophobia in the nation connects this thesis to a conceptual framework that assists in understanding the meaning and quest for 'truth' through religion in a transitioning modern society marked by high levels of inequality and violence. All this, simultaneously juxtaposed against the freedom for the formation and expression of new and multiple identities in the context of political instability and lack of governmental trust. The appropriate conceptual framework is 'alternative' to mainstream sociological theories that dominated conversion studies from the 1950s to 1970s but consistent with the turn made in many 21st century conversion studies towards understanding conversion in times of pluralism. The conceptual framework, strictly speaking, is not that of conversion studies and therefore does not follow any social-psychological 'model' that traces the stages of conversion. Rather, it is that of social inclusion and exclusion and the 'politics of belonging' in a world where the "power of identity" (Castells, 2010) is on the ascendance and where people imagine communities (Bauman, 2000; Yuval-Davis, 2006) for themselves - those communities that they search for, create or join in order to find a place of acceptance and security.

1.6 Research design and methods

Initially the intention was to collect and compare data from Orthodox, Conservative²⁷ and Progressive converts and rabbis in Johannesburg and Cape Town, since these are the two

²⁶ Although the new South Africa is almost two decades old, this terminology is used as it symbolises a major socio-political shift.

²⁷ The Conservative denomination which exists only in Johannesburg did not have a rabbi and therefore data was limited.

cities in South Africa through which conversions occur. However for various reasons the original aim of comparing conversions across the various denominations was not possible. Ultimately, because most of the data came from Orthodox rabbis and converts in Johannesburg, the focus was limited to Johannesburg.

A social constructionist approach was used for this study. Although some statistics were included, it was limited to developing an overview of the trend of conversion rather than an analysis of experiences of conversion. The quantitative data was used only to provide a simple description of how many conversions were taking place per year. The provision of quantitative data was deemed necessary as since Zekry's 1998 study, there has been no further accounting for conversion to Orthodox Judaism in Johannesburg (or elsewhere in South Africa). In this way, the quantitative statistics enhanced the social constructionist approach used in this study. The main design was qualitative in nature drawing from in-depth interviews with Orthodox rabbis and converts in Johannesburg. Although a full analysis was conducted on the interviews for rabbis and drew fascinating results, in order to keep a tight focus on the research question, only selected results are presented. The interviews with rabbis were selectively applied to relevant sections of the literature in order to deepen the understanding of the conversion process and how it occurs in South Africa. The understanding of experiences of inclusion and exclusion of Orthodox converts in their communities was gained from the converts themselves. This was achieved by using thematic analysis, with the assistance of NVivo 11 software.

1.7 Outline of chapters

Chapter 2: Sociological literature on conversion – an outline of the sociological literature on conversion is provided, along with an overview of the theoretical directions employed to understand the inclusion and exclusion of converts in their new communities.

Chapter 3: Research design and methods - an explanation of the approach, design and methods is provided in this chapter. The choice in approach, design and methods is discussed and justified.

Chapter 4: South African Jewry and the Johannesburg Orthodox community – a demographic outline of South African Jewry is provided. The Orthodox community in Johannesburg is also described in order to gain a more contextualised understanding of the environment that converts make their home. The chapter furthermore presents a profile of those converting into the Johannesburg Orthodox communities. This is followed by an in-

depth exploration of the manner in which conversions are conducted in Johannesburg, as understood by rabbis.

Chapter 5: Facilitatory factors of conversion - details those factors that made conversion possible which surfaced from interviews with converts and rabbis. They are factors associated with the nature of the social environment in post-apartheid South Africa (external to the Jewish community) and cover aspects such as changing nature of group boundaries and attitudes towards Jews, and also attitudes towards intermarriage (internal to the community).

Chapter 6: Reasons for conversion - as discussed by both groups of converts. These findings are grouped into two themes, namely belonging and identity.

Chapter 7: Experiences of inclusion and exclusion - in the words of converts, the experiences of exclusion and inclusion are discussed in relation to why conversion was deemed necessary, and acceptance and belonging their new communities. A hierarchy of inclusion is found among converts. Race is discussed as an issue that affects the experiences of inclusion and belonging.

Chapter 8: Discussion, recommendations and conclusion - the discussion provides a reading of the results within a chosen theoretical framework, and provides a conclusion about conversion in relation to belonging, the politics of belonging, social inclusion and exclusion. This is followed by recommendations for future studies of this nature. The overall conclusion presents a synopsis of the meaning of the key findings in this study.

Chapter 2: Sociological literature of conversions and conceptual definitions

2.1 Introduction

When an individual or group abandons a worldview, the ideology of one faith-system, in order to adopt another (whether from secular to religious, from one religion to another, or switching within one religion), a religious conversion is said to have taken place. The seeming simplicity of the notion of conversion is deceptive, as conversion is found in a wide variety of religions, situations, contexts and forms. Consequently, given the diversity in religious conversion, it is a difficult concept to grasp. It is also a topic that has been studied within various disciplines making the task of presenting a definitive view of the concept even more demanding. Since its rise as a scholarly topic, there has been little consensus on what conversion is and how it should be studied. The majority of the Western academy of religious conversions of the last century has focused on Christian conversions. However, the influence of globalisation and migration which has led to the increasing cross-pollination of cultures, as well as sub-altern studies and post-colonialism, the study of conversion has become richer and more varied in recent times, particularly post-2000. In addition to existing scholarship, undoubtedly each religion has its own body of literature on conversion. Within Jewish studies this is especially true as conversion is a topic that has been much debated over centuries, and more so, with birth of the modern state of Israel.

This chapter provides an overview of the literature of conversions from the time it entered mainstream Western scholarship. The overview illustrates the diversity in thought around conversion within sociology and highlights the limitations of the scholarship (particularly of the last century). Thereafter, the key concepts of this study, namely exclusion and inclusion will be explored.

2.2 Overview of conversion literature

Voluntary and forced religious conversions of individuals and groups have taken place across the globe for millennia. Therefore, conversion has been a crucial topic in theological and historical discourses for as long. However, as Cipriani (2009:vii) states, "Conversion does not have a long history of study as a sociological subject, even though it has a long historical tradition". Religious conversion as an area of scientific interest developed only from the latter

part of the 1800s along with the expansion of the social sciences and the modernist project (although debates around the role of tradition and religion in modernity have been present since the times of Marx, Weber and Durkheim). One of the earliest discussions of conversion in modern, Western social science was by William James, an American psychologist-cum-philosopher, working in the area of religion. In 1842, James published a series of lectures in a volume entitled, "The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature". This contained two lectures dedicated to the topic of conversion. Like James, academics studying the phenomenon since then have strongly emphasised the religious experience of conversion as an individual experience and have followed a similar analytical process to that presented by James, that is, an analysis of the psychological state in the radical, profound, sudden, and immediate change in worldview as a peculiar act. The line of thought and conceptualisation of conversions in scholarly literature, as seen in James' work tended to be understood in much the same way in psychological literature up until the end of the 1960s and 1970s.

Conversion as an interest in sociology emerged rather late. The sociological interest followed the rise of new religious movements in the United States (US) (and to a lesser extent, the United Kingdom [UK]) in the 1950s and particularly the 60s. Mainstream Christian dominated societies saw these movements as spearheaded by what were considered at the time 'cult groups'. The timing of these studies was not incidental. It was the height of the modern scientific era when mainstream religions in a supposedly secular age were challenged by flourishing, new charismatic movements. It was also a time of a profusion of anti-establishment movements and spiritual quests. In the US, for example, the rise of conversion scholarship partly owes its establishment to the hippie movement and the cultural protests arising out of the war with Vietnam (see Cipriani, 2009: viii for a detailed account). Due to this timing religious conversion in general started receiving substantial scholarly attention outside of psychology in a number of other disciplines, including sociology and anthropology (for reviews see Beaucage, Meintel & Mossière, 2007; Cipriani, 2009; Davidman & Greil, 1993; Giordan, 2009; Gooren, 2007; Jindra, 2014; Kilbourne & Richardson, 1989; Pitt, 1991; Rambo, 1999; Rambo, 2010; Rambo & Farris, 2012; Snow & Machalek, 1984; Sremac, 2010; Thumma, 1991). The earliest theory that influenced the field of sociology was 'brainwashing theory', which was followed by a number of other theories, such as process models and experimental activity theories (Popp-Baier, 2001:45), socialisation theories, and rational choice theories (Gooren, 2007). The field was hotly debated and highly contested among researchers. As Thumma (1991) declared, "(t)here was more disagreement than there was consensus". Scholarship on conversion focused on a notion of conversion that was individually experienced

and often invoked psychopathological causes (Stark 1965) that explained the radical transformation of the individual and his (or her) worldview. Most studies that emerged from this wave of interest present several problematic issues (Davidman & Greil, 1993:83). Firstly, these studies were placed at the pinnacle of the (American) modernist project and scientific rationality and they carried a functionalist preoccupation based on understanding religion as pre-modern, irrational and as something that would ultimately disappear (Beaucage et al, 2007:11). Secondly, early social scientific conversion studies show relevant social-psychological factors and the influence of social networks (such as the Lofland & Stark model 1965) in leading to conversion and appear to be more interested in how a group structures itself in order to gain new members and 'transform' them into something which the group requires. Overall, these studies have contributed to understanding the growth and sustainability of new social movements. However, these theories and studies neglect the social, historical and cultural aspects connected to conversion in a broader context (Sremac, 2010:8) and provide little insight into the similarities and differences in conversion across social environments. As such, internal conflicts and contestations around identity, ethnicity (where applicable), culture, politics and history remains under-examined in those conversion studies. Thirdly, the studies are not easily generalisable as they are based on new Christian religious movements / groups that take a particularly favourable stance on conversion. Because they are peculiar to Christian conversions, they leave a question mark about how to understand and study conversions that are non-Christian. Another difference is that many new religious movements are usually not ethnically bound, whereas Judaism is. Therefore, it may be better to look towards cases where religions are tied to ethnic communities, so that focus is directed to group citizenship, the community and its investment in converts' integration in order to perpetuate the group culture, ensure the social reproduction of long-standing and important cultural values and to enhance ethnic survival. But apart from that, and critical to understanding conversion, the plurality of the world as brought about by globalisation and migration, is barely factored into an understanding of conversion. Furthermore, the studies of religious conversions have generally been gender blind. The different experiences and the stratification of men and women in these groups has been of no - or lesser - interest.

From 1990s onwards different approaches to conversion have been called for. This started with Lewis Rambo, who was among the first to argue for the broadening of the scope of conversion studies and for an interdisciplinary approach. This call also corresponds with post-modern shifts in intellectual thought, and with the flowering of much scholarship on identity, globalisation, pluralism, cosmopolitanism and democracy. From this point on the development of a new wave of conversion studies can be seen, such as the work of Gauri

Viswanathan (1998) who explores conversion as the politics of nationhood within a colonial state (India) and as resistance to colonial power. Since the early 2000s, there has been a renewed focus on religious conversion in literature, as it pertains to Muslim converts as a minority of minorities in Europe. There is also a growing body of literature around conversion to Christianity in the East, where Christianity is a minority religion (Chao, 2006:194). These studies specifically focus on China and Taiwan (Chao, 2006; Yang, 1998 & 2004; Yang & Ebaugh, 2001; Yang & Tamney, 2006). Another emerging body of literature of conversion deals with the conversion of Asians to Christianity, the dominant religion in the US (Cao, 2005; Chen 2002; Hall, 2006; Ng, 2002; Wang & Yang, 2006; Yang, 1998; Zhang, 2006). These studies do not resemble early sociological theories of conversion where brainwashing, socialisation and rational choice are prominent; neither are they strictly located in the discipline of sociology. Rather, the former set of studies look at social, cultural, religious and political factors that influence increasing numbers of conversion to a minority religion, namely evangelical Christianity in the East, and may shed light on the motives for black and Afrikaner conversions to Judaism. The latter set of studies considers Asian immigrant groups in the US and stress conversion particularly to evangelicalism, as a function of assimilation, ethnic integration and identity reconstruction. Although Judaism resists assimilation, it is worth noting how Asian minorities manage ethnic integration and identity in the Diaspora. As Yang (1998:238) argues, "The conversion experiences of people from third world countries in political and social turmoil differ from those described in the existing literature". Another point of similarity is that the literature of Chinese and Taiwanese conversions responds to the bias in existing literature of the sociology of religious conversion which is mainly based on Christianity in developed countries and does not include non-white and non-black (referring to Asian) people (Yang, 1998:238). Important insights may be gained from these studies that challenge the assumptions of the greater body of conversion literature. In addition to the proliferation of studies on conversion in the last 16 years, there have emerged more recently a number of edited volumes on conversion such as the 803 page "Oxford Handbook on Religious Conversions" (2014), "Religious Conversions in the Mediterranean" (2013), and "Conversion in times of Pluralism" (2009). What is common to each of these volumes and the individual studies of the last two decades is that the chapters within each are diverse, covering many different religions (including Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism, Daoism, Confucianism, Judaism, New Religious Movements, and Mormonism). They cover many disciplines such as anthropology, demographics, geography, history, migration, psychology. They focus on different aspects of conversion, for example, the cultural, social, political, psychological, religious aspects and also the role of language. They also cover vastly different locations around the world from West to East, North to South. The studies include analyses of the micro, meso and macro

levels and demonstrate the "globalization (sic) of conversion" by considering how globalisation has impacted on religion, identities and conversion. All in all, the studies comprise a multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary body of scholarship. From this base a variety of definitions, particular to the type of study, emerge. As Castells (2010:12) says on the topic of religious fundamentalism, "theories are so diverse as to defy synthesis" and the same could be said for conversion. I make use of a selective set of sources that match the characteristics of my study to formulate the concept of conversion.

2.3 A conceptual understanding of conversion

As to be expected from the above introduction, definitions of conversion abound²⁸. However, what most definitions commonly imply is that conversion is "a primary event with both individual and social implications" (Giordan, 2009:6). Referring to conversion as a primary event means that conversion is of major significance to the individual but it does not limit that event to any particular form or type. Therefore, the definition is broad enough to study various kinds of conversion experiences and various kinds of converts. Further, by stating that conversion as a primary event has individual and social implications also opens the topic to various levels and themes of study (such as the current topic). Giordan (2009:1) further states "[a]lthough the theme of conversion is not one that has a long history in sociology, it constitutes a privileged observation point to study society, especially the complex framework linking together the individual and the socio-cultural contexts in which he [sic] is included.' Thus far, this study has demonstrated how conversion cannot be seen in isolation to the social context in which it occurs - and this is particularly true of Jewish conversions in South Africa. A key point of this dissertation is that conversion is as much a social process as it is a spiritual and religious one. Further, the dynamics of the environment need to be understood to explain why conversions occur in the way they do and why they attract the people that they do. Also, Jews are an ethnic group and the religion of Judaism "has been the dominant marker of Jewishness for centuries" (Herman, 2007:23). Because of the conceptualisation of Judaism as part of a people, a nation and an identity built on a 'special' relationship to God (the Torah given to Jews by God), converting to Judaism is also a complex social and

²⁸ In order to understand conversion in the post 2000 world, the conceptualisation of conversion as presented in this section draws on two separate but equally important edited volumes of conversion in the current times. The first is 'Conversion in the Age of Pluralism' edited in 2009 by Giuseppe Giordan. The second is 'Religious Conversions in the Mediterranean World' edited in 2013 by Nadia Marzouki and Olivier Roy.

ethnic issue even though it is regarded as a religious topic. The boundaries around ethnic groups are always contested in relation to a particular time and space in history. The maintenance of these boundaries therefore requires constant shaping and reshaping of ideas and values relative to their environments in order to preserve them. Given these characteristics, I argue that conversion to Judaism should be considered as a conversion of an ethnic type²⁹, which is never a static process and one that changes with dynamics in the community and social environment (and indeed is peculiar to the social environment). Furthermore, while religious ideas are important to the meaning of Jewish conversions, religious observances are also used as ethnic identity markers, the success of which rests on integration into a community. Therefore, it is hard to see conversion as a religious issue alone - but rather as an ethnic (formation / maintenance) process involving individuals and their communities. The conversion process, as an ethnic formation / maintenance process, relates to the view of French sociologist, Pierre-John Simon (Simon, 1994:18 cited in Gampiot, 2013:120) who describes the function of ethnicity as:

...a web of relatively objective...traits shared with a number of individuals and shaping them in their own eyes and others', into a specific community, and at the same time, a common consciousness of belonging to this community, both for yourself and the other members of the group (self-identity) and for the non-members (hetero-identity) in a feeling of acceptance, pride or even vanity (which may be assertive of or aggressive), or on the contrary, a feeling of shame and self-hatred (negative identity). Ethnicity is what makes you share with others membership in one of these extremely numerous and diverse, always highly specific, ethnic groups such as Quebecker-ness, Jewishness, Breton-ness, Vietnamese-ness, Japanese-ness etc.

Jewish conversions seem to fit into the above definition as the experience of making one Jewish (as opposed to, for example, a 'Judaist'). Conversion is about the making and remaking of self and group identity in order to achieve ethnic membership. Communities control who may enter the group and this is an important aspect of conversion. Conversion relies on various communal structures (e.g., the Beth Din), is embedded in power structures and is not purely an elevated individual spiritual experience (although it may occur as such for the individual). Gatekeepers (e.g., rabbis) direct entry into the community based on criteria they deem important. Conversion therefore is not just an individual, spiritual / religious process, but also a social process that requires tangible identity transformation of the ethnicity

²⁹ Where I refer to conversion as an ethnic process, it means that it is a process of making, or remaking, an ethnic group.

of an individual in order to gain recognition within a group in order to meet the functions of the community / ethnic group. Considering conversion as a spiritual quest implies that anyone can convert at any time and that equal status is acquired – which, as this dissertation will show, is not the case. It also assumes that the receiving community is homogenous and flat and therefore the definition overlooks the hierarchies within the community - the internal divisions and conflicts. Further, it does not tell us anything about which spaces and the status that converts can achieve. Therefore, I prefer to see conversion at an individual level as a transformative social process, embedded in social and power structures that serve particular ethnic functions. Doing so highlights the fact that not everyone may be accepted into a group and that stringent criteria may be applicable in order to qualify for, and maintain, membership and status within the group (i.e., social inclusion; see definition in Chapter 1). For this reason, experiences of social exclusion and inclusion are regarded as important in this study. Simultaneous social exclusions and inclusions as part of a system of stratification are implicit in conversion.

Finally, conversion is also about gaining a new sense of belonging (or as Simon says "a common sense of belonging"), which reflects the acquisition of citizenship within a desired group. It may also be seen as the affirmation of belonging for members of the ethnic group. Conversion is therefore not only about belonging (and citizenship in the group) in a particular time and space but also about the politics of belonging.

2.4 Belonging and the politics of belonging

The definition of ethnicity, which includes a "common consciousness of belonging to this community, both for yourself and the other members of the group (self-identity) and for the non-members (hetero-identity)", introduces the relevance and politics of belonging into the discussion on conversion. The formulation of the two concepts is derived the argument of Yuval-Davis (2006; 2010) and is considered important since this is what social inclusion and citizenship in a group implies: belonging.

Briefly, belonging may be said to be an emotional attachment, about feeling 'at home'. Belonging, according to Yuval-Davis, is constructed along three analytical levels: social locations, identities (and identifications), and normative values. Social locations refer to where people are positioned "along intersecting (or rather mutually constitutive) grids of social power" in particular historical times and spaces in society (Yuval-Davis, 2010:268). They refer to race, class, gender, age, kinship etcetera. These positionalities are generally constructed along many power axes at the same time (making it amenable to intersectional studies) and

have different meanings in different historical contexts. As a result of these characteristics, social locations are often fluid and contested. Social locations affect the way people feel and understand their belongings. Hand-in-hand with social locations is identity. Identities are "narratives, stories people tell themselves and others about who they are (and who they are not)" in reference to particular groupings and collectivities (Yuval-Davis, 2006:202). In other words, they may be seen as constructions of belonging and reflect a desire for emotional attachments. In that sense, identity narratives "relate to the past, to a myth of origin; they are aimed at explaining the present and probably above all they function as a projection of a future trajectory" (Yuval-Davis, 2006:202). By telling narratives, individuals transition into the identity they desire. Constructions of belonging mean different things to different people at different times and they shift in different situations. These identities become more important when emotional attachments are threatened and individuals feel less secure. Consequently, they are fluid and contested. Narratives have a performative function which are best explained in Yuval-Davis' (2006:203) own words:

Specific repetitive practices, relating to specific social and cultural spaces, which link individual and collective behaviour, are crucial for the construction and reproduction of identity narratives and constructions of attachment.

Normative values relate to "the ways specific belonging/s are evaluated and judged". These judgements are concerned with how boundaries should be drawn (exclusions) and how permeable they should be. In other words, belonging is about social locations within a power grid relevant to a particular point of time, construction of individual and collective identities and emotional attachments and also how these identifications and attachments are valued and judged.

Politics of belonging may be said to be "specific political projects aimed at constructing belonging in particular ways to particular collectivities that are, at the same time, themselves being constructed by these projects in very particular ways" (Yuval-Davis, 2006:197). Drawing on Benedict Anderson's (1991) "Imagined Communities" in which he theorises about the cultural roots of nationalism, Yuval-Davis points out that the boundaries that are created and exist between people (boundaries that include some and exclude others) comprise "an act of active and situated imagination". Although the politics of belonging is referred to at the level of a nation, she states that it can apply to any "delineated collectivity", in the case of this study, an ethnic community. In order to explain what the politics of belonging is based on and how it relates to belonging, Yuval-Davis (2006:204) explains:

The different situated imaginations, that construct these ...imagined communities with different boundaries depend on people's social locations, peoples experiences and definitions of self [identity], but probably even more importantly on their values.

Yuval-Davis differs from Anderson in that she argues that the imagined communities and their boundaries do not rely on the fact that the nation is too vast for every member thereof to know each other. Rather for her, what "underlies the politics of belonging is all about potentially meeting other people and deciding whether they stand inside or outside the imaginary boundary line of the nation and/or other communities of belonging, whether they are 'us' or 'them'" (Yuval Davis, 2006:204). It is important to note that the 'us' and 'them' are neither homogenous (although it may appear so) but rather "differential and varied". Therefore, to conclude, the politics of belonging consists of two mutually reinforcing currents. The first current is:

...not only the maintenance and reproduction of the boundaries of the reproduction of the community of belonging by the hegemonic political powers but also their contestation and challenge by other political agents (Yuval-Davis, 2006:205).

In the case of this research project, "community of belonging" is the heterogeneous Jewish community (made up of Orthodox, Progressive, Conservative, traditional and secular members of different ethnic backgrounds) in Johannesburg; "hegemonic political powers" refers to the Orthodox Beth Din; "other political agents" refers to the Progressive community (and less so Conservative) in Johannesburg. The second current is that it also:

...struggles around the determination of what is involved in belonging, in being a member of a community, and of what roles specific social locations and specific narratives of identity play in this...it encompasses contestations both in relation to the participatory dimension of citizenship as well as ...the status and entitlements such membership entails (Yuval-Davis, 2006:205).

Given the above, conversion - as relevant to Orthodox Judaism in this study - is an ethnic process connected to belonging and the politics of belonging. As such, in this study the conceptual approach to understanding conversion is that conversion is 1) a social construction (rather than a purely psycho-religious phenomenon) that functions to achieve belonging and overcome imaginary boundaries between members ('us') and non-members ('them') (politics of belonging) 2) is embedded in community dynamics where power and internal divisions are critical and 3) is influenced by the broader social environment.

2.5 Theoretical framework

The last point in 2.4 is that conversion is influenced by the social environment. Conversion, belonging, identity, the rise of ethnic communities all fit into the theoretical space of modernity. With the development of the social sciences (including sociology) and the advancements of modernity, these concepts have become increasingly densely researched. What is common between them, is the stage of modernity in which social life exists today.

Marx, Weber and Durkheim predicted that the transition to modernity would result in the decline of religion as societies increasingly turned to science and technology in mastering the world (Giddens, 2006:555). The classical theories of sociology make various contributions to understanding how social change through processes such as modernisation, industrialisation, migration and urbanisation effect a sense of being within collectivities and states, in other words belonging in society. Each theory explains differently the impacts of modernisation in society - creating an image of modern society. Marx sees social change as creating conflict between the interests of the different social locations in society (what he calls classes) that produces alienation and false consciousness and results in religion as the "opium of the masses". For Durkheim, it is the change in the bonds that bind people - their solidarity - which moves from a traditionally bound, collective, mechanical solidarity to an individualistic, specialised roles-based fragmentation in an economically dominated society, which he calls organic solidarity. With this comes a decline in communities that previously provided moral guidance for individuals. For Weber, the Protestant ethic in Europe at the time was amenable to the development of capitalism which brings with it modernisation. Modernisation and its obsession with economy and science brings rationalisation and bureaucracy which is a constraining force on society, an 'iron cage', which results in disenchantment in society. Effectively what modernity brought about was the rise of the modern nation state based on a new set of economic relationships that would replace the old sense of community and being and uproot one's sense of belonging. What emerges from this is a somewhat subdued, constrained, lost and demoralised individual, in a stratified, yet efficient modern world where society either betrays him/her, or leaves the individual to fend for him/herself, and/or imposes many contradictions in the meaning of his/her existence. Building on these themes, structural-functional theorists of the first half of the 20th century argued that these situations of uncertainty provided reason for a return to religion - or gave weight to the role of religion in people's lives (O' Dea, 1966). However, since the latter 20th century, nation states have been in decline, and nationalism is looked upon reservedly and sceptically; identities are actively being constructed and reconstructed; closed communities (such as gated communities) and ethnicities are on the ascendance; religions have become global movements and major money

spinning enterprises. As Hall (1996:596) states, "[a] distinctive type of structural change is transforming modern societies in the late twentieth century". That structural change is globalisation (Hall, 1996; Castells, 2010). Giddens (1990) referred to that stage of modernity as reflexive modernity. Giddens and Hall both show that identities have become more important today. For Giddens they are reflexive in nature; Hall (1996:598) claims that with globalisation, which erodes time and space, identities become pluralised and these are "sometimes contradictory or unresolved identities" which cross-cut each other and dislocate them; they fragment and become de-centered, meaning that they are also constantly shifting. Castells (2010) makes a significant and useful contribution to an understanding of the nature of modern society. He views modern society as a 'network society'. He (2010:2) states that "[o]ur world, and our lives, are being shaped by conflicting trends of globalization and identity" that arise through the global transformation of capital and the technological revolution - and the demise of statism - in the network society. In the network society, which is the advanced stage of modernity we find ourselves in, identities are in flux, and belonging has shifted from nations and states into reconstructed, defensive communities based on identities (particularly resistance identities). Bauman (2001; 2006) offers a different perspective. Drawing on Marx and Engel's famous statement that with modernity (modern capitalism), "All that is solid melts into air", Bauman (2001:30) proposes a view of modernity which he terms "liquid modernity". In liquid modernity, the solids (i.e., old social structures) are melted in a process of "liquefaction" to make way for new solids, "more solid than the melted ones". He (2001:30) later says this takes place "to clear the site for new and improved solids...preferably perfect and for that reason no longer alterable" (2006:3). Therefore "the melting of solids" is "the permanent feature of modernity". In this process, communities are redefined into "ethnic communities", "ghettos", and "cloakroom communities" (Bauman, 2001; 2006). While communities offer the illusion of freedom, they are in reality constraining of individuals as they rely on uniformity, compliance and loyalty for their survival. Therefore, communities are in reality self-serving, contradictory and misleading (Bauman is cynical of communities). Communities are the new solids and that is their paradox.

2.6 Conclusion

This chapter outlined the literature of conversion and provided a conceptual definition of conversion relevant to this study. This definition links it to belonging and the politics of belonging. The theoretical explanation for conversion raises the importance of modernity and globalisation in understanding these concepts. They underlie conversion which is associated

with belonging, citizenship, inclusion, exclusion, identity, ethnicity, and community. Each concept in itself is an expression of modernity and globalisation. The interconnectedness of the concepts is staggering - they all speak about the same thing: the stage of modernity we live in today affects humans in profound and multiple ways.

Rather than prescribing in advance which theoretical current will apply to this study, and in keeping with the social constructionist approach to the study, the currents will be looked for in the data. The next chapter will provide a description and justification of the research methods.

Chapter 3: Methodology and methods

“Nature and the world do not tell stories, individuals do.”

Riessman, 2002:219

3.1 Introduction

The main objective of the study is to understand the experiences of social inclusion and exclusion of converts to Judaism in South Africa. Their experiences of inclusion and exclusion are linked to an identity that must change in order to be accepted into a new community. Chapter 1 outlines the dynamics of the environment and how this could impact on conversion. Chapter 2 provides a sociological and conceptual overview of conversion that extends the thought that Jewish conversion is more than a religious phenomenon. The current chapter addresses the research design and details the research methods used in the study.

3.2 Methodology and research design

The paradigmatic approach of this study is interpretivism as the objective is to understand the reasons for conversion and the experiences of conversion from the perspective of converts. Just as conversion studies of the last century have typically fallen into the realm of modernist social science, namely positivism, so too has the previous study of Orthodox conversions in South Africa (Zekry, 1998). Social science from a modernist perspective holds that the individual's knowledge of the material (and external) world, is objective, value-free, and a “condition of the individual mind” (Gergen, 2001:3) awaiting discovery. The assumptions of modernist social science, which are based on the natural scientific model, have been rigorously critiqued and challenged as being replete with internal biases that have been more favourable to the development of positivistic, modernist social science than an accurate reflection of knowledge of the social world (Gergen, 2001:4). Against this backdrop interpretivism has emerged as an alternative to modernist social science. Drawing from Max Weber's notion of *verstehen* (trans. understanding), the philosophical tradition of phenomenology and the theological tradition of hermeneutics, interpretivism takes an anti-positivistic stance and does not assume that the 'social' is objective and fixed. Interpretivism argues that fundamental differences occur between the subjects of study in the natural sciences and the social sciences, and

methods should be more attuned to the unique qualities of the social sciences rather than be an import of the natural sciences. As Bryman (2001:14) puts it:

The fundamental difference [between the natural and social sciences] resides in the fact that social reality has meaning for human beings and therefore human action is meaningful - that is, it has meaning for them and they act on the basis of the meanings they attribute to their acts and to the acts of others.

In other words, interpretivism requires that the subjective meaning of social action is understood by the social scientist (Bryman, 2001:13). By understanding how people make sense of their world, the social scientist is able to understand also the meaning of social action and behaviour from the perspective of the person involved. It requires taking an empathetic approach to the social sciences and meaning and human action are viewed as interrelated phenomena.

A number of theoretical traditions make up interpretivism. One such theoretical position is social constructionism, which stems from various disciplines including sociology, philosophy and linguistics. Among others, it draws from the works of Karl Mannheim, Ludwig Fleck, Peter Berger and Thomas Luckman, George Herbert Mead and Irving Goffman (Gergen, 2001:5). More recently, since the 1990s, social constructionism has been expanded by Kenneth Gergen, who has made several key contributions to the development of social constructionism particularly as it pertains to theological studies (see Gergen, 2001). Briefly, Gergen (2001) explains that social constructionists question taken for granted knowledge and should be more critical of ontological presumptions. We should begin to make sense of the social world from this standpoint. Furthermore, the way in which we understand the world must be thought of as the outcome of interactions between people that are expressions of their particular historical and cultural dynamics. Language is also seen as embedded in patterns of relationship which are specific to contexts. Meaning in language is derived not because social phenomena exist externally and because terms are given to describe or label them. Meaning comes from language that emerges from the patterns of relationships in which it exists - those being historically, culturally and context specific. In other words, the way in which the world is understood is a "product not of objective observation of the world, but of the social processes and interactions in which people are constantly engaged with each other" (Sremac, 2010:12). Gergen (2001:10) sees language as "integers within patterns of relationships ... outgrowths of specific modes of life, rituals of exchange, relations of control and domination and so on". Truth is consequently discursive "acquiring its meaning from the particular traditions of usage" (Gergen 2001:10). Generally speaking therefore social constructionism takes as its starting point that knowledge is produced through historically and culturally rooted social

processes, interactions and language, which are context-dependent (Gergen, 2001; Popp-Baier, 2001; Sremac, 2010). Social action therefore must be seen as a dynamic feature of social interaction and also is an outcome of these 'forces'. Social constructionism strives to analyse the meaning of "historically situated social interactions underlying the establishment of entities or facts [e.g. conversion] in the physical or social world, in sciences and humanities" (Popp-Baier, 2001:42) and "uncover[s] the ways in which individuals and groups participate in the creation of their perceived social reality" (Sremac, 2010:10). Social constructionism sees the meaning attributed to issues / phenomena, such as experiences of social inclusion or exclusion, as emerging from social interaction between individuals within a community or society, from social processes that result in such - for example conversion. It also sees human behaviour - the decisions and choices made - as "an active process of construction and interpretation in which people together attempt to define the nature of their particular social situations" (Sremac, 2010:10). In other words, the aim is to delve deeper into social phenomena as constructed, experienced, understood and communicated by individuals who have gone through these particular circumstances in a particular time, place and space.

With these elements in mind, social constructionism works well for a sociological study on conversion. There is a reorientation of conversion studies that recognises history, culture, and context (as done in the preceding chapters) and also language as shared process of interaction through which meaning is derived. Building on Gergen's framework, Sremac (2010) applies social constructionism to religion in two ways. Firstly, religion is both a "collective and cultural framework that shapes the entirety of life and beliefs" (Sremac, 2010:14). Religion is understood as a collective means where beliefs and values are held by a collective - a community of people - and therefore to be converted is a process of becoming part of that collective. Conversion is therefore naturalisation into the collective and "into group language [which] plays a crucial role in shaping one's beliefs" (Sremac, 2010:14). Thus, conversion and community cannot exist separately. Sremac (2010:14) goes on to say that "there is a causal relationship between a person's conversion and the community where this happens; the community is both the context and cause for the process of conversion. Therefore conversion happens not without the community, but within". At the same time, religion as culture recognises that, although religious practices may be consistent across time or context, the narratives differ as they are historically and culturally contingent (Sremac, 2010:15). According to social constructionism knowledge comes to be constructed in its specific context (Sremac, 2010:15). With conversion, this knowledge relates to the transformation of the self which occurs in a religious framework, in a particular context, which is then described, acted

upon and recognised by others (Sremac, 2010:15). Gergen (2001:10) states that it is important for social constructionists to ask "what the functions of knowledge claims are within a community, in which rituals do the claims play an important role, what and who benefits or loses through these knowledge claims from what standpoint is the inquiry taking place; what values are at stake; whose voices are silenced by approaching the work from this particular standpoint?". This is not the only place to reflect on the narratives. Based on the idea that language is socially constructed and understood, the researcher should be reflective of the ways in which research methods (e.g., interviews) contribute to the construction of the self through the presentation of narratives in the interview process. In other words, the inquiry operates at two levels of self-construction: 1) by relating a story of one's life and 2) by crafting that story in the particular context and dynamics of an interview for a researcher and all the values and historical and cultural representations he/she embodies. Therefore, reflexivity is incorporated into the social constructionist perspective. The role of the research and the researcher in the construction and interpretation of the narratives should be reflected upon as much their functioning within a particular community.

Social constructionism was selected for this study because 1) it gives converts a public voice, one that has not been articulated before by converts in South Africa, 2) it is relevant for understanding conversion as a communal and cultural phenomenon - a process of social transformation embedded within social interactions and power relationships and 3) it provides possibilities to explore identity and experiences of inclusion and exclusion following conversion as understood from individual conversion accounts. In summary, it was selected because it recognises that conversion is a social process of transformation (not exclusively religious or individual) and gives scope to understanding it in a South African context with its historical racial and political dynamics. Furthermore, it encourages the understanding of the protagonists in their stories as their stories are being told and unfold - their stories / narratives in context, in time and in space. Social constructionism also recognises and interprets the researcher's role in the research as an interactive construction. Self-reflection is particularly important in this study as I, the researcher, have been a participant and observer of the process during my own experiences of inclusion and exclusion which led to the conceptualisation of this research.

The theoretical contribution that this study makes is to embolden the literature of conversion studies from an alternative sociological view. It is alternative in four ways. Firstly, by taking a stance that goes beyond the traditional psychological, theological approach to conversion, which has also influenced sociological studies, this study pursues a route that has been called for by leading scholars in the field. In this regard, Lewis Rambo, a leading scholar

who has studied conversion for decades, has called for interdisciplinary studies of conversion that go beyond psychology, theology and more traditional studies of conversion within the sociology of religion (Rambo, 1993; 2010). While this study is not interdisciplinary per se, the points of interest cross multiple disciplines (sociology, anthropology, history, politics and cultural studies) and the epistemological and methodological frameworks used are derived from an interdisciplinary base. Secondly, social constructionism is an unusual framework for conversion studies and, as few studies of conversion adopt this perspective, this study can add to the dialogue in literature of the relevance and usefulness of social constructionism for conversion studies. Finally, within the social constructionist framework, the methodological design applied for this study is unique. Thus, a contribution is made by opening social constructionism to new methodological applications and research designs as encouraged by Gergen (1994; 2001) that can ultimately enhance the knowledge gained and penetrate the limiting paradigmatic divide.

3.3 Research design and methods

The research was designed to respond to two main research questions, namely "What explanations do ethnic and new spiritual converts provide for conversion to Judaism in Johannesburg in post-apartheid South Africa?"; and "How do converts to Judaism experience social inclusion and exclusion in their Jewish communities in post-apartheid South Africa?" Social constructionism envisages itself as a single strategy research design - that of qualitative research strategies. Based on its ideological foundations and critique of modernist, positivistic social science from which it has emerged, qualitative research strategies are naturally and inherently implied in social constructionism. However, Gergen (2001:12), a keen advocate and prime developer of social constructionism, challenges this assumption. He reminds researchers that constructionism is "indebted to an empiricist heritage" and argues that empirical studies still offer value even though they differ in focus to constructivism (Gergen 2001:12). Yet, the social constructionist studies visited for this dissertation tend to all be qualitative. With Gergen's (2001) arguments in mind, the research design for this study initially took an unusual and bold step with social constructionism. The design employed was not purely single-strategy (i.e. qualitative) rather it was devised as a multi-strategy design, made up of quantitative and qualitative methods to meet the two different research objectives. The use of quantitative and qualitative data within a single research project is somewhat controversial generally and is also unique in the area of conversion studies, which have traditionally been studied from a quantitative perspective or more recently from a qualitative perspective by those advocating for social constructionism. But, for this study, it was hoped that

the use of quantitative and qualitative methods combined would add value to the social constructionist framework - in creating an overall picture of the social, historical and political context against which the experiences of social inclusion and exclusion through conversion lie. In other words the quantitative data would display the historical trends for conversion and chart to what extent 'atypical' conversions were occurring in post-apartheid South Africa. It was deemed essential for establishing part of the historical-contextual-communal understanding of conversion. Thereafter, the qualitative data would allow an in-depth understanding of converts' reasons for conversion and provide the opportunity for their perceptions of inclusion and exclusion to emerge. While a quantitative survey could have explored the experiences of converts in their new communities after conversion, it was felt that qualitative methods were more appropriate as this is an unexplored question in the South African context and would be better suited to an understanding of the phenomenon.

The quantitative data was generated from the conversion records of the Registrar of Orthodox conversions, Rabbi Ron Hendler and Rabbi Barney Bender. The office of the Registrar of Orthodox conversions resides at the Union of Orthodox Synagogues, where the Beth Din is also located. Although the Beth Din had granted access to Rabbi Pinchas Zekry for his PhD study on conversions, they had not been as obliging for the current study. Access to the archives was not granted by the Beth Din and therefore the conversion certificates could not be checked. However, the Registrar was supportive of the study and was helpful in giving access to his records and to those of his former colleague, Rabbi Bender, who had previously run the process for a number of decades until his passing in 2003. Therefore, two sets of records were accessed - those of the former Registrar, Rabbi Bender, for the years 1994-2000 (although he served in the position for a longer period) and his successor, Rabbi Hendler, for the years 2000-2013. Bender's files contained the registration forms of the conversion candidates. These forms indicated the identity of the candidate (male / female, individual, couple or family), the reason for conversion, the race, ethnicity and age of each candidate in the unit applying for conversion and the date of conversion. Hendler's records consisted merely of a list of names of candidates so it was difficult to ascertain the same level of information as contained in Bender's files. From Hendler's files, gender could be established from the first name in most cases, but in some cases androgynous names made the inference of gender more speculative. Race and ethnicity could also be established from surnames but again, this is not always a clear or a reliable indicator of race and ethnicity. Furthermore, Hendler's lists did not show age or reason for conversion and so differentiating between adults and children was difficult. The unit type could be seen based on the surname and whether there was a group of individuals with the same surname converting at the same time. However, while it

could be established whether a family unit was converting, it could not be seen whether the family unit were siblings, or parent(s) and children, as age was not indicated. From the surnames presented it could be seen whether the families converted had a prior connection to Judaism (such as through a family member or marriage) or not. A similar method could not be used when seeking to establish individuals from couples because in a couple, only the non-Jewish partner would be listed as the convert and therefore in the data, they appear as singles.

Furthermore, the records from Hendler overlapped with Bender's records for the years 2000-2003 and discrepancies appeared between the two sets of records for the overlapping years. The totals from Hendler were larger and as I was unable to verify against the certificates, it was impossible to know whose statistics were accurate. I defaulted to Hendler for those years to avoid excluding candidates that are claimed to have converted. Hendler's list ended in August 2013 and it is possible that a few more conversions may have taken place later that year. Therefore, 2013 presents an incomplete total. From the records provided (Bender's files and Hendler's lists), data were extracted and collated into basic descriptive statistics. It was the first time that information from the files and lists of Bender and Hendler had been generated into data. It was also the first time that data on Orthodox conversions had been generated since Zekry's 1998 study.

The qualitative data were generated from semi-structured, in-depth interviews with participants (converts) from Orthodox Jewish communities in Johannesburg. In-depth interviews were regarded not only as a method from which to gather narratives of conversion in the words of converts, but also the opportunity to present conversions as stories which interpret - or reinterpret - how participants' life experiences have affected their religious beliefs and shaped their decisions going forward. In so doing, converts might be organising events over time into a particular understanding and in the process giving them a particular meaning and themselves new self-identity which guides their current behaviour and practices. In-depth interviews allow converts to be the narrators of their life stories and to express their self-transformation within a series of related events that hold a subjective meaning for them, and gives them a voice.

An interview schedule was conceptualised for a pilot study and was tested in 2012 on six converts who had lived as Jews in South Africa for at least two years. The first part of the interview schedule was designed to understand the background of the convert's life. In the second part of the interview, participants were asked to relate the story of how and why they came to convert to Judaism. The interview schedule consisted of open-ended questions - in keeping with social constructionist methodology. The open-ended questions were grouped into broad areas of interest: demographics, religious background, knowledge of Jews and

Judaism prior to conversion and conversion itself. In the category of conversion, the idea was to extract what prompted conversion, how and when conversion took place and also understand experiences during and after. Questions included (among others): "Where were you born?", "In what year were you born?", "What was your home language in your family home?", "How many siblings do you have?", "What was your former religious affiliation", "Did you practise religion as a child?" and "How important was religion to you prior to conversion". In some cases, questions did not need to be asked as the participants ventured into those areas without prompting. The interview schedule was adopted loosely to allow for flexibility in responses so as to capture the narratives the way that participants perceived the flow of events leading up to their conversions, during their conversion and after. In other words, the interview schedule was used as a guideline, rather than as a fixed structure. Therefore questions were not posed in a rigid formula and could follow any order depending on the participant and in keeping with how the narrative emerged. Within the answers provided, many converts related their spiritual journeys over their lifetimes as lengthy life-stories, in which they highlighted important symbols and events that came to be challenged over time, and discussed the meaning and value of religion, inclusion and conversion in their lives at the time and going forward. In some cases, participants provided abbreviated answers, which is where the interview schedule was useful in drawing out longer responses. At other times spontaneous questions related to the specific issues raised by the participant were asked to develop the participant's train of thought. Where questions were asked, generally it was because these participants were less open and ready to relate their experiences. The demographic-type questions relaxed the more reticent participants as they were 'easy' to answer and put the participants at ease with the interview process. However, in some cases these questions were unnecessary as the participants would start their story from their childhood and cover all elements of the interview without prompting. Discussion around identity and inclusion arose spontaneously and organically during the story of conversion. Because of the nature of the interviews, the format of the interview and the structure of the transcripts of each interview was different. However, the outcome, although derived through many different narrative forms, was the same. Namely, an understanding was gained of who the convert was, what role religion played in their lives before and after conversion, the experiences of conversion during and after the process - along with the challenges and benefits of conversion. However, because the duration of the interview was between 1.5-2 hours, many participants became fatigued towards the end and narratives became shorter - especially as pertaining to inclusion in the Jewish community after conversion and so less analysis was possible on this point.

It was mentioned earlier (in chapter 1), that, in addition to converts, rabbis were also interviewed for this study. They were included in order to gain a deeper understanding of conversion contextually, beyond literature and within the environment in which it occurred. It was felt that this would provide a more comprehensive understanding of conversion in practice in Johannesburg as well as a more nuanced appreciation of what converts enter into when they convert, thereby allowing the reader to comprehend converts' responses better. As the study was confined to Orthodoxy, only interviews with rabbis from the Orthodox sector are included. The purpose of the interviews was to have rabbis describe the process of conversion, their role within the process, the strengths and weaknesses of the programme, who is converting and why (from their perspective), as well as the factors that affect the integration of converts into their new communities. A structured, open-ended questionnaire was designed for interviews with rabbis. Much like the interviews with converts, the duration of the interviews were approximately 1.5 hours in length.

3.4 Understanding the convert categories

The quantitative data were organised into two convert categories, namely ethnic converts and new spiritual converts³⁰ (see forthcoming Section 3.7). They were derived according to their motivation for conversion. Ethnic converts were seen as those who had come to conversion via marriage. Their entry to Judaism could be through an existing spouse (marriage would have already taken place civilly) or through a future spouse (marriage had not yet taken place). They were termed 'ethnic converts' for reasons discussed earlier in Section 1.3.1.

New spiritual converts were conceptualised as the 'atypical' converts discussed in Section 1.3.2. They are either Afrikaners and persons of colour (black, Indian, Asian and Coloured) who had no prior connection to Judaism (through spouse, family, or ethnic group membership - such as the Lemba). They were seen as 'units' consisting of individuals, couples or families. The term 'units' was provided by Hendler. The term 'new' was used with spiritual converts, to make the point that this category of converts is generally unprecedented in conversion trends (discussed in Chapter 1). Even though there have always been spiritual converts to Judaism, they have been few, and typically not Afrikaner nor persons of colour.

³⁰ Although other convert types do arise (e.g. those with Jewish family members, or those for adoption) data for only ethnic and spiritual converts were generated.

The use of the term 'spiritual' is not intended as a label for people who define themselves as spiritual, or who demonstrate a particular level of spirituality or type of spirituality. It refers simply to the idea that these individuals were motivated to convert for reasons that were not ethnic (related to marriage, culture or family), nor as a result of adoption. The reasons for their conversion related specifically to a spiritual quest or out of some form of religious interest. The term 'spiritual' was used to refer to either or both reasons (spiritual and/or religious) for conversion, as the case may be for the convert.

Spirituality is difficult to define because there is little consensus in sociological literature of what it constitutes and how it differs from religiosity or religiousness (Lazar, 2014). Unfortunately, space does not permit a full discussion of the intrinsic differences between the two concepts and an abbreviated account is provided here. For the purposes of this study, spirituality was understood as being related to life coherency (meaning and purpose in life) and the belief or experience of the transcendental, and may or may not be derived from organised religion (Lazar 2014; Smith, Stones, Peck & Naidoo, 2007). For the sake of brevity, religion may be understood as "an institutionalised set of doctrines and rituals that are practiced by a distinct group of people" (Smith et al, 2007:264). Another way of describing an established religion is that it has its own doctrines, temples, body of specialists, devotions, and rituals (Pace, 2009). In this study of Jewish conversion, I understand 'being religious' as observing the applicable set of doctrines and rituals of the group to which one belongs in and religiosity / religiousness is the level to which these doctrines and rituals are observed within an established community³¹. The difference between spirituality and religion / being religious may appear clear cut, but it is not (Lazar, 2014). This is because religion, and being religious may include being spiritual or achieving spirituality. For this reason, understandings of spirituality and religiosity may differ according to the religion to which it applies, the context in which it is examined (e.g. when a person is in poor health or of advanced age), and the methodological frameworks through which the concepts are studied. For example, Lazar (2014) argues that applying scales of spirituality and religiosity derived from Christian religions is a limitation when studying Judaism because the fundamental precepts and expectations of the religions are so different. Importantly too, definitions of each concept may also differ according to individual discretion and self-perception.

Generally, there is recognition that they are both multi-dimensional concepts that are independent but related (Lazar, 2014). The usage of the term 'spiritual converts' is used to

³¹ Again, the literature offers multiple definitions of religiousness and religiosity however, since they are not the core focus of the study, a succinct overview for conceptual purposes is made use of here.

to cover the different possibilities within the context of this study. In the narratives of new spiritual converts, traces of both concepts are found in the reasons why they choose Judaism. Because this study is not an examination of the difference in the concepts of spirituality and religiosity / religiousness, it is accepting of both and is employed for smooth reading in the analysis of data.

3.5 Analysis

The records obtained from the Registrar of Conversions were basic. Hendler's records were received electronically and consisted of lists of names with corresponding dates, and Bender's information was presented in paper-based, hand-typed forms in multiple files. Both sets of information were then captured in a MicroSoft Excel spreadsheet. As no relational or hypothetical analysis was required, Microsoft Excel was deemed adequate and SPSS software was not required for any statistical purposes. The quantitative data generated provided simple descriptions of conversions over the years. The Excel tables constituted the primary quantitative data for this study. Starting in 1994 and ending in 2013, it showed the number of conversions per year, gender, and race of converts according to convert categories (ethnic and new spiritual converts). The quantitative data are presented in detail in chapter 5.

The analysis of the qualitative data for both converts and rabbis was guided by the approach of Miles, Huberman and Saldaña (2014) using NVivo software. With the help of NVivo Software, the data was organised and coded into different themes. The data was organised into three groups: rabbis, ethnic converts and new spiritual converts (as described in section 3.4 above). Each section of a narrative was entered as a 'node' within NVivo. Within each set of data, the nodes comprised of topics, such as reasons for conversion as well as experiences of the conversion process and life as a Jew thereafter. Nodes were developed according to the importance, relevance and frequency with which they arose in the narratives; in other words, if many converts spoke about a particular topic, answered a particular area of interest or was new information, it was created into a node. The nodes were populated, amended, refined and re-grouped as the narratives of the participants developed. A second order grouping and re-grouping was then done to consolidate nodes into broader themes, for example, such as 'Belonging'. Because of the differences between the conversion types, not all nodes were the same for ethnic and spiritual converts. As an example, Table 3.1 shows the listing for the node structure that emerged from ethnic and spiritual converts for reasons for conversion.

Table 3.1: Node structure for reasons for conversion

Analytical Theme	Ethnic converts	New spiritual converts
Facilitators	<p>1. First level coding nodes: Elimination of group barriers? Elimination of group barriers? Intergroup contact No knowledge of Jews Condition of the partner / spouse</p> <p>2. First level coding nodes: Trend towards more religiosity Religious easier Second level: Religious revival</p> <p>3. First level coding nodes: Leniency towards intermarriage and conversion Second level: Attitudes to intermarriage</p> <p>4. First level coding nodes: Then vs. now Softening of attitudes Second level: Changing attitudes towards Jews</p>	<p>1. First level coding nodes: Elimination of group barriers? Elimination of group barriers? Intergroup contact No knowledge of Jews Questioning enabled Internet Breakdown in authoritarianism Second level: Post-apartheid environment shift in values</p> <p>2. First level coding nodes: Network society / information age; Questioning; Search for truth; Internet. Second level coding: Access to previously prohibited religious information</p>
Primary reason:	<p>First level coding nodes: Push factors Condition of the partner / spouse Acceptance by partner's family &</p>	<p>First level coding nodes: Push factors Search for truth; Changing values of church; Collapse of structure and boundaries in</p>

<p>Belonging & identity</p>	<p>community Avoid marginalisation Children’s benefit (identity and acceptance) “Choice” Second level coding: 1. Unified family values / family cohesion 2. Single, integrated family identity</p>	<p>the Church; Community rejection; Rejection by Afrikaner communities (persecution) Rejection of Afrikaner identity Require guidance to practise Internet Second level coding: Search for new moral frameworks</p>
<p>Primary reason: Belonging & identity</p>	<p>First level coding: Pull factors: Strong cultural life Strong family values Own religious beliefs improved / enhanced Replacement of absence of religion / weak religious views Second level coding: Socio-cultural benefits</p>	<p>First level coding nodes: Pull factors Organised community and available resources Welcoming community (home) Trusted moral framework Answers to questions Second level coding: 1. Strong, vibrant religious community = support for learning and practice; 2. Satisfying, reliable religion</p>
<p>Secondary reason: Connection / attachment</p>	<p>First level coding: Empathy for Jewish suffering (e.g., Holocaust) Second level coding: Empathy</p>	<p>First level coding: Similarities between Jews and Afrikaners Upbringing of Old Testament = Torah Second level coding: As per first level</p>

Table 3.1 indicates that the nodes that developed for ethnic converts were consistent with the description of the elements of ethnicity discussed in Chapter 1. The label of ‘ethnic convert’ was therefore justified as an ideal-type. The first level nodes functioned to categorise the interviews into themes as represented by each node. These themes were organised around their common properties / message which in turn organised the nodes into higher level categories, referred to as the second level coding. The analytical themes were derived from the second level nodes.

Thereafter, the nodes were analysed on their own and compared in order to understand to what extent the reasons and experiences of conversion differed and why. NVivo also

allows for the capturing of demographic variables and in order to understand the profile of the participants more accurately, this tool was used to describe the participants in section 3.6 below.

3.6 Participants

Converts who had lived in their Jewish communities as Jews for at least two years were purposively sought for this study. Two years was chosen so as to ensure converts would have had experienced some time living as Jews in their communities. Furthermore, after two years it could be expected that the newness of conversion and the subsequent hype would have faded; thus, participants could reflect on daily life. Time of conversion was not taken into account, only that participants must have converted while living in Johannesburg and be willing to talk about their conversion. By including converts who had converted prior to 1994 gave a view of process changes and its impacts. The post-apartheid element would enter in this regard, also in terms of the background to conversion.

The first interviews with converts in the Johannesburg communities were established through my own networks in the Orthodox community. Thereafter, the converts were asked to recommend others and to request their permission to share their contact details. I contacted only those converts who agreed to be contacted and out of this group most agreed to be interviewed. Those who did not agree were not contacted again.

A diversity of characteristics in the sample of converts was sought, such as the length of time that had passed since conversion (minimum length was 2 years and no maximum), age, marital status, race, ethnicity (particularly of Afrikaners) as they were considered important factors in experiences of inclusion and exclusion in the community. Two of the aforementioned characteristics proved particularly difficult to achieve in the convert sample. The first related to marital status. Although marriage is the primary reason for conversion, the divorce rate between Jews and converts is higher than that of Jews (Bruk, 2005:134; Zekry, 1998:239). The status of those who come to convert because of marriage comes to be questioned after divorce since their *raison d'être* has been removed - from the perspective of others - and their place in their community is questioned as they revert back to being seen as converts - or former non-Jews - rather than Jews. In terms of their inclusion, to contrast the experiences of divorced converts from married converts would be enlightening. Unfortunately, the divorced convert I contacted in Johannesburg refused the interview. Other converts who had faced the prospects of divorce (but did not ultimately divorce) did agree and made some valuable contributions in this regard. Interestingly, a number of widows participated in the

study and their situations provided interesting comparisons. The majority of the converts in the sample are married however.

The second characteristic among converts that was difficult to establish was racial diversity. While there appears to be a number of persons of colour, the number of conversions is very small and converts of colour are very few (especially those who are South African born). At the time of the study there were only five in the Orthodox cohort in Johannesburg (an individual and a family of four). This was confirmed by the lists of conversion candidates provided by the Orthodox Registrar in Johannesburg. These lists indicated no other black, Coloured or Indian converts until that point in time. However, approximately five other persons of colour were in the programme at the time of the study: two black men and one black family from Central Africa and three South African born women (one Indian, one Coloured and one Muslim) who were in relationships with Jewish men. I have since learned that more people of colour have joined the Orthodox programme in Johannesburg. The visibility of black converts is becoming more obvious with an increase in their numbers as a visit to the Norwood Mall in Johannesburg in December 2014 suggested. I encountered three black men striding confidently through the passages of the mall with their *tzitzit* (fringes on the edge of a religious garment as a reminder of the commandments) and *yarmulkes* (skull caps) in full display, aware of and enjoying the attention they attracted. However, while their presence might be sensational to some, the sensation caused by their visible presence in the community outweighs the actual number of black converts in the community. However, full access to conversion certificates is required to verify this assumption.

As a result of the above-mentioned factors, the sample that was ultimately achieved displayed some skews. The sample was particularly of white, married women which is reflective of the broader population of Jewish converts (although a few black and Coloured participants were interviewed). A final skew in the sample should be acknowledged. The sample is made up of converts who remain members of their Jewish communities to some extent. Those converts who had left their communities as an indication that they had moved away from their conversions unsurprisingly refused participation in the study. Therefore, the study explores the experiences of inclusion and exclusion of Jewish converts that remain in their communities post-conversion.

Overall 103 people were contacted to participate in the study as the study initially included converts and rabbis (and other authority figures and conversion programme teachers) from Orthodox, Progressive and Conservative in Cape Town and Johannesburg. From those contacted to participate in the study, 67 interviews were collected. However, a decision was taken to limit the study to only Orthodox converts. From the 67 interviews conducted,

37 were Orthodox converts from Johannesburg. Of that 37, three of the interviews were not usable either because the recording was faulty or that it was discovered in the interview that the converts did not match the requirements of the study (i.e., they had not converted in South Africa, or were not South African nationals and were unlikely to remain the South African community). The majority of the converts interviewed for this study converted converted after 1994; only 7 had converted before 1994.

In addition to the converts, ten interviews were conducted with rabbis of which nine were used. Of those rabbis who were approached, many played a dual role, such as being either a member of the Beth Din and communal rabbi, or Registrar of conversion and communal rabbi. Of the nine rabbis, one was the Registrar and at the same time a community rabbi, one a community rabbi and *dayan* (judge) and the longstanding head of the Beth Din (who at the time had been a member of the Beth Din for 25 years), and the remaining rabbis were community rabbis. Apart from the Registrar and the *dayan's* interviews, one rabbi was the leader of a 'traditional synagogues' (see Chapter 4) and the remaining of synagogue communities in areas away from the geographic core of Jewish Orthodox life. These synagogues are referred to as 'peripheral synagogues' (see Chapter 4). None of the rabbis of the core areas of Orthodox Jewish life agreed to participate³².

In addition to the ten interviewed for this study, 16 other rabbis were invited to participate but they either declined or did not respond. One rabbi refused an interview stating that he had few "successful converts" (discussed in Chapters 6 and 7) but referred me to a magazine article he had authored on the topic and since the article provided relevant information, it was treated like an interview. Out of the Orthodox rabbis who were interviewed, 6 of 9 were from Chabad³³. Rabbis from this movement respect the authority of the Beth Din in South Africa but regard themselves as independent and take leadership from the teachings of the most recent former leader of the movement, who is regarded as the messiah by many. Almost all of the non-Chabad rabbis who were contacted for interviews on conversion either declined the request or did not respond. The three Orthodox rabbis who were not Chabad who participated in the study were the Registrars and the Head of the Beth Din. Only one non-Chabad community rabbi agreed and having expected this response, stated in his interview, "I am probably the only rabbi that has spoken to you". This reflected a very insular

³² Traditional synagogues, peripheral and core are defined and described in Chapter 4. See section 4.3

³³ A form of Orthodox Judaism - see chapter 4 for further detail. Chabad is an acronym for "(*C*[*k*]hokmak/Wisdom, *Binah*/Insight, *Da'at*/Knowledge) used to designate the Lubavitcher Hasidim" (Robinson, 2001:571). Also described as a "messianic outreach movement within Orthodoxy" (Rich, 2015).

nature and indicated a trend of non-support for a study that aimed to delve into the inner workings of a sensitive political issue within the community. Due to the number of Chabad rabbis which outweighed the other rabbis, an additional skew in the data occurred: rabbis spoke from the peripheral areas, which account for ethnic converts. This is where these rabbis' experience lies (mostly Chabad in peripheral areas - no-one from core where the spiritual converts spoke to me).

3.7 Profile of the converts

In total there were 33 converts: 29 female and four male. Two main groups of converts were distinguished: the ethnic converts (motivated by marriage, and the new spiritual converts (motivated by spiritual convictions). Spiritual converts have always been a very small minority in conversion to Orthodox Judaism in South Africa, but they are not new. The new category refers to the atypical spiritual convert who has started appearing in post-apartheid South Africa, namely Afrikaner and black converts. Table 3.2 tabulates the numbers of both groups of converts.

Table 3.2: Number of participants according to group

	Number
Ethnic converts	20
New spiritual converts	13
Total	33

Table 3.2 shows that most converts interviewed were ethnic converts. One ethnic convert had a father who was a Jewish Holocaust survivor, but her mother was not Jewish. She had grown up in the Jewish community, had attended a Jewish school and had formed a Jewish identity. She had always resisted conversion until she realised that it would affect her future marriage and then changed her mind. Afrikaners with no prior connection to Judaism through a partner or family member appeared in the spiritual convert category. One Afrikaner fitted into both categories. However, because she came to Judaism first for spiritual reasons, she was placed into the spiritual category.

Table 3.3: Gender of the participants

	Ethnic	Spiritual	Total
Male	1	3	4
Female	18	11	29
Total	19	14	33

Table 3.4: Race of the participants

Race	Ethnic	Spiritual	Total
Black	0	2	3
Coloured	1	0	0
White	19	11	30
Other (e.g. Indian or Asian)	0	0	0
Total	20	13	33

Nineteen ethnic converts participated in the study: 20 were female, 19 were white and one was Coloured. One male (white) was also included the ethnic category. Of the ethnic converts almost all described themselves as having very little interest in religion while growing up. Only three female converts who came from strictly observant Christian homes had a religiously active upbringing. All three were Catholic and had attended convents. An additional Catholic woman in the sample grew up secular. The remainder of the participants were nominally affiliated to Protestant, Methodist and Anglican Churches. Two had previously been affiliated to Greek Orthodox backgrounds. The ethnic background of these converts was as follows: English (9), Portuguese (1), Lebanese (1), Greek (2), and Coloured (1). In addition, one was an Afrikaner. The participants' birth dates ranged from 1944 - 1976; the eldest was

in her 70s, the youngest was 37 and the average was 49.6 years³⁴. Of the ethnic converts only 4 were born in Johannesburg. The remainder came from Bloemfontein (1), Cape Town (1), Durban (2), Port Elizabeth (2) or small towns around South Africa, such as Potchefstroom and Witbank. Some were born outside of South Africa such as in England (2) and Mozambique (1). One convert had attempted Reform conversion but abandoned the process as she felt it was not satisfying. Two converts (male and female) had converted Conservative but as a result of various factors relating to lack of acceptance of their children in the dominant Orthodox community, they later converted to Orthodoxy. A major reason for the man's later conversion to Orthodoxy after his divorce was that having lived many years during which he had enjoyed only partial acceptance as a Jew and as the father of Jewish children, he wanted to move out of the liminal space into a formally accepted position as a Jew and remarry a Jewish wife. Of the 20 ethnic converts, six females had converted for a second marriage. Of these, five had not been married to Jewish partners in their first marriage. Another two female converts married men who had previously been married. The marital status of the converts: most were still married, two were widowed; none were single as a result of divorce. Three women had children who needed to convert with them. All the people in this category of interviews had been living in Johannesburg since their conversion and at the time of the interviews.

In the spiritual category, 13 converts were interviewed. Of these, 11 were white and two were black. At the time, only five black South Africans (three adults and two children) had converted to Orthodox Judaism in Johannesburg and all had remained within the community (the third adult was the spouse of a participant in the study). While other black individuals had converted, they were not South African, had taken temporary residence in South Africa for conversion, and had moved out of the country before the time of the study. It was evident that it was never their intention to remain within the South African Jewish community - they had only come to convert since the possibility of such did not exist in their home countries. At the time of the study, other persons of colour (South Africans and non-South Africans) were in the early stages of the process but it would have been premature to include them. Of the spiritual category, four participants were male and 11 were female. One was from a Sotho background; one was Zambian of Tswana descent; and the remainder were Afrikaners. Only one was from Johannesburg. The rest came from small towns such as Ficksburg (1), Kempton Park (1), Orkney (1), Pietermaritzburg (2), and Springs (1). Two were born outside of South Africa, in the neighbouring countries of Swaziland and Zambia. All

³⁴ Note, not all provided their age or year of birth.

participants in this category had grown up in staunchly religious environments and 13 had been religiously active all their lives. However, two (one black and one Afrikaner) had not been religious although their families had been religiously active. The former religious affiliations of the spiritual converts were: Methodist (1) and a combination of Afrikaner churches (the first church they belonged to being one of the Reformed churches - Dutch Reformed Church (DRC), *Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk* (NGK) or *Hervormde Kerk* - and the last religious affiliation before converting was typically evangelical, Messianic or self-study groups)³⁵. The eleven participants who had been members of the Afrikaner churches had been born into one of the Reformed churches but either by adulthood, or after marriage, had abandoned the church of their youth and joined a Pentecostal church, such as the *Apostoliese Geloofsending* (AGS), also known as the Apostolic Faith Mission (AFM)³⁶. From there they moved on to smaller, fringe Christian churches, typically evangelical (charismatic) churches, and often (but not always) later became affiliated with Messianic Christianity. Prior to discovering Judaism, most Afrikaners had left their religious communities and had formed their own self-study groups (within the Christian paradigm). They also abandoned these as unsatisfactory and began following a literal, unguided interpretation of the Jewish commandments as found in the Old Testament, before seeking more clarity from Jews on the Old Testament and moving to Judaism. The spiritual converts followed a similar path (especially the Afrikaners) although they had never encountered each other along the way.

The participants in the spiritual category came from small towns around the country including Bethlehem, Bloemfontein, Ficksburg, Kroonstadt and Orkney (Free State), Worcester (Western Cape), Newcastle and Pietermaritzburg (KwaZulu-Natal), Boksburg and Springs (Gauteng formerly the Transvaal). Only one was born in Johannesburg. Two converts moved throughout their childhood and had also lived in neighbouring countries, such as Botswana, Lesotho, Mozambique and Zimbabwe.

Of the spiritual convert category, two of four males had converted as single men (one divorced as a result of the conversion, the other married many years after his conversion). Of the females, one converted and had remained single, one started the conversion process as a single individual but then completed with her partner and subsequently married him after conversion, three had converted as full families (with husband and all their children generally

³⁵ One convert would not identify her former church. In the latter she had been exposed to 7th Day Adventism under the influence of her father although she had not adopted their beliefs and practices.

³⁶ The AGS and AFM are the same movement. The former uses Afrikaans as language of worship and the latter, English.

below the age of 12), and three had converted as part family units with husband and some of their children (generally those children who did not convert were older teenagers or adults children who had already left home).

The conversion of all the participants in the spiritual category had taken place post-2000. Of these converts, two had emigrated to Israel shortly after conversion (at least four other families had done the same before them). Five others strongly desired to leave for Israel but were unable. Their reasons are best summarised by the convert who stated, "I would like to but I am too old now. I am nearly on pension age so what is the use of going there and everybody you know are here - your children and grandchildren are here - not that they are going the way you are but you still want to see them. To go there at our age and to find a job there is going to be very difficult". Age, family ties, employment and having to start again were concerns facing converts. Generally, however, all the converts in this category shared the sentiment of wanting to emigrate to Israel because of its perceived holiness. Another convert stated, "I would love to [live in Israel]. I would love that. They say the holiness there is so thick you can touch it. I would like to go there".

Of the spiritual converts, most were born in the 1960s. The youngest was 37 years and the oldest was 53 years. The converts' occupations included a beautician (1), bookkeepers (3), equity analyst (1), motivational speaker (1), office administrator (1), pharmacist (1), psychologist (2), nurse (1) and secretary (1). From the total sample, four did not have tertiary qualifications and of those three were housewives. One convert was self-employed and five had been employed in Jewish communal organisations since their conversions. The dominant language among ethnic converts prior to conversion was English; among the spiritual converts it was Afrikaans (most of these were Afrikaners). In later years some Afrikaners used both languages in their homes; others switched to English exclusively.

In both groups, the knowledge of Judaism prior to conversion was non-existent or very limited; most only knew Jews as the people they read about in the Christian Bible. This may be due to the fact that most Jews in South Africa today reside in urban centres - predominantly Johannesburg - and most converts grew up in small towns in and around South Africa or southern Africa where there were few (or no) Jews and where apartheid maintained strict barriers between groups. In the entire group of 34 converts, only five had been exposed to Jews and a Jewish community during their lives before conversion or before meeting their partner. This indicates that people were drawn to Judaism by personal reasons and by their perceptions of the intrinsic strengths of the religion rather than being attracted to Judaism through exposure to proselytisation missions.

Ethnic converts were exposed to Judaism and the Jewish community through their partners before conversion. Since their partners were non-observant, exposure was at a traditional level and encompassed the cultural and familial aspects of the Jewish community rather than the religious aspects (e.g., Friday night family dinners rather than synagogue attendance). By contrast, the spiritual converts had not been exposed to any of the religious, cultural, communal or familial traits of Jewish life prior to conversion beside what they understood from the Five Books of Moses (referred to in Hebrew as *Tannach*) and the 'Old Testament' (referred to as Torah which includes the prophets).

Ethnic converts were introduced to Judaism through their partners. As they came from secular backgrounds, most were not seeking religion or to replace a religious framework but they all accepted adopting a religious framework to various extents. Spiritual converts were actively seeking a new religious framework - not specifically Judaism - and eventually discovered Judaism during their search.

With the exception of three ethnic converts who were religious, the rest were secular but they had observed traditional Christian festivals, such as Christmas and Easter, and at some point during their early childhood they had received some form of Christian teaching. The ethnic converts were generally not members of any religious communities so they did not have to disassociate themselves from religious communities but only from traditional family occasions around religious events. They also had to distance themselves from their families of origin to some degree to avoid role conflict and confusion for all involved. Further, distance from social networks and ties that no longer fitted their new way of life was also required. The spiritual converts had already disassociated themselves from their religious communities, core religious beliefs, family, networks and social ties. They were desperately seeking to associate with something new. The extent to which this distance was upheld varied across all converts and depended on the nature and value of the relationships and on the extent to which the convert was prepared to relinquish them.

An observation common to both sets of converts is that converts and their partners exhibited a mutual influence on their decisions during the process. In other words, regardless of motive to convert, both individuals impacted on the decision to convert (especially in husband and wife relationships).

Pro-Israeli and pro-Zionistic attitudes existed across all the convert categories and the majority of converts indicated a love for Israel and a support for the State of Israel and the Jewish people. The strongest and most supportive attitudes towards Israel existed in the spiritual convert category and a defensive stance was adopted towards the politics of Israel. A visit to the Facebook pages of Afrikaner converts provided ample evidence of fervently

supportive (right wing) attitudes towards Israel. While ethnic converts had adopted allegiance to Israel (this was expected), they were not all as supportive of Israel and any criticism of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict emanated from them, albeit with discretion.

In keeping with the convention of qualitative research, I used pseudonyms to ensure the converts and rabbis' anonymity; this was also a condition for participation of many of the participants. Pseudonyms for converts were chosen to reflect whether participants had kept their birth names or had adopted Hebrew names. The pseudonyms for rabbis were assigned randomly to the letters of the alphabet.

3.8 Insider, outsider, or "always in-between"?

As I am both a member of the community and a convert to Orthodox Judaism, I am an "insider" or a "positioned subject" (Rosaldo, 1989) in the research. Being an insider has both advantages and disadvantages.

Mullings (1999:340) argues that the binary view of researchers as insiders or outsiders is an unhelpful and rigid framework to work with in data collection and analysis, as it tends to cast the status of the researcher as a "fixed attribute". Rather, she claims it is more useful to the researcher to recognise that these categories are fluid spaces that are occupied differently according to who participates in those spaces. Therefore, the status as either one of those categories - as insider or outsider - is situationally bound. As such, the researcher may be considered both at different times (an insider with one group of participants and an outsider with another) or on alternative issue. To avoid strict ascriptions of status according to insider / outsider perceptions, Mullings (1999) recommends that the researcher should reflect on whom he/she is interviewing, what information is required, under what circumstances the information is made available, consider the power dynamics at play, and then carve "positional spaces" with each of different interviewee types (Mullings, 1999:340). Positional spaces are defined as "areas where the situated knowledges of both parties in the interview encounter, engender a level of trust and co-operation" (Mullings, 1999:340). Depending on who the interviewer and interviewees are, this requires highlighting selective aspects of the researcher's identity, or lack of characteristics, that the interviewee will be able to best associate with (this does not mean that other aspects of the researcher's identity must be concealed). Doing so, it is claimed, will assist in gaining the trust and confidence of the interviewee which in turn impacts on the quality of the information gained from the interview (Mullings, 1999:344). However, one may not always control what aspects of one's identity the interviewee will respond positively or negatively to; neither can one avoid obvious characteristics

(e.g., gender) that may impact on the interview. However, Mullings (1999) argues that if carefully anticipated, by stressing some aspects more than others, it might possibly help create a new interview "space" between researcher and participant.

This approach creates ethical challenges, such as whether employing these tactics are "a form of betrayal of trust and confidence", misleading and dishonest. However, Mullings (1999:344) maintains, from the experiences of her own work, that "there is no guarantee that such selected disclosures are the main determinants of that type of information than an informant decides to share". In order to avoid unethical possibilities from arising, careful thought and reflexivity should be applied in dealing with this approach and the consequential ethical challenges it poses. Choosing what aspects of one's identity to foreground over others in certain situations, and anticipating what perceptions it may create with the interviewees, is extremely important.

In this research I felt it important to disclose to all the participants - rabbis and converts alike - that I am a convert to Orthodox Judaism and a former member of the community as I now reside in another country. I declared my conversion because I wanted all converts to have equal knowledge of my position; further, some rabbis and converts might have known me either through the community or conversion. Declaring my status as a convert, but also as someone familiar with the process, community and terminology put many converts at ease, and they felt that I would be more empathetic. This facilitated the narratives dealing with the procedural aspects of conversion and allowed for deeper discussion and, in many cases, longer discussion. I made careful decisions regarding dress code to remain respectful of the ideological positions and the expectations of converts, both converts and rabbis alike. Rabbis also perceived the same benefits of speaking to someone who understood the process. It removed the 'stranger' element from the research. However, as already mentioned, in the case of the Beth Din, access to their archived certificates of conversion - neither in Johannesburg nor Cape Town - was permitted although permission had been granted in a previous study on conversion. However, an interview was granted with the Head of the Beth Din. The Registrars in both cities also assisted me in seeking the Beth Din's approval. Although the Registrars had weighed in on the matter it did not change the Beth Din's answer. Their position remained although I outlined the benefits of such a study and gave them assurance of confidentiality in that no names would be recorded and revealed; the certificates were required purely for statistical purposes. Rather than providing me access to the conversion certificates, the Beth Din suggested that the Registrar of Conversions in Johannesburg provide the names of people who had made enquiries for conversion but never returned to initiate the process. In their

view would make for a more enlightening study. Further, outside of the Beth Din and the Registrar, only one non-Chabad rabbi would speak to me.

This indicated the insider-outsider dimension. The previous study (Zekry) was conducted by a rabbi, who is involved with conversions in Durban and who is involved in working for the community. The results would thus be considered more secure. I am a convert and a sociologist and giving me the opportunity to review and analyse the topic in a formal way could have had negative consequences for the religious authorities among other converts. Possibly issues of trust were at stake as the topic was highly sensitive. As I am primarily an 'outsider' in their view, they could have been reluctant to discuss their decisions or problematic issues with someone to whom they are not accountable. Certainly, there is a power asymmetry between a convert interviewer and a community rabbi, judge or conversion rabbi. Notwithstanding, the participating rabbis did not exert any power in any way during the interview process.

This dissertation deals with data derived from the Registrar of Conversion's office as it relates to converts and from the interviews with converts. The advantages and disadvantages of being a researcher of a topic of which one has firsthand experience are discussed in relation to the data generated for analysis. In terms of access to converts and understanding the issues, it may have been beneficial. In terms of access to rabbis, it is more difficult to determine.

3.9 Conclusion

The dissertation so far has argued for an alternative conceptualisation of conversion which views it as much as a social phenomenon as a religious one. The underlying framework is socio-political shaped by specific historical processes and social factors including race and ethnicity rather than any psycho-religious framework. It therefore calls for an alternative approach to studying and addressing the research question. Social constructionism was deemed relevant because it acknowledges the historical and cultural dynamics and the context in which conversion occurs, as well as provides a voice for the converts. The in-depth interview method, its design and testing, were developed so as to ensure that the converts' narratives were authentic and to allow for an understanding of conversion to emerge from the participants' perspectives to meet the research objectives and provide a new epistemological and ontological understanding of conversion. Social constructionism and the design methods were also considered important because of the role of the researcher in this study. While it acknowledged that the researcher is part of the process of the participants' story creation,

social constructionism and formulation of the in-depth interview schedule were seen as a safeguard against the researcher's own views and emotions clouding or influencing those of the converts.

Chapter 4: Jewish Johannesburg, its communities and conversion structures

4.1 Introduction

Having covered the research questions, literature of conversion from sociological perspectives and the methodology and research design, the purpose of this chapter is to understand the overall trends of Orthodox conversion in Johannesburg by viewing the data obtained from the Registrar of Orthodox conversion and thereby ascertaining who is converting to Orthodox Judaism in Johannesburg; provide a description of the Johannesburg Jewish community and relevant trends that also emerge in the data; with the background of the Orthodox community in Johannesburg in mind, explore conversion from within the Johannesburg Orthodox communities by hearing from rabbis how the process is structured and implemented and why. Finally, this chapter discusses the findings of the conversion programme in relation to the conceptualisation of conversion.

4.2 Who is converting to Orthodox Judaism in Johannesburg?

From the files and lists provided (see section 3.3), data was generated and collated into basic descriptive statistics as shown in Table 4.1 overpage. The data generated was sourced from Bender and Hendler's records as discussed in Chapter 3. It is therefore primary and original data. Prior to this study, it had not been collated in data format, nor analysed, and therefore never published. Where relevant, this data is compared to existing (secondary) data presented by Zekry (1998) as it was the only access to those records I was able to establish.

Table 4.1: Number, gender and race³⁷ of converts 1994 - 2013

Year	Total Adults and children	Gender			Race		
		Male	Female	Not sure	White	Black	Mixed race
1994	33	4	15	14	33	0	0
1995	69	11	28	30	69	0	0
1996	25	3	13	9	25	0	0
1997	25	4	13	8	25	0	0
1998	24	9	6	9	24	0	0
1999	59	8	22	29	59	0	0
2000	21	8	13	0	21	0	0
2001	62	25	37	0	61	1	0
2002	34	9	25	0	34	0	0
2003	41	15	26	0	39	2	0
2004	27	5	22	0	27	0	0
2005	17	4	13	0	17	0	0

³⁷ According to the findings in the data, until 2013 black individuals were the only persons of colour that had converted and remained in the community. As such, Indian, Asian, Coloured are not reported here, and for this reason the table refers to white and black only.

2006	27	8	19	0	27	0	0
2007	21	7	14	0	21	0	0
2008	24	7	17	0	24	0	0
2009	16	6	10	0	16	0	0
2010	35	7	26	2	35	0	0
2011	19	8	11	0	18	1	0
2012	30	11	19	0	25	4	1
2013	13	3	8	2	13	0	0
	622	162	357	103	613	8	1

Table 4.1 shows that from 1994-2013 there were 622 conversions of adults and children. Of the 622 in the sample, the majority are female and account for 357 (57.4%) of the population while males account for 162 (26.1%). This figure could be higher, if the gender of the children between the years 1994-2000 was known. The majority of converts (615 or 98.9%) are white. While the conversion of people of colour is discussed in Zekry's dissertation (1998:197-202), there are no recorded conversions of people of colour during the period 1951-1997. The first occurrence of persons of colour reflected in the data is seen in Bender and Hendler's records respectively in the period 1994-2013. The first person of colour to be converted by the Johannesburg Beth Din occurred in 2001 and then again 2003. Both times the converts were Ethiopians and neither remained in the community subsequently. The first black South African conversion to Orthodox Judaism in Johannesburg occurred in 2011. The convert is a single female who was motivated by spiritual and religious reasons. The following year (2012), a black South African family of four converted to Judaism for the same reasons. In both these cases, the converts had no prior connection to Judaism through family ties or marriage. However, at the time of data collection and since then, I have been aware that other persons of colour (black, Coloured, Asian and Indian) - although still a fraction of the

total - were in the process of converting - some for spiritual reasons and some for marriage. Since then, in June of 2017, the Registrar estimated that there were 20-30 persons of colour (black, Indian, Asian and Coloured) enrolled in the conversion process. The statistics will in future show a different racial profile.

Table 4.2: Number of converts 1951 - 2013

Period	No. of converts	Average per year	% increase
1951-1997	1 150	25	
1998-2013	470	31	24% (6)
	1 620		

Source: 1951-1997 secondary data taken from Zekry (1998:152); 1998-2013 primary data generated from Bender and Hendler's records.

The findings in Table 4.1 were compared to Zekry's (1998) findings and are presented in Table 4.2. Zekry (1998:152) found that over four and half decades (46 years), in the period 1951-1997, there were a total of 1 150 converts in Johannesburg, an average of 25 converts per year. Whereas since Zekry's study which was concluded in 1997, from 1998-2013 (15 years), there were 470 converts - (40.9%) of that total, which equates to 31 converts per year. Table 4.2 shows that a 24% increase on the yearly average of converts accepted by the Beth Din (bearing in mind the numbers are small).

Table 4.3: Beth Din conversions 2008 - 2013

Year	Registrar	Beth Din
2008	24	35
2009	16	26
2010	35	39
2011	19	42

2012	30	48
	124	190

While the files from the Registrar’s office provided the above data, the UOS reported different figures of Beth Din conversions at the Biennial Conference in 2013, as demonstrated in Table 4.3. The UOS report shows that more conversions took place through the Beth Din compared to the lists provided by the Registrar. This may be because a number of conversions did not go through the Registrar’s office, for example, those of adoption or for compassionate reasons. What is significant is that the numbers for each year are higher and are steadily increasing. The demand for conversion to Orthodox Judaism appears to be growing and conversions are being performed more rapidly by the Beth Din than in former times.

Table 4.4: Comparison of gender of converts 1951 - 2013

Period	Total sample size	No. of female converts	% size of sample	Average per year	% increase
1951-1997	1266	988	78.0	21	
1998-2013	470	288	61.2	19	-9.5
	1736	1276	73.5		
Period	Total sample size	No. of male converts	% size of sample	Average per year	% increase
1951-1997	1266	278	21.9	6	
1998-2013	470	140	29.8	9	50
	1736	418	24.1		

Source: 1951-1997 is secondary data from Zekry (1998)³⁸; 1998-2013 primary data generated from Bender and Hendler’s records.

³⁸ Zekry’s overall sample size for Johannesburg is 1 150 cases (1998:152) while his gender sample size for Johannesburg is 1 266 for males and females combined (1998:162).

As mentioned earlier, from the data collected for this dissertation, the gender split over the 15 years since Zekry's study is 61.2% (288) female and 29.8% (140) male. This is equivalent to an average of 19 females and nine males per year. Table 4.4 shows that, in contrast, 29.8% of the cases were male compared to 21.9% in the past. This is equivalent to an average of 21 females and six males per year. While females still remain the dominant gender group in this sample, the average number of females has decreased while the average number of males has increased. Traditionally conversion to Judaism has almost always been primarily for marriage (Zekry, 1998:192), which is why the sample has been skewed towards females. The growth of families entering the conversion process may account for the increase of males. Also, what is inferred from the data is that often the individuals who convert for spiritual conviction are male.

Afrikaner families almost exclusively make up the families with no connection to Judaism (apart from one black family). Like many other white ethnic groups, Afrikaners have always been among the sample of converts entering Judaism for marriage. However, the data gathered for this study shows that Afrikaners with no prior connection to Judaism have started appearing for conversion for spiritual reasons and are entering as family units - either entire family units or parts of a family unit (e.g., parents might convert but adult children may not choose to). This same motive appears to be true for Afrikaner individuals too.

Table 4.5: Increase in Afrikaner converts 1987 - 2013

	Afrikaner converts		
	Individuals	Families	Total
1987-1990	7	0	7
1991-1994	6	0	6
1995-1999	5	0	5
2000-2004	10	6	24
2005-2009	3	2	11

2010-2013	4	7	27
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Table 4.5 shows that Afrikaner families started entering the process from 2000 onwards. From 1987 - 2013, Afrikaner individuals were always among the conversion sample. What is different about the Afrikaner individuals from 2000 onwards, is that they stated that their conversion is for spiritual reasons. At the time of data collection, several other Afrikaner singles and family units were in the programme for conversion motivated by conviction.

If one considers the data up until 1997, the majority of converts (61.1%) state marriage is the primary reason for conversion (Zekry, 1998:192). This is followed by 19.7% who want Orthodox status and inclusion because their mother is non-Jewish, 9.9% converted for conviction (spiritual/religious), 6.3% previously converted Reform, and 3% converted for other reasons (adoption, illness, compassion etc.) (Zekry, 1998:192). Unfortunately the data received from the Registrar does not show motivation and so cannot be compared to Zekry's findings. However, the interviews with rabbis (later in this chapter) give the impression that most conversions today remain for the reason of marriage.

At the time of collecting data for the study (May-August 2013), ten teachers were preparing 78 candidates for conversion. Of those 78 candidates, 29 were couples - 25 of which were for marriage and 16 were Afrikaners (1 family, 4 couples and 4 singles with no prior connection to Judaism). Five of the ten teachers were dealing with Afrikaner families, couples or singles in their classes. At that time there were no black, Coloured or Indian candidates on the programme. A young Asian Muslim woman was supposedly on the programme with her Jewish partner, however due to sensitivity, comment on this point was refused. It is unknown whether the conversion proceeded.

To summarise, the data shows an increase in the number of converts to Orthodox Judaism in Johannesburg. The primary demographic profile remains largely the same: white females for reasons of marriage. Male candidates are increasing especially among those for spiritual reasons. There is a small trickle of persons of colour entering both for spiritual and marriage reasons. The first black South African to convert to Orthodox Judaism in Johannesburg took place in 2011 - remarkably late after the transition to democracy. While marriage is still the most likely reason for conversion, the motivation that appears to be on the increase is spiritually derived. This trend is especially true for Afrikaner families and individuals with no prior connection to Judaism. The phenomenon of whole families converting is new and commenced in 2000. In the light of this overview of converts to Orthodox Judaism in South Africa, the nature of the Johannesburg Jewish community is examined.

4.3 The Johannesburg Jewish community

It is claimed that 82% of South Africa's Jewry reside in Johannesburg and Cape Town³⁹ (Kaplan 1996:351). It is difficult to establish how many Jews live in Johannesburg as the sources are out of date, but estimates are that there are approximately 50 000 - 60 000 individuals. The majority affiliate as "unobservant-Orthodoxy" (Kaplan, 1996:352) or "non-observant Orthodoxy"⁴⁰ (Herman, 2008:28) and is often referred to as Traditional (as in this dissertation). Traditional Orthodoxy refers to secular Jews who retain affiliation with Orthodox institutions although they are not regular practitioners of Orthodoxy (if at all)⁴¹. They are typically Jews who make an appearance at synagogue⁴² on the high holy days, maintain membership at a particular synagogue where life events will take place (e.g., marriage, *bar mitzvahs*⁴³ etc.) and often maintain their association to a synagogue by providing membership fees and donations in order to preserve or develop Orthodox institutions and Orthodox life in South Africa. Almost entirely (save for one), the partners of the ethnic converts are from

³⁹ Jewish communities were once vibrant in Pretoria, Port Elizabeth and East London but are now "struggling to keep communal activities going" (Kaplan, 1996:351). Cape Town is said to have sustained its population because of "its relatively safe - as well as beautiful - environment and a substantial internal migration from other parts of South Africa" (Kaplan, 1996:351).

⁴⁰The terms "unobservant-Orthodoxy" and "non-observant Orthodoxy" were coined by the late Professor Jocelyn Hellig (1986), who Kaplan (1996:352) describes as "the most sensitive observer of South African Judaism" at the time. Unobservant Orthodoxy is an oxymoron in that Orthodoxy demands the most rigorous observance of Torah principles, whereas in this case it is selective. Kaplan describes it as Orthodox affiliated Jews who are "drawn to tradition, attend synagogue, and observe the major festivals and rites of passage. They feel no discomfort in driving to synagogue on the holy days and choosing to neglect a great many of ritual observances. Some keep kosher homes but do not mind eating non-kosher food out of home" (Kaplan, 1996:352). The reasons for the development of unobservant-Orthodoxy are discussed by Kaplan (1996:352); and Shain (2011). Because this form of Judaism is so prolific in South Africa, it makes it unique from other Jewish diaspora communities around the world (Hellig, 1986:233; Kaplan, 1996:352).

⁴¹ The tolerance and accommodation of the non-Orthodox by Orthodox rabbis is also credited as one of the reasons why Reform did not entrench itself in South Africa (Kaplan, 1996:353) (never exceeding more than 20% of the population) since there was no need therefore to find another affiliation (Shain, 2011:11).

⁴² In common language, a synagogue is referred to by the Yiddish word "shul", meaning "place of worship". Most of the interviewees (rabbis and converts) referred to their synagogues as "shuls" and the word is used interchangeably throughout this study.

⁴³ Lit. "son of the commandment". A boy who has achieved the age of 13 and is consequently obligated to observe the commandments. Also, a ceremony marking the fact that a boy has achieved this age.

traditional Orthodox backgrounds. Ethnic converts are therefore first exposed to - and participate in some nominal way - in this form of Judaism first before encountering the stricter form of observance mandated by the Beth Din during conversion.

A range of communal structures in Johannesburg cover the religious, educational, cultural and social life of Jewish Johannesburg (SAJB, 2013-2014:16-68). The most relevant of these institutions for this dissertation is the Union of Orthodox Synagogues (UOS), which governs the religious affairs of the Orthodox community in Johannesburg⁴⁴. The Beth Din (Jewish Ecclesiastical Court) is an internationally recognised body located within the UOS. The Beth Din's functioning as a court covers such matters as marriage, divorce, conversion adoption, and legal disputes. In its functioning it seeks to "[maintain] religious standards and [provide] guidance for the overall Orthodox direction of Jewish South Africa" (UOS, 2003-2016). In addition to the Beth Din, the UOS handles issues of *kashrut*⁴⁵ (production and supervision of kosher services and food stuffs), manages Jews for Judaism, which is a "fight" against "missionaries, cults and all pernicious groups targeting Jews for conversion" (UOS, 2003-2016), publishes a magazine "The Jewish Tradition" and assists synagogues with community development by helping to increase synagogue membership, improve synagogue finances, services, marketing and management. The range of activities and services the Beth Din provides for the community indicates that it is well placed to influence and control the cultural and ethnic content of the community and protect the boundaries of the community.

At the time of data collection for this study (2013), in Johannesburg, there were 59 synagogues or religious groups of worship, in other words, congregations of various forms and sizes, listed in the Guide to Jewish Southern Africa (SAJBD, 2013-2014:16-24). They are scattered around the northern and eastern suburbs of Johannesburg based on where Jews reside in the broader metropolitan area of Johannesburg. The core of the synagogues are found in the connected areas of Glenhazel, Sandringham and Fairmount, an area colloquially referred to as 'the ghetto' since it is densely populated mostly by religious Orthodox Jews. It houses Jewish bookshops (of a religious nature), kosher food outlets (e.g., bakeries, delis, coffee shops, restaurants and supermarkets), Jewish owned retail stores catering specifically

⁴⁴ It claims to be "the largest Jewish religious organisation in the country catering to the needs of 95% of the Jewish community".

⁴⁵ The body of Jewish law dealing with what foods Jew may and may not eat and how those foods must be prepared and eaten. *Kashrut* is the abstract noun meaning "fitness" or "correctness". It is the same root as the more commonly known word, *kosher*, which describes food that meets these standards. The word *kosher* may also be used, and often is used, to describe ritual objects made in accordance with Jewish law and fit for ritual use.

to the religious market and a number of Jewish schools of various sizes that cater for differing needs when it comes to religious observance. All the religious establishments close on the Sabbath (known as *Shabbat* in Hebrew) but the synagogues are bustling throughout the Sabbath. The residents of those suburbs move around on foot during the Sabbath as it is prohibited to drive on the Sabbath. The members of various communities generally know the members of other communities and there is much movement between homes in order to share meals together. The profusion of synagogues within walking distance makes it very easy for people to go 'shul-hopping'. On a Sabbath morning, people may attend services at one place of worship (synagogue or *shtibl*), walk to a neighbouring community for lunch, do afternoon prayers at another place of worship and then conduct their Torah study at a different learning institution within the area. The neighbourhoods are very quiet on the Sabbath with few cars on the road - observant Jews walking with their baby strollers and families to services or to each other's homes. The core is characterised by *shtibls*⁴⁶ and not large traditional synagogues characterised by pews and a choir. *Shtibl* synagogues are also found in some outlying areas, such as Houghton and Gallo Manor.

The remainder of the synagogues are located in the periphery, that is, the wealthier Northern suburbs including and surrounding Sandton. The periphery communities consist of more traditional Orthodox Jews, secular, or Progressive Jews who do not need quick access to religious institutions and services. The periphery communities are largely supported by Chabad synagogues. Chabad is a highly successful branch of *Hasidic* Judaism which strikes a balance between strict observance and acceptance of Jews regardless of their level of observance. Chabad ventures into areas where 'assimilated Jews' (meaning non-observant, non-religious Jews) live in order to draw them back into Judaism. Most Chabad synagogues are in wealthy areas of the Johannesburg northern suburbs such as Illovo, Hyde Park, Sandton, Bryanston, Riverclub, Melrose and Gallo Manor. There are also a few Chabad synagogues in more religious 'Jewish areas' such as Lyndhurst, Norwood and Orchards.

There are various kinds of synagogues in the core and periphery. With each synagogue comes an established, new or growing community. Each community differs in size and practice. There are the *shtibl-like* synagogues that follow the practices of the former Eastern

⁴⁶ *Shtibls* (also spelt *shtiebl*) are "small very traditionalistic houses of prayer" (Kaplan, 1996:351). Herman (2007:32) describes them as "the small, intimate, traditional house of prayer associated with the Eastern European Jews – as an alternative to the large, formal synagogues, which were typical of the British Commonwealth style". These could include small congregations using homes for prayer with few visible signs that the space functions as a synagogue.

European Jewry (specifically *Mitnagdim*⁴⁷) tight-knit religious congregations mostly located in Glenhazel and its surrounding areas. There are also traditional synagogues⁴⁸ which are scattered in areas with high concentrations of Jews - mainly of traditional orientation. They are larger type synagogues with multiple pews catering for large congregations and have a choir and a cantor. Such synagogues were previously located in the centre of Johannesburg and surrounds, that is Hillbrow, Berea, Yeoville, and Observatory. Some have since closed, been sold or relocated to the northern suburbs. Today traditional synagogues exist in Victory Park, Waverly, Great Park (Houghton), Sandton, and Sydenham. In some of these traditional synagogues, *shtibl* type formations have occurred separately on the premises of the traditional campuses (such as Waverly and Highlands North) to cater for the more religious in the area, Glenhazel may be too far to walk on the Sabbath. The traditional synagogues are not Chabad synagogues (although may have a Chabad rabbi). The core and the periphery in turn can be used metaphorically to describe the level of observance - or as the rabbis refer to it - assimilation (as the levels of religious observance are low). The divide can be characterised by those who will drive on the Sabbath and those who do not. The periphery-core descriptor also displays another pattern which also reflects the religious divide between the communities.

Overall, the Orthodox Jewish community in Johannesburg is a vibrant, well structured, cohesive and highly resourced community. Whether converts know it or not before their conversion, this is what they convert into; this in itself may be an attractive element of the community. The nature of the Jewish community is unique in that it is Orthodox dominated, although traditional in character rather than strictly religious. However, in the core of Jewish areas there has been a revival of a more strict form of Orthodox (Ultra-Orthodoxy (Herman, 2007). This is evident in the pattern of how the conversion process has been changed over time (to be seen in the forthcoming points). The development of a more religiously energised Orthodoxy is different to its original base of unobservant Orthodox members and appeals to younger sectors of the community. It is largely the same, however, in character, being of

⁴⁷ The literal translation is "opponents" and refers to Orthodox Jews, mostly from Lithuania, who "maintained classical Torah learning" were/are opposed to Hasidim (Herman, 2007:25). Hasidim refers to "followers of the Hasidism movement" (Robinson, 2001:576). Hasidism was a new and innovative movement "that had emerged in the traditional communities in Eastern Europe" (Magid, 2003). It is described as a "mystical revival movement that swept through Eastern Europe in the latter half of the 18th century" (Green, 1987:317) and also "a social movement that rebelled against the elitist religious establishment and its strict attitude to the law and Torah studies. It emphasises mystical religious expressions and emotional experiences" (Herman, 2007:25).

⁴⁸ Traditional synagogues cater for traditional Orthodox Jews. These synagogues have always characterised South African Orthodoxy and are "large formal synagogues typical of the British Commonwealth" (Kaplan, 1996:351).

Lithuanian (*Mitnagdim* and *Litvak*) origin (Herman, 2007). The particular character of the community is based on its origins in Lithuania and was also influenced by Anglo-Jewry and the British model of affiliation that existed through the British Commonwealth countries (Kaplan, 1996:352). It is worth noting how the Orthodox community came into being as the trends within the community mirror the trends in conversion. The link between community values and the way conversion is valued and managed will become clearer in the current and forthcoming chapters.

4.3.1 Dynamics in the community

It was mentioned in Chapter 1 that the community assumed a non-observant form of Orthodoxy that expressed itself in Anglo-Saxon terms, but with an overarching and strong *Litvak* character promoting a homogenous identity and a deep loyalty to Israel while simultaneously acting cautiously to maintain security and citizenship in South Africa. In this way it has become uniquely South African. However, a number of shifts have taken place in the community over time in response to local and global political, economic and social developments and as they pertain to Israel. These explain the nature of the community today (Herman, 2007). In the face of a changing environment, it is argued that the community has via various institutions acted to "preserve the content of the Jewish community as *Mitnagdim*/Orthodox/Zionist/cohesive" which has required the vigilant control of boundaries and the silencing of "all other voices, past and present" outside of those parameters (Herman, 2007:26). In addition, these interconnected shifts preserve the same identity narratives in the community although they have different meanings in post-apartheid South Africa. This has created a new community identity: "secular Zionism has been shifted towards religious Zionism; moderate Orthodoxy has been replaced with Ultra Orthodoxy; and homogeneity has been maintained by advancing exclusion and seclusion" (Herman, 2007:26)⁴⁹. These shifts reinforce each other. They came about because of the interconnectedness of Jewish identity to the South African and Israeli states, as well as global movements towards religious revival. In terms of the South African state they are linked to the pre-apartheid state, the apartheid state, and continue into the post-apartheid state.

⁴⁹ While there are many detailed and important points that can be drawn out, the most salient to this dissertation are succinctly presented here to avoid repetition. These are complex issues and have been influenced by many historical developments which cannot be captured in this short section.

Three aspects of the shift towards a more conservative and observant form of Orthodoxy should be mentioned, as they are reflected in the description of the Jewish community in section 4.3 but importantly also in the trends of conversion. Firstly, a reason for this shift came about because of the *Ba'al Teshuva* movement (literally, those who return⁵⁰). The movement occurred in the 1970s and 1980s through the successive establishment of the Lubavitchers (Chabad/Chassidic), Ohr Sameach (*Mitnagdim*) and Aish Hatorah⁵¹ from America (Kaplan, 1998) and connected to global trends of religious revival (Shain, 2011:14). These movements imported "a large number of strictly Orthodox, yeshiva-trained rabbis from overseas" (Herman, 2007:30). The simultaneous loss of more "enlightened outward-looking rabbis" (Herman, 2007:30) through emigration who felt to remain living in South Africa during apartheid was against their conscience meant that the gap could be filled by the rabbis from the *Ba'al Teshuva* movements, such as Chabad. The transformation brought about by these new rabbis was a result of their inward-looking approach, charisma and development of their strong educational systems (Kaplan, 1998:78). They also filled positions in many traditional (*Mitnagdim*) synagogues which is significant for the diversification of the perceived homogeneity of the community. In traditional synagogues they were also able to broaden their appeal to the non-observant Orthodox, who were more sympathetic to - than knowledgeable of - Orthodoxy (Kaplan, 1998:78). As parents, they were also sympathetic to their children being raised in Orthodoxy and even though virtually none practised Orthodoxy, they "generally accept[ed] the legitimacy and authenticity of Orthodox belief and practice" (Kaplan, 1998:78). Shain (2011:11) suggests that the political instability of the time may have also had the impact of turning individuals inward and towards religion. Herman (2007:31) states "in spite of their relatively small numbers, the Ultra-Orthodox voice is vociferous, and their worldview began slowly to occupy the common sense of many community members. The latter had very little Jewish knowledge to debate the issues brought up by the Ultra-Orthodox adherents...were just indifferent to the religious authority, or had no ideology to follow" (Herman, 2007:32).

The second reason attributed to the shift of a more conservative and observant form of Orthodoxy is the "*shtibilisation* of the Orthodox community" which is where the newly-religious *Ba'alei Teshuva* (plural) became active. As mentioned earlier, *shtibls* are small houses of worship and were instrumental in providing places through which their learning

⁵⁰ Referring to the Jewish religious revival movement. The *Ba'al Teshuva* is a "formerly non-observant Jew who returns to Jewish practice (in a traditionally observant manner, it is implied)" (Robinson, 2001:569).

⁵¹ The Lubavitcher Movement was established in South Africa in 1972; Ohr Sameach in 1986 and Aish Hatorah in 1996 (Herman, 2007:32).

occurred. The *shtibilisation* of the community at first caused discontent as they challenged the Anglo-Lithuanian tradition of the large, formal synagogues (Herman, 2007:32) and "while, in the main, the Orthodox establishment welcomed the turn towards religiosity, it objected to the balkanisation of the community, the loss of central control, and the tendency for these *shtibls* to become independent, separatist institutions" (Harris, 1999 cited in Herman, 2007:32-32). There were also concerns that *shtibls* "would provide an opportunity for a breakaway from the religious establishment for those members who were contemptuous of it and felt no responsibility to the larger community" (Herman, 2007:33). It is worth noting that the *Ba'al Teshuva* and *shtibilisation* movements were also connected to the decline in Reform. Reform's failure to capture the imagination of the community meant also that a more conservative Orthodoxy could grow deeper roots⁵².

The third factor is that the growth of Orthodoxy was also accompanied by a shift in power within the community. The Beth Din's changing role within the community, under the influence of the Chief Rabbi, cannot be ignored. In 1986 the Beth Din, which up until then consisted of two separate organisations with two separate Chief Rabbis (in Johannesburg and Cape Town), became centralised into one national body under the leadership of the Chief Rabbi B.M. Casper in Johannesburg shortly before his retirement; he was followed by the late

⁵² Although Reform had entered the community long before the *Ba'al Teshuva* movements (the first Reform synagogue opened in 1933), the movement had achieved limited success and had never exceeded 20% of the population (Kaplan, 1998). Its heyday was in the period up until the 1950s and 60s but then it suffered a series of setbacks especially in the 1980s and 1990s. The reasons relate to events within Reform itself, as well as the turbulent political situation in South Africa which led to an increase in emigration to mainly other English-speaking countries such as Canada and Australia, the US and Britain (Horowitz & Kaplan, 2001). The impact was that an ageing Reform community was left behind. Also, the Orthodox rabbis' accommodation of less observant forms of Judaism, their strong resistance to Reform (based on the view that only they hold authentic Judaism), the growing religious revival movement within Orthodoxy curtailed Reform's growth. The non-observant Orthodox, although not religious (as mentioned above) were also attached to tradition and held authenticity as an important value (the narrative of the Orthodox) (Herman, 2007). There were also a number of "mistakes" within the Reform movement (Alexander, 2012) - such as the style of worship within Reform that was became very static, lack of investment in the training of South African Reform rabbis, a failure to build the necessary institutions to entrench itself (a training programme for musicians, cantors and educators, a higher learning programme for BA, MA and *yeshivah* students and a rabbinical school) (Alexander, 2012), and internal conflicts within Reform (Herman, 2007). These internal and external factors combined led to the failure of Reform to be anything other than airport lounges for *bar mitzvahs*, weddings and funerals for those returning once a year from Toronto or Sydney (Alexander, 2012). It meant that the community's shift to the right occurred largely unchallenged by the more progressive sector. It also gave the Orthodox revival movement scope to grow.

Chief Rabbi Cyril Harris (Kaplan, 1998:79). The impact of this centralisation was that it "allowed Orthodox Judaism in South Africa to operate as an integral unit in its policies throughout the country and the Jewish community" (Kaplan, 1998:80). It is worth noting the following:

When Orthodoxy became stricter, most South African Jews were willing to accept the changes without opposition because of the respect they had for this tradition, and probably due to their lack of Jewish knowledge to deliberate and question this shift. The community also perceived the traditional rabbinate as the only rightful source of religious authority. Consequently, the Orthodox rabbinate, in particular the Orthodox Chief Rabbi and the *Beit Din* (the Jewish court), continued to exercise power over a wide range of issues, such as conversion, *kashrut* (Jewish dietary laws) and synagogue standards (Herman, 2007:30).

In effect, while the consolidation may be rationalised as necessary to support the revival movement and its longevity in the community, it did not only continue the "exercise of power" but it strengthened it and also gave it a monopoly over Orthodox identity and its role in the community (whether one agreed with it or not). What will be seen in the data which follows is that the centralisation of the Beth Din occurred at the same time that conversion became more controlled by the Beth Din also in a more centralised, rationalised system. Through the new system of conversion, greater authority over conversion and therefore converts, their partners and families was achieved. It also increased its jurisdiction over the members of the community (as it did through *kashrut* and synagogue standards). The result was that the Beth Din became more central to the community and simultaneously more prescriptive. The centralisation, uniformity, new standards plus the consolidation of authority seen in conversion becomes evident in the interviews with rabbis and converts reported in this study.

The Johannesburg Beth Din's consolidation of power occurred precisely at a time when the political authority of South Africa (the Afrikaner led National Party) was unravelling and political instability was increasingly more frequent and severe. Understandably, community members with many anxieties around the future turned inwards towards communal authorities, especially religious ones, almost as if they were the authority figures to provide guidance⁵³ and safety.

The *shtibl* and *Ba'al Teshuva* movements, which together represent an independent, autonomous grassroots movement back to religiosity (Kaplan, 1998:85), is in contrast to the highly centralised and controlled structure represented by the Beth Din. Kaplan (1998:85)

⁵³ Even if they played no role in challenging apartheid.

argued that this "dichotomy creates both the tension and the vitality that characterize South African Orthodoxy today". This appears to remain true today and the tensions and vitality it brings features within conversion too. When it comes to conversion, I argue that the *shtibl* movement works in favour of the converts and that the Beth Din encourages converts to make use of the *Mitnagdim* places of worship as these are where converts can become religious by learning and modelling others. This would provide more support for the continuing revival movement which is in the interest of the Beth Din (it justifies its place within the community). But it also perpetuates a particular community identity which the Beth Din appears to favour. This will become evident in the feedback provided by rabbis and converts alike regarding converts' affiliations to Chabad. In this study, the shifts and trends emerge in the practices of the Beth Din concerning the converts and as evident in the converts' voices.

Herman (2007:38) argues that debate has not been encouraged in the community and that "the Ultra Orthodox/Orthodox movements send messages of great consensus and unity, thus sustaining the narrative of homogenous community". Herman (2007) emphasises the point about homogeneity as emanating from the religious movements, the politics of the community as well as community institutions such as schooling. She (2007) shows and argues how through schooling any opposition to the Ultra Orthodox narrative has been silenced and this strengthened the imagined homogeneity of the community (this silencing also occurred in other ways). The issue of schooling for converts' children has relevance in this regard. But all in all, she shows how the deployment of various narratives promoting homogeneity take on a different meaning in South Africa and promote a more conservative form of Judaism and a shift to the right in the community. The shifts discussed above (to religious Zionism, to more Orthodox forms of Orthodoxy and to the protection of homogeneity) relate to control over the community.

Herman's (2007) point is that in response to local and global developments, the community has always acted to maintain a particular homogenous identity (although not always with ease or without conflicts, tensions and or sacrifices). The outcome is that "non-observant Orthodox Jews, the secular Jews and the other Reform Jews, feels marginalised and Disempowered...The recurring message is that Jews in South Africa either join one of the religious communities or they may lose their Jewish identity" (Herman, 2007:38-39). This very same narrative and its impacts arise in conversion.

The post-apartheid environment has ignited old fears around anti-semitism, isolation and fear (Herman, 2007:39). The South African government's stance vis-a-vis Israel and in defence of Palestinians and the Arab world and the response to Israel as an apartheid state has again raised the issue of the relationship of Jews and the state, of Jewish identity and

loyalty and the fragilities in maintaining a secure place for itself. Again, local and global social and political and economic factors impact the way the community responds to its environment and polices its borders. Herman (2007), Shain (2011) and Kaplan (1998) argue that South African Jewry has moved to the right and become more insular and inward-looking pushing "many Jews in South Africa into the seclusion of a close tight society" (Herman, 2007:39). While one could point to many community led initiatives that engage the 'new' South Africa, further engagement is required since identity still needs to be adapted (Shain, 2011). Again, this will be seen in conversion too: it is trying to engage the new South Africa but at the same time resisting change to the 'traditional' identity of the community. Herman (2007) looks towards a growing "counterforce" (among secular and Progressive Jews) that challenges the new content and boundaries of the community as a way of moving the community forward. However, she cautions that "the success of the counterforce is dependent on the community's willingness to debate its shifting identity, to broaden its boundaries and to create a new content that celebrates diversity, inclusivity, tolerance and openness to others" (Herman, 2007:40). Conversion offers an opportunity to address the broadening of Jewish boundaries, and to embrace diversity through an "openness to others". However, as will be seen, while the Beth Din is engaging with conversion as a process that interfaces with others, and in so doing attempting to facilitate the entry of non-Jews into its boundaries, it is doing so in a way that supports a particular homogenous identity (protecting its identity) and maintains insularity. In other words, the way the conversion process is implemented is unable to capture and celebrate the diversity of the candidates to the benefit of the community.

In conclusion three key points arise. Firstly, the notion of authenticity emerges as important. As the issues connected to the community are challenged politically (at a local and global level), identity is also challenged. However, traditional origins are clung to in order to foster a sense of authenticity to differentiate it from others forms of Judaism and provide support for its survival, create momentum for the favourable religious shifts and promote a notion of a perceived / imagined homogeneity. Secondly, unity and conformity is highly valued in the community (Herman, 2007:37). Uniformity and conformity emerge in this study as important values in the conversion process of individuals to the Jewish community too. It will become evident in the expectations of converts, through the conversion process, and afterwards. Finally, survival of the Jewish community in South Africa has led to the ethnic content taking on a more religious dimension, and given more importance, as well as the protection of this content and its boundaries. Survival is a parallel theme in Afrikaner converts' testimonies and reasons for conversion as will be seen in the forthcoming chapters.

The next section discusses the Johannesburg variant of Orthodox conversion in which many of the above trends emerge. As the community changes, their outlook impacts the way conversion is practised and the changes within conversion mirror the changes in the community as controlled by its authority figures. These changes are a result of social and political factors; the anxieties are sustained even if they are different in nature; finally, as a consequence there is a concern for the protection of the community boundaries and identity. This is also evidence in conversion too. Much of what was discussed in 4.3.1 shows in the conversion process.

The next section details the process of conversion, its implementation and the key issues specific to the Johannesburg Orthodox community, as managed by the Beth Din, and as conveyed in the interviews with rabbis.

4.4 The Johannesburg model of conversion

Jewish conversion may be said to be the process where a gentile becomes a Jew⁵⁴ (Sagi and Zohar, 2007:1). According to Jewish religious law, in order for a conversion to have occurred immersion (*tevillah*) in a specially constructed and prepared bath (*mikveh*), circumcision (*milah*) for men, and the formal acceptance of Torah commandments (under oath) are required (Schwartz, 1995; Riskin, 1973). These requirements are to be performed in the presence of three witnesses⁵⁵ (Riskin, 1973:29). These are the basic, universal requirements applied around the world that allow the imaginary boundaries between Jew and gentile to be overcome⁵⁶, so that converts may become part of the ethnic group - the Jewish people. Conversion processes operate like naturalisation processes in which new members of a nation acquire formal citizenship (Kriel, 2012).

But prior to that, the Head of the Beth Din explains that in order to become a Jew, candidates (for conversion) must "first of all [have] a change of heart, a change of mindset"

⁵⁴ Sagi and Zohar provide a full and in-depth, detailed discussion on the meaning and practice of conversion in Judaism as understood in *halachah*. A general descriptive account may also be found in Zekry's (1998) dissertation.

⁵⁵ In practice today, within Orthodoxy, these witnesses must be 3 rabbis (rabbinical judges / *dayanim*) of an Orthodox Beth Din.

⁵⁶ There are various schools of thought about the conditions under which conversion must occur, and the symbolic meaning of conversion. See for example Riskin (1973); Sagi & Zohar (2007), Schwartz (1995).

to want to change their religion and become Jewish⁵⁷; second, acquire the basic knowledge of Judaism; and third, be committed to doing “whatever the *Shulchan Aruch*⁵⁸ requires a Jew to do and...learn and apply it”. The up-front commitment to the full opus of Jewish law is modelled on the revelatory encounter with God at Mount Sinai where the Jews receiving the Torah said “*Na’aseh V’nishma* - ‘we will do and we will hear of it. We do and we’ll learn’”. In other words, the convert is expected to make a pre-commitment to ‘doing’, that is the performance of the 613 commandments⁵⁹ that initiates a life-long career of learning and deepening one's Jewish practice. The orientation towards performance of commandments (rather than the development of inner states or mystical forms of connection) is a key feature of Jewish religious life - and an external demonstration of a form of Jewishness. These normative aspects of the religion take the lead in the conversion process. Thus the measure of the convert's progress in becoming Jewish is a function of the extent to which his actions and life are aligned with the Torah's prescriptions and framework for human flourishing. The result is a focus on the actions and observances of the convert not merely as externalities of conviction but because this itself is a core feature of authentic Jewish life. In a sense, sincerity, honesty and integrity which are understood as being fundamental to the conversion⁶⁰ are not abstract internal states but ways of performing and maintaining the actions/rituals of Judaism. According to Judaism, as put in the words of Rabbi B, “in order to judge sincerity one needs to look at actions”.

There are two pillars of conversion therefore, as discussed above, which is consistent with the findings of the literature in Chapter 2. The two pillars are 1) accepting a Jewish life based on the prescriptions of the Torah); and 2) becoming part of the people by studying their ethnic identity markers in religious, cultural terms. Based on this understanding of conversion, converts enter into a contractual relationship with the Beth Din, wherein they undertake to meet the requirements of the Beth Din in exchange for conversion itself - the transformation of their identity and acceptance into the Jewish people.

⁵⁷ This refers to voluntary, self-initiated requests for conversion where converts are not forced to convert, and where conversion is not a result of any proselytisation efforts. Again, this is due to historical reasons when there were laws against conversion to Judaism, and punishment would follow.

⁵⁸ Lit. “the prepared table”. It refers to the “Sixteenth-century compilation Jewish ritual laws, put together by Joseph Caro, considered authoritative by most traditionally observant Jews” (Robinson, 592).

⁵⁹ Judaism teaches that 613 commandments were given to Jews and are not binding on non-Jews.

⁶⁰ Rabbi C summarised that “in general the single most important factor in a conversion is sincerity and honesty and integrity”.

4.5 The objectives

The objectives of the programme and its consequential structure, are based on the two aforementioned underlying principles in conversion (in section 4.4). As such the objectives of the conversion programme are:

- **To teach candidates about Judaism:** its core beliefs, knowledge about the Torah and prayer books, the Jewish calendar and lifecycle, the commandments, ethical behaviour, a brief outline of Jewish history, nationhood and Israel, and the details relating to the rituals and practices associated with every aspect of the religion. In addition, conversion candidates need to learn to read and pray in Hebrew from a prayer book. Certain prayers / blessings are expected to be known by memory.

- **To ensure conversion candidates are performing daily, weekly and monthly rituals correctly in accordance with the principle "V'nishma"** and in accordance with *halachah*. This entails monitoring sessions with the Registrar approximately every three to four months over a period of two years. During monitoring sessions, candidates demonstrate their progress in the classes and are informally tested by the Registrar. Discussions around their advancement in the programme also take place.

- **To prepare candidates for the final Beth Din interview and to assess readiness for conversion and lifelong commitment to the practice of Judaism.** This is the concluding part of the formal tuition process, the meeting with the Beth Din during which a decision is made whether the candidate will be converted or not. At this meeting, the candidates need to demonstrate knowledge, practice, commitment to living a Jewish (religious) life and sincerity in wanting to be Jewish. This meeting usually takes place at the end of the two-year process, following a written (open book) exam and takes place in a court room at the Beth Din, which is located in the UOS in Norwood, Johannesburg.

- **To generate successful converts.** The programme is aimed at generating converts that maintain observance and commitment to religious life throughout their life time. Converts are considered to be successful if, after a year from the date of their conversion, they are still maintaining their Judaism. At that point the Beth Din is more convinced that the conversion has been successful and will issue the convert's conversion certificate to him/her as elaborated below. The Head of the Beth Din said, "After a year we want to know that during the year the convert really integrated it [Judaism] into her life. Then we believe that there is a good reason to hope that it [religious way of life] will

be sustainable". Here sustainable refers to living a Jewish life for the remainder of one's life, without lapse.

In a nutshell, the objectives of the programme are to provide content and prepare candidates for a religious Jewish life in a consistent, identifiably reliable manner between converts; determine sincerity of converts to proceed with the conversion; and to achieve successful converts. The role of the Beth Din is important in achieving these objectives. Its role is to ascertain whether (or when) one is ready for conversion and the commitment it entails, has sufficient knowledge to live a religious Jewish life, and is likely to maintain observance post-conversion (be a successful convert). Overall, the responsibility of the Beth Din is "just to see that the people who are converted are converted *halachically* and can be accepted *halachically* and therefore also should be accepted all over the world" (Head of the Beth Din).

4.6 Conversion

Once the objectives of the conversion programme have been met and the Beth Din is satisfied that there is sincerity, conversion may occur. When this is the case, converts:

...have to immerse in the *mikveh* in front of the *Beit Din*. While in the *mikveh* the *Beit Din* ask the questions - the official accepting of the oath of Judaism. Then they become converted. It is a *mikveh* and for males it is a *bris* and a *mikveh*.

At the time of *mikveh*, when conversion takes place, converts are required to make an oath while in the water in front of the Beth Din, who are present as witnesses behind a screen, and declare their faith and acceptance of the commandments. They are also required to sign a declaration that they will uphold the principle elements of the faith. At the same time they are required to sign a nullification letter that states, if their conversion is found to be questionable on some grounds (such as insincerity), the convert accepts that the conversion will be annulled. The Head of the Beth Din confirmed this, "In fact we make them [converts] to sign that we are able to revoke it [their conversion] but also it is not so simple today, but yes, we can." Later he said, "We do it [nullify conversion]. If the *Beit Din* finds out that at the time of the conversion, there was no shed of doubt that there was no acceptance, if they said it [the oath] and it was just lip service, then the conversion will be nullified". In addition, a year after the conversion, the convert is required to appear before the Beth Din and prove sincerity and observance again. If satisfied, the Beth Din will then issue a certificate of Jewishness that a convert will use to prove identity around the world - and if desired, gain citizenship in Israel. Converts use their marriage certificates and conversion certificates to

demonstrate "proof of Jewishness" which is required to gain access to Jewish schools and membership at synagogues and other Jewish organisations.

4.7 Expectations of converts

A number of personal changes and adjustments are required of converts at a formal and informal level (Kriel, 2012). At a formal level, converts must attend weekly classes regarding Jewish observance such as Sabbath observance and laws, kosher laws, religious festivals and prayer. In addition, they must learn Hebrew in order to be able to follow and participate in prayer services. Also the candidate must attend community led lectures on various topics and weekly synagogue services. In essence, the candidate needs to demonstrate conformity to religious practices and make other lifestyle changes and observances. At an informal level converts are required to live close to an Orthodox synagogue, make their home kosher, enrol their children in Jewish schools and demonstrate conformity to the requirements of the conversion. In essence, the length of the process relies on the external characteristics of the convert and, apart from behaviour, includes dress code (modest dress for women⁶¹ and religious dress for men) and adopting the lifestyle of other religious members (Kriel, 2012).

4.8 Conversion programme structure: roles and responsibilities

The conversion programme is managed by the Registrar who receives applications for conversion, interviews, accepts and monitors candidates onto / during the conversion programme, selects and appoints teachers, oversees the curriculum, and vets the quality of candidates. The role of the Registrar is to manage the process and refer candidates once they are deemed ready for conversion to the Beth Din. The converts are required to meet the objectives outlined earlier before an audience with the Beth Din is permitted.

Although there are three main role players, the convert, the Registrar and the Beth Din, the role of the community rabbi cannot be underestimated or ignored. The community rabbi is the entry point into the community - the person who has a direct relationship with the convert - is the face to Judaism and community, supports teaching in informal ways and leads by example. Therefore, the conversion role players interact in what Rabbi F refers to as a

⁶¹ Women are expected to wear only skirts and dresses of modest length, sleeves and necklines also at specified modest depths and lengths. After conversion, married women are required to cover their hair by making use of a scarf, hat or wig. Men are required to wear their *yarmulkes* (skullcaps) and *tzitzit* (fringed vest to be worn under garments) every day.

“conversion triangle”. The conversion triangle includes the convert, the community rabbi, the Registrar and by extension the Beth Din. Once the candidate is on the programme, the Registrar, community rabbi and the convert all work towards one goal - conversion. Therefore, the Registrar is not only the facilitator and manager of the process, but also the link between the Beth Din and the convert. The community rabbi is required to provide testimony of the convert’s readiness for conversion. At times in the process, the community rabbi represents the convert and at the other times, he represents the Beth Din in having to make a judgement as to whether a recommendation of the convert can be given to the Beth Din. The convert must convince first the community rabbi, then the Registrar and finally the Beth Din of his/her sincerity, regardless of the initial motivation for conversion and is expected to maintain this observance for life. Overall, the structure shows how embedded the conversion process is in community structures.

4.9 Sincerity and successful converts

An important element of conversion is sincerity, a key quality mentioned by the rabbis in my interviews. Sincerity refers to sincere performance of a religiously committed lifestyle, which indicates that one is converting out of conviction, for the love or desire of the religion itself and for no other motive such as marriage, position or material gain (known to rabbis as ulterior motives). Even converts for marriage are expected to demonstrate sincerity albeit that their initial impetus for conversion came through marriage.

The rabbis and Beth Din take the idea of sincerity very seriously to eliminate doubts, potential problems and to avoid failing their responsibility to meet the *halachic* requirements of conversion. As to be expected, ascertaining the sincerity of the convert is difficult. Like most of the rabbis interviewed, Rabbi C expressed the difficulty in trying to ascertain sincerity:

What proves sincerity? That is a good question. I don’t know what proves sincerity. You have to convince three rabbis that you are sincere. Are we experts on people’s sincerity; do we put them through a lie test? No. We rely on what the [community] rabbi says, two years’ practising, the teacher says she is a good student. She calls, she seems to be expressing interest beyond. She is really interested. All that together and then you come to the *Beit Din*, they ask you some questions and discuss it with you. The feeling is okay you are sincere. At the end of the day the only one who knows if you are sincere is God. There is only one telephone number in this and nobody’s goes straight to God. I don’t have a line to God and neither does the *Beit Din* neither does Rabbi Hendler and

if he told me, he did I would say he must see a psychiatrist because he doesn't.
So how do we know she [the convert] is sincere?

For the rabbis, and Beth Din, the meaning of sincerity is clearly defined by *halachah* and it is not merely knowledge of the religion, or an acceptance of concepts, ideas or values. Rather as discussed earlier, sincerity equates to an ongoing acceptance and performance of the commandments. It is a full integration of the behaviours and way of life associated with observant Jewish communities. The Registrar explains that "You are not making an oath on values, you are making an oath... they [the Beth Din] very clearly say to the person, do you promise to keep *Shabbat*? Do you promise to keep kosher?" The broad categories cover the basis of key areas of observance in religious Jewish life. The Beth Din are not looking for sincerity in the form of a noun only - but sincerity that is both action and the noun together.

Some rabbis expressed difficulty in ascertaining sincerity as a limitation of the system. The community rabbi, the Registrar and the Beth Din are all involved in determining sincerity. The community rabbi is first in line in recommending a candidate, the Registrar next and the Beth Din makes the final judgement. However, it is difficult to know when that decision can be made. Furthermore, at what point is the convert judged to be sincere or not? Rabbi C, speaking about a convert at the *mikveh*, commented:

Okay, so am I [the convert] saying yes to [the questions in the oath to] get the piece of paper [conversion certificate] or am I saying yes because I am sincere. Am I sincere because I am really sincere or at this moment I feel sincere but Friday night is my sister's birthday and she invited me to a very fancy restaurant and I can't say no so I am going to go and I have to get there by car. She is my sister. So are we sincere or not sincere?

The dilemma for rabbis is when sincerity may be said to be lacking or may have been negated and the implications for the convert. The issue is again not easy to establish and involves complex issues of intention with corresponding complexity in Jewish law. The Head of the Beth Din explained that sincerity needs to exist at the time of the oath at the *mikveh*. He explained, "If at the time [of immersion] it was just saying [the conversion oath] without thinking that she is going [to observe after conversion, then it] is questionable" in principle. However, if at the time of the *mikveh*, the person was sincere in making the oath, but later (at an undefined time) this sincerity falls away, the conversion is still valid (as confirmed by rabbis in the interviews). Sincerity must have existed at the time of the *mikveh* oath irrespective of what happens later (this is discussed further in the next section). If there is a doubt of the sincerity of the convert during the *mikveh* oath, then according to the Head of the Beth Din, there is also a doubt about the legal validity of the conversion which can lead to problems

in future, such as whether the conversion is valid, whether the convert can be accepted as Jewish and whether the children are Jewish.

The observance / acceptance must not only be sincere but also absolute: "If a person goes through the conversion and says I am prepared to accept everything except one rabbinical law, then the conversion is not valid. So this comes back to what I said – an absolute commitment to *halachah* whether the Torah Law or the Rabbinical Law". The Head of the Beth Din said:

The conversion must be a sustainable conversion obviously meeting the *halachic* requirements. *Halachic* requirement means the commitment has to be without any qualifications; it has to be absolute. The knowledge has to be knowledge to be able to carry on a lifestyle, a *halachic* lifestyle, then you cannot expect a convert or convertee to know everything. I also know this is a lifetime. I mean you are learning everyday new things. Our curriculum that is planned or designed to have the basic knowledge that a person must know how to run his life as a Jew⁶².

In other words, if the converts accept all of what is required of them and they abide by this, it is easy to make a decision on sincerity and the length of time involved in the process does not make any difference to when a conversion can take place. The convert will be permitted to convert even if he/she has not completed two years on the programme. However, when this does not happen, it raises questions about sincerity and motives. Rabbi C explained:

If it is five years later [after *mikveh*] I can't [now] retroactively say you weren't sincere. I am saying you went through the *mikveh* Thursday morning and Friday night is your sister's birthday and you go out to a restaurant and eat on *Shabbat*. I am asking you is that sincere?

Rabbi C continued:

So let's say that it didn't happen like that, that it happened six months later. So she was good, she kept it [observance], but she really didn't, or she thought she fooled everyone, or she fooled herself, and her husband and her mother-in-law and even the rabbi. That is what I mean.

⁶² "Sustainable conversion" refers to maintaining observance after conversion; "without any qualifications" refers to conversion without ulterior motives and if there is observance, then one is sincere and this overrides the ulterior motive if there is one; "halachic conversion" refers to meeting the requirements in Jewish law for the performance of the conversion.

If sincerity validates a conversion, then it stands to reason that insincerity can invalidate a conversion. But the rabbis, although irritated by the lip service some converts pay to their vows, are reluctant to be so harsh. As one rabbi stated, it is hard to imagine that converts would put themselves through all of this in order to throw it away at the first opportunity. Rabbi C clarified the position according to Torah sources and what that means for the status of the convert:

Is it the first Friday night you bomb out, two years later or the woman goes to the *mikveh* for three months and then stops going to the *mikveh*. There are, I think, certain discussions amongst the allotted authorities. You know... is there a subject thirty days... the *Talmud*⁶³ would tell, the *Talmud*, which is a source of the laws, tells us that if the *Ger* becomes a Jew and eventually (it doesn't give a time) returns to their old ways he doesn't become a *Goy*⁶⁴ [non-Jew]. He is a Jew, but that means at the time of the conversion he or she was sincere, how do we know? Because he lived like a proper Jew for a year, two years, three years. I am saying if there is a reason to suspect that the person is really, really is doing this... well the *Beit Din* tries to determine that and not get it but... have people fallen through the cracks? Certainly I would say yes.

A convert will still be regarded as a Jew provided that a *halachic* conversion was performed and that at the time, the convert was sincere. When I asked the Registrar if a convert who does not keep all (but does keep some) of the observances of the religion is no longer Jewish, such as for example, a married women who fails to wear a head covering, he replied:

It doesn't make you less Jewish. It makes you less committed. It makes you less committed to what you've committed to. You did make a vow and oath.

Although there are many practical difficulties in applying the measure of sincerity as a criterion for conversion, especially given that its scope must extend to the whole body of Jewish law at the relevant moment of the conversion, the criterion itself is defended given the essential voluntariness of the conversion. For example, Rabbi B said, "If you want to join our particular club which we believe is the true club, then there is only one set of rules". The

⁶³ The *Talmud* is "The body of Jewish civil and ceremonial law and legend comprising the *Mishnah* and the *Gemara*. There are two versions of the *Talmud*: the Babylonian Talmud (which dates from the 5th century ad but includes earlier material) and the earlier Palestinian or Jerusalem Talmud" (Oxford Dictionaries, 2016)

⁶⁴ Lit. "nation" or "people" in Hebrew. It is also the Yiddish word for non-Jew (Robinson, 2001:574). It is claimed not be a derogatory word as it is used in the Torah, however, in practice it is often used in a pejorative way.

Head of the Beth Din concurred, "You want to join a club, a golf club. You can't say I want to be your member according to my rules. You can't. You want an Orthodox conversion according to your rules. It can't be. If you want to join a club these are the rules of the club". He continued:

To [join] our club there is only one set of rules. I mean there is Reform, there is Conservative, there is Reconstruction, there is... anyone is welcome to go to them. I mean there is Reform in this country. If you want to join our particular club which we believe is the true club, then there is only one set of rules.

Given the somewhat monopolistic features of the Jewish community in South Africa (as explored above in section 4.3.1), the context in which the convert exercises choice may be more binary than the Head of the Beth Din suggests. For ethnic converts this presents acute dilemmas as Chapter 8 shows. At a deeper level, for those converts who genuinely view Orthodox Judaism as the "true club" but nevertheless seek the same leniencies that born-Jews enjoy incrementally to deepen their commitment to Torah, the up-front assumption of the club's rules may smack of unfairness. The treatment of sincerity which translates into sincerity in the moment followed by a limited period of sustained practice following the conversion (one year) indicates a pragmatic approach on the side of the Beth Din and perhaps a mindfulness of the dilemmas faced by converts. The pressure on the Beth Din to maintain authenticity and credibility while responding to the genuine need for conversion within the community appears from the interviews. The next section demonstrates how in practice the assertion of sincerity and the binary choices faced by ethnic converts results in negotiated or transactional resolutions of this tension.

4.10 Game playing and transactional conversions

The criterion of sincerity is tested by ethnic converts. The Head of the Beth Din states this clearly; "Strictly speaking conversion for ulterior motives should not take place. Ulterior motives can be many things but one of them is to marry a Jew or a Jewess". How then are conversions for marriage accepted? According to the Head of the Beth Din:

Halachah permits [that] if you are in the process, you realise although the initial step was taken for ulterior motives, but if you see that afterwards it becomes a sincere motive to be Jewish then you are allowed to do it [perform conversion].

Rabbi F explained further:

The debate now is do we allow conversions that start as an ulterior motive and hopefully through the process it will become authentic or do we stop it at that

point? The view of the *Beit Din* here, and I think very much supported by Rabbi Kurtstag [Head of the Beth Din], is the following: 'Let's not kid ourselves, this is an ulterior motive but we will allow an ulterior motive to begin'. There is no guarantee that when a person gets on the course that we are going to say okay... it will begin and we will assess it. If we feel that it has become authentic, we will allow it to go through, if not, not. Many other communities do not allow the process to even start but that process [above]- which I support - is definitely the one the South African rabbinate has adopted. We start with ulterior motives and we move forward.

Thus, a way is found around the problem of converting individuals for marriage - that is, to allow sincere motives to emerge over time in the conversion process. The rabbis nurture a hope that during conversion, as converts learn more about Judaism, their ulterior motive will trigger a genuine commitment to Orthodox Judaism that meets the *halachic* criterion for conversion. In other words, the couples will come to convert for religious reasons even if at the outset, they had ulterior motives. As the Registrar stated that they are looking for people who have been "moved to the covenant. They [the converts] may start out with the wrong intentions [marriage] but they [the rabbis] watch for signs that they have moved towards the right intentions [religion] in the process and move towards the covenant authentically". The Head of the Beth Din provided an example:

In fact we had cases, interesting cases, where people started in the process in order to be Jewish and afterwards they broke up the relationship and the candidate for conversion continued. She said, this is my life, I want to be Jewish. You can see that there is a sincerity and seriousness about it. So although originally she started because she wanted to marry this guy afterwards she still wanted to do it. This is what we are aiming at [conversion for sincere reasons].

While converts may be suspected of having an ulterior motive, the rabbis too may be thought to have ulterior motives - or hidden agendas - in permitting conversion for marriage. This includes improving the levels of Jewish knowledge and observance generally while fighting assimilation and maintaining identity - making the "non-Jewish Jew" Jewish. Rabbi C illustrated this:

In the case of conversion you are actually dealing with a captive audience. The guy has no choice... well, it is very simple - "you love the girl?" "Yes". "Are you going to marry her?" "Yes". Okay the girl eventually turns around and says, "Look here (whatever your name is) Brian, I want to go through this conversion. I can't do this alone, they are not letting me do it alone. Are you... you love me, do this for me". So the crazy thing is HE is doing it for an ulterior motive. He is becoming Jewish because of a non-Jewish girl. As crazy as it sounds that is the reality. At

least you have him sitting in the chair [in the Registrar's office]. Rabbi Hendler says to him, "If you don't keep *Shabbat* within six months then...". In a sense Rabbi Hendler is making more returnees to Judaism than all the other rabbis together but he has got you over the barrel. You need something from him...

Conversion for marriage creates a situation of "bartering" that is used both to achieve the goal of sincerity and achieve compliance with the conversion process on the one hand and improve levels of observance of the Jewish partner on the other hand. Rabbi C said:

[The Registrar] in a sense says you need something from me, it is a barter, you going to give me *Shabbat* I am going to give you conversion. You are going to give me *Tefilin*⁶⁵ and I am going to give you two months closer [to Beth Din appointment], etc. Okay so if you are putting on *Tefilin* because I love a *shiksa* [derogatory term in Yiddish for a non-Jewish woman] is that good or bad? As far as I am concerned I don't care why you are putting on *Tefilin* as long as you are putting on *Tefilin*, eventually...

Converts are known to 'play the game' and try and convince the rabbis that they are sincere in order to get through the process as quickly as possible⁶⁶. As Rabbi D said:

There are one or two who pretend that it is not [for marriage] but it turns out that it is and that is like worst case scenario because then you know that they are bluffing you to start off with. There is no point in bluffing based on what I said before. So this is how you are here let's deal with what we've got rather than trying to make up a story to suit the play.

Some converts' behaviour after conversion place the rabbis in a difficult position. A rabbi may have given a recommendation of sincerity only to find that the converts are no longer maintaining their observance, casting a shadow again on the convert's motives in the first place but also creating doubt on the word of the community rabbi. Rabbi F said:

The *Beit Din* will not convert a person unless they have been given a letter [of recommendation for conversion to the Registrar and/or Beth Din] from the rabbi of the shul that states that the person is authentic. It puts the rabbi in a very difficult position. On the one hand he wants these people. These people spend

⁶⁵ Usually translated as phylacteries in English (Robinson, 2001:594). They are leather pouches "containing scrolls with passages of scripture, used to fulfil the commandment to bind the commandments to our hands and between our eyes" (Rich, 2015).

⁶⁶ Often women convert in their 30s and want to have children as soon as possible after marriage. Rabbi D explained, "The body clock is ticking so you tell me now, I have to wait another two years [while on the conversion programme]. It might not be possible two years from now... There is a pressure to kind of cram everything [the syllabus of conversion]".

more time with the rabbi than the average person. You become friends with them, intimate with them, whatever. You want to help them. Sometimes you can see that this is an Oscar academy winning award story and [on the other hand] you know that four months down the line they will either leave the shul because they are now going to another area as it is easier then to duck and dive...

Hence Rabbis may doubt the word of converts. Rabbi F demonstrates this when he spoke of writing the letter of recommendation:

You actually don't know if when you give that letter it is authentic or not. In fact even when you give the letter you don't know if they are telling the truth or not. People say I didn't come to shul because I was sick. Do you know if they were working from home or not. How do you know? How do you know if the person is keeping *Shabbat* or not, how do you know?

Rabbis also harbour an expectation that many conversion couples will not maintain their observance after conversion - as shown by Rabbi F above. Sometimes this happens immediately as Rabbi E recounted, "As soon as they [converts] got their certificate and married their Jewish boyfriend/girlfriend, their Jewish observance went out the window". The Head of the Beth Din also discovered, "Sometimes you find out that in fact at the time when they were converted they never actually meant seriously to be observant". Other times the dropping of observance happens over a long period of time. Rabbi C stated, "I would say that women who converted because of marriage in 1970/80, let's say from '60 to '90, are they observant Jews now? You would surprise me if more than 10% are". Either way, it is expected that converts for marriage (and their partners) will do what is needed to expedite the process and that observance rates will drop after time.

While some rabbis believe this dropping of observance is because of lack of sincerity, others feel that the demand may simply be too great for some. The Registrar said, "There is an actual vow. It is a huge vow that. Is it that people don't really take it seriously or they do take it seriously but they just become more... they can't keep it up, it is too difficult, they just fall by the wayside". Rabbi G commented:

Like somebody studying for a test there is always a big whew... a big drop afterwards and that has to be expected. It has to be expected ... I would say anybody studying for anything. I don't think it is intentional that when you are finished there is a big whew and a drop. It is up to you afterwards to lift your game.

Later Rabbi G said: "They have sometimes over performed before and not lived up to that. I would prefer to see, 'what-you-see-is-what-you-get', upfront whether the *Beit Din*

accepts it or not. Go through that as opposed to putting it on for a month". Rabbi H felt that it is a natural process of unwinding after conversion:

I personally don't think any couple really means to lie their way through it. R25 000 for the whole process. You are not going to spend R25 000 and change your lifestyle just to live a lie. I think it happens that somebody hears a bad comment or they just slip in there and one thing leads to another, so just life... you know, you slowly but surely regress. I don't think anybody means to, or most people don't.

Rabbis who invest time, energy and substantial support feel let down by converts who mislead them during the process. Many rabbis interviewed relayed this sentiment. The Registrar, in the position of facilitating conversion, encounters this often:

As you can imagine it is always very disappointing for us [rabbis]. We are not sort of crazy like we don't realise that people are human beings. On the other hand they are putting us in an impossible situation because we know in order for a person to have a successful conversion, and what is successful for us means that they adopt the religious lifestyle and they are going to be more or less religious for the rest of their life. Yes, you drop this and you drop that but you've basically got to be committed to it.

Rabbi A also shared his disappointment in certain cases:

There are converts that have let me down tremendously. I think the community and I invested a huge amount of time and space into people that gave me every reason to believe that this was something that they really were doing for the right reason and gave of themselves and a lot of self-sacrifice and therefore generated a lot more trust from myself and the community that this was something that was really going to blossom inside the community.

It is evident that spiritual converts are viewed differently to those for marriage. As Rabbi H said, "The ones who do it out of personal conviction are in a different league. They are completely in a different league". Furthermore, in the rabbis' eyes, the most admirable reason for conversion is one without ulterior motive, even the motive was initially ulterior. It is seen as a sincere reason for conversion. It was not referred to directly in the interviews but was implied by the negativity expressed towards conversion couples.

Rabbi D mentioned:

There were many notable exceptions [to conversion for marriage] however, of people whose faith and embrace of Judaism was deeply sincere and unquestionably genuine with no ulterior motives whatsoever. Those individuals surely earned the exalted title of *Ger Tzedek*, 'righteous convert'

Similarly, Rabbi E stated, "In the end, over the years I learned that some of our best Jews weren't even born Jewish. They were Jews by choice". Rabbi A said: "There are converts in our community who have really impacted on the Jewish community and in the area of people and social work".

This section shows the dilemmas faced by the Beth Din and communal Rabbis around conversion. A robust approach to sincerity is used in an effort to overcome the *halachic* dilemma of conversion for marriage. The next section examines why the Beth Din is willing to adopt a pragmatic approach in responding to ethic converts.

4.11 Guarding the identity of the community

A number of additional tensions in the conversion process arose out of the structure and implementation of the conversion between the Beth Din, converts and the community rabbis. The rabbis' interviews showed that the conversion process was structured in particular ways to protect the *Mitnagdim* and religious (rather than traditional) identity of the Orthodox community (discussed below). The way that the programme is structured in effect demonstrates the politics of belonging; the tensions between converts and those born Jewish demonstrate the contestations of the boundaries in the identity of the community. Each aspect of the programme which demonstrates the politics of belonging is discussed below.

4.11.1 Responding to the threat of intermarriage

"Conversion for marriage is seen as an ulterior motive because they [converts] have a Jewish a Jewish partner and they want to bring their children up in a single religion" (Rabbi F). From Zekry's study and from the interviews, ulterior motive stands out as the category in which conversion most frequently takes place. Rabbis regard marriage as the dominant reason for conversion. As Rabbi D said, "You fall in love with a Jewish boy and you fall in love with a non-Jewish girl and that brings most converts in". According to the rabbis, and as supported by the statistics, most converts are women. As another rabbi put it, "Factually we have more women converting to Judaism than men - that is the statistic". Rabbi F was more specific: "99% of the conversion in Johannesburg is people who are converting for purposes

of marriage". In a different interview, Rabbi C stated "I am going to talk in one gender just to make things easier. We will talk about 'her' because probably 80:40 [of converts] are female". Yet another rabbi, Rabbi G, commented "I have converted one Jewish boy in the past two/three years. The others have all been girls". What must be remembered is that the comments come from rabbis who are located in peripheral areas where there is more secularism - or as the rabbis would say "assimilation" - and consequently higher levels of intermarriage. Therefore, it is no surprise that the candidates who they are seeing are women as presenting for marriage. The Head of the Beth Din confirmed this when he stated, "I think there are more mixed marriages." (Note that even after conversion they are considered mixed marriages). Intermarriage is an ongoing thorny issue, but there is an understanding that it should be dealt with differently than in previous times, which was to ban conversion, force a break-up of the relationship, or ex-communicate anyone who had intermarried (although ex-communication may still occur at a family level as evident in the interviews) which goes back to the founding days of the community. The first ban of conversion for marriage arose in the early years of the formation of the Johannesburg Jewish community. A rabbi interviewed for this study explained what happened:

The first argument that took place in the Jewish community in Johannesburg was related to... surrounded conversion. In 1888 the first shul [synagogue] was built at President Street. The foundation stone is in the wall over here and two years later there was a split in the community and half the community moved to Park Street. Park Street eventually became Wolmarans Street. President tried to relocate and eventually joined Wolmarans and it became the union of those two communities but within two years we had this big [unclear] and this major blow apart and the book tells a story how it related to conversion. In the early days even though people were not very religious at all, more the English and German origins which was in itself quite involved with the non-Jewish community and in a sense also had origins where there was intermarriage and... they passed a resolution that there is no conversions, no conversions whatsoever. Why? Because people were coming over here meeting local girls, the intention was to bring out their families, they became alienated from their families and just went off into the sunset. They said no conversions and one of the rabbis or the rabbi of the President Street Shul did a conversion and the leadership challenged him and he managed to rally support. He actually at the meeting got the overwhelming support and the whole committee resigned en masse and went on to build a new shul. Interesting because they weren't really religious at that time but that is what it centred around. They were worried that conversion would be a means

to dilute the community and particularly not fulfil responsibilities to families overseas because suddenly they just had new allegiances here and never walked away.

The same concerns appear to have prevailed over time. During the period between 1956 and 1972, the "Beth Din rejected conversions for marriage but would consider the child of a mixed marriage [between Jew and non-Jew] ... [if] the child was raised to believe himself/herself Jewish" (Zekry, 2000:28). Mothers were considered to be "acceptable candidates" of such children and were converted with their children at *bar mitzvah* of the male child, or the marriage of a female child (which is when the children were permitted to convert). In 1972, new guidelines around the ban were introduced which showed "greater leniency" around the issue (Zekry, 2000:28) although these guidelines upheld the view that "if there is an ulterior motive or if the motive is particularly for the purpose of marriage, then the conversion cannot be granted". In 1986 the conversion programme became centralised under the Beth Din and the approach to the "painful subject of intermarriage" which had "exercised the minds of Rabbis" (Bender 1984) was reconsidered. It was at this point that conversion couples⁶⁷, a structured programme with monitoring of candidates, and high levels of religious observance was introduced. In his "Memorandum on Intermarriage and Conversion", Bender (1984:1), the former registrar of conversions⁶⁸, declared that "Most people link intermarriage with assimilation as though it were one and the same thing, whilst in practical reality it may not necessarily be so". This implies a shift in views towards intermarriage "not in order to condone intermarriage G-d forbid, but merely to state that intermarriage and assimilation are not necessarily synonymous terms" (Bender, 1984:1). He continued that "Intermarriage is a fact of Jewish life, however many Articles, Sermons, Addresses or appeals are made on the National or individual level". This position on intermarriage was the underlying justification for a new approach to conversion, as outlined in his Memorandum.

The underlying view that emerged was that "Jewish people should be encouraged to move in circles which would not lead to intermarriage" but that "one cannot escape the realities of intimate Jewish-Gentile relationships" (Zekry, 2000). For that reason, the programme was "upgraded" (discussed below) in a way that would be "beneficial to the continuity of Jewishness" (Zekry, 2000:29). The "Jewishness" referred to was (and remains) an observant form of Orthodox Judaism specified by the Beth Din, rather than the traditional / secular form that exists in the majority of the Jewish population in South Africa. Today this sentiment

⁶⁷ Where both convert and partner participate in the conversion process (discussed in section 4.11.4).

⁶⁸ He was also the first Registrar of Conversions at the Beth Din.

continues. Whereas the approach previously was to ban conversion - or make it near impossible - the approach is to permit it with conditions and for particular purposes. The Head of the Beth Din stated:

My belief is we have to face the problem of intermarriage and I...[believe] it is too naïve to think that if people fell in love and are really serious that you are able to break up a relationship. I believe the only way to deal with it is conversion. The conversion must be a sustainable conversion obviously meeting the *halachic* requirements.

Again the Head of the Beth Din later repeated, "The only way to face the mixed marriages is conversion, but it has to be a valid conversion" (a valid conversion refers to keeping to the *halachah*, the convert's acceptance of the commandments and proving sincerity). Following on this point, Rabbi A explained why conversion for marriage is tolerated:

I think there is maybe more leniency today. If there is a change in recognising that if there is a guy who wants to marry somebody who is not Jewish, that there is somehow a need to hold onto the guy because if you are going to reject them outright you are not only not going to gain the person you might convert [but] you are going to lose the person who was born Jewish. So whilst in the old days there would have been absolutely zero tolerance I think it is more...[tolerated today].

In an article in the "Jewish Affairs", Zekry (2000:32) published the findings of his PhD thesis. His recommendations for conversion, following interviews with rabbis, stated that "it ought to be emphasised that the optimal goal lies in prevention of intermarriage. This principle gains greater momentum as the challenges of the new South Africa present themselves". He does not elaborate on the challenges, but the thread of the article suggests he is referring to new threats of dilution of Jewish identity and ethnicity. He continues by quoting the late Chief Rabbi of South Africa, C.K. Harris:

The new dispensation in South Africa offers greater opportunity for mixing on the part of the diverse ethnic and religious groups and fears have been expressed that tendencies towards assimilation will accelerate and the number marrying out of the faith will increase (Zekry, 2000:32).

The times have changed, but the threats and insecurities have not. Therefore according to conversion authorities, if conversion is to be allowed, it must serve the community - to avoid being assimilated. While the same concerns about intermarriage prevail today, the approach is different. The quotes above show that the community is insular (others have argued that it has become more insular and Ultra-Orthodox), yet conversion has become more

permissible. But at the same time, the conversion process has become more controlled and rigid in order to manage intermarriage to the benefit of the community - but also to benefit of the Beth Din. Prior to this conversion met individual requirements more, today it meets communal requirements more.

Sincerity (as seen in points 4.7 and 4.8) and the judgmental use of the language of ulterior motive are ways of controlling conversion, as it controls the converts, outcomes and results (supposedly) by creating more religious converts. Nullification, the oath in the *mikveh*, and declaration of religious intent (seen in points 4.5) have a dual purpose: to contractually tie converts to their obligations, but also to control outcomes to negate the possibility of converts avoiding religious practices afterwards. All these measures serve Jewish community longevity and identity in their view. Another way of controlling conversion and conversion outcomes is through the rationalisation of the conversion process.

4.11.2 Bureaucratisation and centralisation

It was noted earlier that the Beth Din became centralised into a unified structure under the authority of Johannesburg and the conversion programme underwent similar changes. By 1986, with the appointment of Rabbi Bender as the first Registrar of conversions, the conversion programme became centralised under the control of the Beth Din. In speaking about the evolution of the approach to conversions in response to intermarriage, Zekry (2000) indicated that two trends emerged in 1972 that were to develop further: leniency towards conversion (as was seen in 4.9.1) and the increased involvement of the Beth Din (discussed below). These trends appear to have continued into the current programme.

The structure of the programme (as noted in 5.8) changed to a centralised and standardised system from a situation where 30-40 years ago, the structure was greatly decentralised and taught via individual rabbis at a synagogue level, and later centralised by the former Registrar and his wife. At the same time, part of this change in structure also meant the eradication of the lay committee (made up of synagogue leaders, most of whom were secular e.g., Chairman of a synagogue) who oversaw the overall conversion process. The lay committee was replaced by the installation of the Beth Din as the only authority deemed to judge the readiness for conversions. The Head of the Beth Din described this:

The role of the *Beit Din* changed I think by only being more strict, I would say and using all different, if you can call it means, to ensure sustainability by having our classes, by monitoring and by Rabbi Hendler and before it was Rabbi Bender to monitor the conversion. I think that I was the one that introduced the late

Rabbi Bender, Rabbi Bender's father. He and his wife used to teach converts and then I said to him instead of teaching converts be in charge of monitoring their tuition and interviewing so we put all kinds of thinking in [place].

The key reason for the disbanding of the lay committee was because many of its members were not observant. Therefore, it was difficult to expect converts to maintain standards that leaders of synagogues did not uphold. Further, those who were not themselves observant did not believe that it was necessary or important for converts to be observant. The Head of the Beth Din said, "I don't think that anybody told [unclear] that you have to now also be *Shomrei Shabbat* etc. They didn't think it was so essential". In other words, restructuring of the programme and incorporating religious standards is seen and experienced as a stricter programme. The new structure is perceived as an improvement that has impacted positively – according to the Head of the Beth Din - on the outcomes of the programme, namely more sincere and successful converts.

Overall, the sincerity of converts, it is believed, is enhanced by more structured teaching by religious people with tighter requirements that are less negotiable. The restructuring has meant that the process has become more formal and stricter and together these factors produce more successful, generally observant candidates than in previous years⁶⁹. Also, by centralising the process, greater capacity is created for converts which means there can be an increase in the number of converts as there are more teachers involved. The Head of the Beth Din sees these changes as an "upgrade" and believes that the upgrading is continuously taking place and has produced improvements in the system. However, he believes these upgrades to the conversion programme are also synonymous with upgrades in the community - that the community has been "upgraded" on a continual basis in the other areas, such as *Shabbat* and *kashrut*. The Head of the Beth Din explained:

Look the conversion has other things. We went through different stages in the community. There is a continual upgrading [unclear 18:46]. We are upgrading *kashrut*, we are upgrading in everything. When I entered... when I joined the *Beit Din* in 1976 we didn't have a *kashrut* bakery which is closed on *Shabbat* because all of them were open on *Shabbat* but now there is no way that you can think about it.

⁶⁹ The strictness of the programme is also explained by the general move in the community to becoming more religious. As Rabbi F said: "It [the conversion programme] has become more strict because the *Beit Din* and the rabbinate has become more right wing. It is a reality in South Africa whether it is good or not, it has definitely caused some people to feel uncomfortable but the rabbinate has become more right wing".

The centralisation is part of a broader change in the community that has come about as parts of the overall community have started becoming more religious. As such there is support among rabbis for the centralisation of the conversion programme, as seen in the words of Rabbi C, who felt that the Registrar and Beth Din have implemented an improved system. He stated, "Compared to programmes throughout the world I think it is probably one of the better ones in the success rate and the type of converts that are produced".

Rabbi C raised the point that the improvements in the system impact on the outcomes - the quality of the converts - in terms of the number of the successful conversions. The Head of the Beth Din too felt that they "have a good rate of success". He said, "I won't tell you that we have 100% but we have better success [than before]". In his estimation, they have "about 70% success rate". Rabbi E agreed, "Today, more and more graduates of the system go on to live dedicated Torah lives and raise beautiful, committed Jewish families". While the conversion programme is considered to have improved over the past few decades - which is in some part credited for the increase in successful converts - this point is debatable. Some rabbis feel that the supposedly improved system produces fewer successes or is quite simply a deficient model.

Many rabbis identified that the centralisation and formalisation of the conversion programme brings with it a shift from individualised lessons to structured group lessons. It also places these lessons outside of the communal framework and also outside of a supportive relationship with a religious leader who could provide converts with guidance and warmth and solace from the strictures of the Beth Din. For these rabbis, there is greater value in maintaining individualised classes where a direct relationship can be fostered and maintained between the rabbi and the convert. This makes the conversion more personal and helps build a longer, lasting bond in the community. Rabbi F said:

At one stage the *Beit Din* had designated teachers... Now they don't have designated teachers they have groups. I don't know to be honest with you if that is the best way. I don't know. I still think there was a lot of value in the husband and wife or boyfriend and girlfriend having a one-on-one. I think you developed a relationship with the person. Now they do it in groups but I don't know if that is the best way forward forever and ever. I just think that it lacks a sort of a bond.

The reasoning goes that with personal lessons, the rabbi can be more involved and supportive of the convert and his/her specific journey. At the same time, learning is also more direct and appropriate to the level of the convert. Greater integration into community practices can emerge because the convert, rabbi and community get to know each other better

and are more aligned with each other. After conversion, the convert is likely to remain in a community based on his/her strong bonds with it. But mostly, through direct contact with a rabbi, through the building of a personal relationship, the rabbis felt that converts have the opportunity to experience Judaism more intimately. A great concern they had is that the essence and beauty of Judaism, the spiritual side, the warmth and opportunity to nurture a love for the religion, is lost. The former model, which was an individual, personal and direct method of learning, is preferred to the "factory system", which consists of many concurrent group classes, held in a depersonalised manner, characterised by forms, tests and check boxes. Centralisation, group lessons, are part of a system which removes the personal element making it a technical process. It is felt that if the programme were to be changed back to a one-on-one format between convert and community rabbi, then the 'soul' can be put back into the Judaism that converts experience with better outcomes. Rabbi A said:

I think the community rabbi becomes a little bit of a... the friend or the positive force in what otherwise is a very technical requirement from the *Beit Din*. The *Beit Din* don't really know them personally, intimately. They know their progress, they know their technical data, but they are not dealing with them as human beings. They are dealing with them as applicants for conversions and it is the community and the rabbi that is much more involved in the personal connection to the converts. The harsh regimental requirements of the system, which is necessary in this process, can be balanced with the warmth and the personal involvement of a rabbi who can become a confidant and, not to undermine in any way the system, but to supplement and give it a personal element. I think that is probably the most important role that the rabbi can play besides educating and sharing information, is giving a warmth to what is otherwise by design a cold and demanding process.

What emerges is that the bureaucratised, centralised group system ultimately does not sit well with rabbis who cannot accept the reduction of spiritual matters to bureaucracy on the one hand and external behavioural characteristics on the other hand. For them conversion is a spiritual matter - a journey of the soul - and spiritual matters are far more enigmatic, subjective, formless and intangible than what the current conversion process acknowledges. Rabbi D said:

It [the process] is very often handled on a mechanical level rather than a spiritual level... You are talking to somebody that doesn't believe that anything of Judaism can be handled on just a mechanical level because that is not what it is about. We are trying to... I think we undervalue the people/the person/individual that you are dealing with. It is a complete under estimation of what Judaism is all about. You are just a body - you are not just a body. If I am only addressing

your body how terrible is that - you are a soul, you are a person, you are an individual, you are a personality. You've got feelings and all of that stuff. What am I really trying to get at - your soul, find that *neshoma* [Hebrew for soul] and purely mechanically I would have... honestly I have no idea how anybody could convert to Judaism without a spiritual connection because on a mechanical level... the mechanics of it are not so easy and they are not so warm and embracing and inviting and some of them seem weird and what for. If there is something spiritual then sure. As I said before it is like the meat and potatoes without any flavours. Eventually you are going to get tired of it. I think the community are essential, the rabbi is essential, but understand the difficult roles of both. The spirituality - I think if they don't spend a lot of time on it they should be spending a lot more time on it because it is essential.

What rabbis were saying is that the new system loses its humanity and potential for a spiritual journey in a new religion and therefore it should be redesigned to a format that is not judgement based. The problem for them is that the programme becomes spiritually impoverished. A return to the former system of individualised tuition and relationship building would address this point which is important to rabbis who are spiritual leaders. Another disadvantage is that, in effect, the new system, is trying to control the outcomes and this devalues the energetic value of the convert in the community. Rabbi G made a significant point:

The *Beit Din* has to... the *Beit Din* can only focus in on what they see. I think it is a disaster. The convert has gone on this most amazing journey, the rabbi is a witness to it, the community is a witness and is not taking advantage of this new energy.

By controlling the outcomes, the process becomes a system that requires constant management, supervision and monitoring. Converts who want to move forward with their lives respond in a calculated manner in order to complete the process as efficiently and expeditiously as possible. While the Beth Din endeavours to control the outcomes in terms of behaviour by generating sincere, uniform converts and facilitate integration into community, in so doing they exert power over converts with little room to move until after the process. At that stage, many of whom want to get away as fast as possible. It also creates a situation of 'ducking and diving' by converts who want to escape the constant surveillance or avoid the pain and discomfort of being 'processed' and remove themselves from the watchful eye of the authorities. Converts find ways to expedite the process so that they can continue their lives

without interference. The process as it stands produces a counter response which then requires more policing and often the community rabbis and even community members are co-opted into doing so. As Rabbi D stated:

The rabbi is a bit of a spy for the *Beit Din*. Not inadvertently but they do ask you. They call up the rabbi and say do you know this woman? She says she *davens* [Hebrew for prays] in your shul. How often does she come? When is she there? Does she keep *Shabba*?

As a result the process becomes anxiety-provoking - a process that converts come to fear at first. Having to deal with judgement and judges, of proving oneself good enough for conversion as if standing in front of God on the day of reckoning is very intimidating (this will be seen in chapter 7 based on what converts say). Some rabbis feel that the fear-based approach⁷⁰ undermines sincerity and authenticity in the programme and long-lasting transformation. Ultimately, although this is not the intention, it becomes self-defeating since if converts are motivated out of fear and the outcomes in terms of sustainable conversions cannot be guaranteed. Another problem (weakness) that it raises with its emphasis on observable and measurable criteria - its bureaucracy - is that converts are not adequately emotionally supported in the process - since this is not what the programme offers. While I was aware in my conversations with the Registrar, who deals with converts directly through the process, that this concerned him as much as it did another rabbi. Rabbi D stated strongly and clearly numerous times in his interview that a need existed to provide converts with ongoing emotional support. He felt that the lack of emotional support created "disabled people" because they are not adequately prepared for the emotional challenges they would encounter in future, such as dealing with the consequences of their decision to convert with their families and friends. Rabbi D explained:

What I was saying is the thing that I find is important and probably not looked at enough is that this is not really changing somebody's clothing and it is not really changing somebody's marriage or family or whatever only, it is a complete and absolute psychological change and I don't know if the system gives enough time and effort and energy to that dimension of it. You are talking about people having to change everything - or you are asking them to change everything - but you are not necessarily or we're not necessarily providing them with all of

⁷⁰ The fear-based approach, it should be noted, is very much a *Mitnagdim* way of serving God. Rabbi H again emphasised the *Hasidic* way and said: "You can look at it [religion and practice] as negative and fear and guilt trip or you can look at it as something which is a positive, uplifting, and encouraging. Two very different approaches" (the first is *Mitnagdim* and the second *Hasidic*).

the structures that they need in order to facilitate that. It probably or possibly comes from the idea that Judaism doesn't encourage conversion. There is almost the age old attitude of you are not meant to be converting anyway so we are going to make it as difficult as possible and why should we provide you with all these comforts and abilities to do it, rather don't do it. Somewhere in the back of the psyche there is that but the problem that you have with that is in Judaism there is what they call [*hatchila* or *bidi eved*] to 'start off with' or 'ex-post factor'. When you are talking 'ex-post factor' if you haven't dealt with it you are creating disabled people within a system. You are doing them a disservice, you are doing the community a disservice, you are doing their spouse a disservice and you are doing their kids and family a disservice. You can't have the little bit of an outsider dimension that always remains there because it is just counterproductive. That is what we see time and time and time again. That is what keeps coming back to haunt us.

He continued:

I think we probably all totally underestimate the magnitude of this process. It is not just a jump in the *mikveh* and rub-a-dub-dub and now you are Jewish. It is so much more than that. You are talking about a complete transformation - psychological, sociological, personal, familial - you have every one of these things that changes. Your circle of friends has to change; your term of reference has to change; the way you speak has to change; the way you look has to change. It is so huge that I think we are all guilty of underestimating just what the person who is involved in it and the family around them and the people around them go through. I don't know if enough is done or thought about in order to work with that and help that.

This point is a major issue for Rabbi D who stressed the lack of psychological support. For him it is a debilitating feature of the programme in that it does not adequately prepare converts for future challenges and the hurt experienced in distinguishing one's practice and values from families and friends as lifestyle changes. He provided many examples of how this affects converts practically and emotionally in living a Jewish life and the pain it causes converts and their families in having to separate from each other. Therefore, he felt strongly that this element - the psychological processing of the transformation - should be addressed. In his opinion, structures must be incorporated to provide psychological and emotional support especially as converts integrate into new families and move away from their old lives. The rationalised, centralised, bureaucratised system does not do this. In other words, the new system, which aims at improving processes, creates tensions between community rabbis, converts and the Beth Din and also undermines - in many instances - the chances of successful

converts, or makes the process harder for converts. Rabbi D concluding on the downside of the process stated:

The possibility exists that... and I might be shot down in flames for this, but that really, a *Beit Din* shouldn't handle conversions. We need them to give the paper in the end to say this person is Jewish and we need them to... they have to give the *halachic* finding because otherwise people can't get married, but the actual process would possibly better be handled by people who are not associated with *Din* [Hebrew for judgement]. People need to feel the *chesed* [Hebrew for kindness], they need to feel the love, they need to feel the warmth of it.

Thus, the bureaucratisation of the process, the controlling of conversion and its outcomes, creates differences of opinions and tensions between community rabbis and the Beth Din. It also reduces the agency of community rabbis in assisting converts through the process, restricts the growth of the convert and centralises power in the Beth Din, making them an authoritarian power which protects the identity and boundaries of the community through conversion. Furthermore, it shows the shift in conversion away from a spiritual individual process to an ethnic social process in which spirituality and individuality have lesser importance. This relates to the argument (in Chapter 2) that conversion is more than a spiritual process.

4.11.3 Homogeneity of boundaries

Another way that the Beth Din controls the identity of the community is by the ideological proponents of Orthodoxy it supports. The implementation of the centralised system feeds an internal division in the identity of that community that the Beth Din seeks to manage in its favour. The identity of the Orthodox community is by no means homogenous (as already seen); various forms of Orthodox Judaism compete for space in the community. Chabad is one form of Orthodox Judaism to which the Beth Din appears to be resistant. One rabbi interviewed stated, "It is a longstanding disagreement and it is coming from two different perspectives." Another commented, "It is not politics. It is huge politics. The politics of politics doesn't begin to describe that and it is not only in the issue of conversions". Resistance to Chabad in the conversion process appears to mirror the resistance to Chabad found in the community (see point 4.3.1).

The mechanical approach of the Beth Din with its legalistic basis is judgmental and conditional and stresses observable and measurable behaviour. This is contrary to the Chabad perspective which is outreach focused and more embracing. Chabad is known to foster an

approach that aims at drawing Jews into Judaism based on unconditional inclusivity and non-judgmentalism. Therefore, certain Chabad rabbis did not fully agree with the approach of the current conversion process (as was seen in 4.9.1). The technical, mechanical, legalistic format is characteristic of a Beth Din and the *Mitnagdim* approach (which the Beth Din follow). The *Mitnagdim* approach is ideologically at odds with the *Hasidic* approach (which is the Chabad way) which is why the Chabad rabbis in particular raise concerns around it. For some of the Chabad rabbis interviewed, what is required in conversion is the beauty and warmth of Judaism, not the soul-less experience of an impersonal programme that focuses on the technicalities of practice. Moreover, insisting on performing Judaism in a way defined by the Beth Din's *mitnagdim* practices means that the Beth Din discourages the development of other forms of Orthodox Judaism among converts, and consequently the community. In other words, uniformity and homogeneity are created to maintain a particular self-serving identity in the community. Chabad resistance in the programme also emerged in another way. Rabbi H believed that because of ideological differences, membership in Chabad synagogues is not encouraged in the conversion programme. This point shows the internal contestation of identity boundaries and the politics of belonging in the Orthodox community.

4.11.4 Conversion couples

Another structural change that coincided with the formalisation of the conversion process and disbanding of the lay committee was the inclusion of the Jewish partners of converts, in other words, couples should convert together. Previously, partners of converts were not included in the programme since they did not need to convert based on the fact that they were born Jewish. Rabbi D described how "Jewish boys would drop off their non-Jewish girlfriends at the conversion classes and never set foot into a class themselves". Today that is not the case. The Head of the Beth Din said, "It is already for the last twenty years - or fifteen years - we insist that the Jewish partner must be a partner in the conversion process and many times the Jewish person said to me, [but] I am Jewish! And you know what I answer? How Jewish are you to date a non-Jewish girl? So it means that you are not so [Jewish], you have to know what Judaism is all about. So we insist on the Jewish partner". Rabbi F similarly explained:

As I explain to people when they come to see me, the Jewish partner has to convert as well. What do I mean convert? Biologically they are Jewish but they have to change their entire lifestyle. The Jewish partner that has been dating non-Jewish people is a person himself who is distant from his religion otherwise he wouldn't have been dating her. I would say anecdotally 90% of the Jewish

people who marry out of the faith (and it is growing all the time) are not boys and girls who were going out with Jews all the time. They went out with one non-Jewish person and fell in love with them. These are people who were in the mode of dating non-Jews. They dated one who they fell in love with. The person who now comes to the *Beit Din* 99% of the time is a Jew who is distant from his roots otherwise he would have never been going out with a non-Jewish partner. In order for the conversion to take place he needs, or she needs to change their life... He [the partner] now needs to convert [too]. What does it mean? He had a *bris* [circumcision], he had a *Bar mitzvah* [coming of age ritual at the onset of puberty], but he is not a living, practicing Jew and therefore he has to change his lifestyle. For her to change her lifestyle, well, she understands. I was born agnostic or Christian or Muslim and now I want to become Jewish so instead of going to church on Sunday, or this or that, I am now moving from this group to that group and I have to change. He doesn't see the necessity for change.

The key reason for creating 'conversion couples' is to avoid a cultural gap in the couple's relationship. It also ensures that the couple develop in the same direction and remain in harmony, which enhances the chances of a successful convert. Rabbi C argued, "How could you expect the girl is going to keep kosher and [when] the husband is going to go [eat non-kosher food] because he still likes his Nando's chicken". The expectation is that the convert will take on a religiously observant life that should be matched by her partner otherwise the process would be undermined by the Jewish partner's non-observant actions and would create discord and conflict in their relationship. The obligations of the convert becomes the obligations of the convert's partner. The Head of the Beth Din explained further:

We believe...if in a mixed marriage, let us say a Jew, born Jew, as I said he is not observant because otherwise he would not date a non-Jewish girl, he dates a non-Jewish girl, she becomes interested in conversion and she goes through the process, and they are very into this thing because they want to be converted. If this remains in his way and they get married what is going to happen? There will be a gap between them which will be a big strain on their relationship so they have to be on the same page. So now there are two possibilities – either she pulls him to her level or he pulls her down to his level, which we don't want. So therefore the Jewish partner must be taught on the process, to come with her.

It is envisaged that the change of one person in the relationship will be negatively affected without simultaneous change in the other person, unless that other is already a religiously observant Jew. Their task is therefore to make the couple 'Jewish' - both the Jew-by-

birth and the Jew-by-choice. From the rabbis' collective experience, converts who have struggled in the process are those who experienced resistance from their Jewish partners who reject the idea of conversion for themselves on the grounds that they are already Jewish. As Rabbi F said, "99% of the cases that are not successful is a direct result of the Jewish partner. 99% - or you could even possibly say 100% - of the cases that are not successful are simply because of the Jewish partner". Later, he reiterated this point, "The ones that don't succeed are because of the Jewish partner. We have those that are successful and you know it moves ahead". The focus again shifts to creating successful outcomes from the process. While this may be difficult to establish, it often creates tensions in the conversion couple. However, if successful, it bolsters a unified (homogenous perception) identity for the community through family structures. In this way, not only a person but a unit (couple, family, children) are drawn into guarding the identity of the community. The additional benefit for the Beth Din is that it extends the scope of its power in the community through conversion units rather than individuals.

4.11.5 Boundaries around children

The final structural change introduced into the programme which is aimed to produce successful outcomes and is seen as a strength of the programme is that children must also become integrated in the programme. The policy on conversions states that children are to be integrated into the programme through schooling. The Beth Din insists that children who will be converting must attend Jewish schools as it is through this channel that they will learn about a Jewish way of life that is consistent with the family change. The integration of children into the programme is important to the Beth Din in ensuring religious symmetry in the household (to avoid confusion and dilution of practices) and in improving the chances of children converting with their parents and becoming successful converts too.

Very important for the Beth Din is that children on the conversion programme must attend a religious Jewish school. The policy states: "A child who attends a non-Torah school will be persuaded to attend a Torah school otherwise the conversion may be delayed"⁷¹. A secularised Jewish school like King David is discouraged as it is not regarded as sufficiently religious in its outlook and approach and therefore will introduce conflict in values and behaviour in the home and family. Their concern is also that many families that enroll at the school

⁷¹ This point was discussed by Rabbi F at length who believes that attending a religious school purely on the grounds that it is religious may not turn out to be a better option for Jewish or convert children alike.

are secular; some may not even be Jewish according to *halachah* they argue. Placing converts in an environment where there is a mix of secular and non-*halachic* Jews is considered problematic for the Beth Din as it may introduce problems for the converting family in maintaining their own religious observance. Moreover, as King David accepts Reform Jews, the Orthodox rabbis are fearful about mixing Orthodox and non-Orthodox children for fear of `intermarriage'⁷² and the loss of Torah values. The Head of the Beth Din said, "In the last three/four years, now we want the children to go to a Jewish religious school – King David School is not happy with us, but we believe it is important for the sustainability of the conversion". This policy change produces tensions with converts and institutions in the community alike. It illustrates the politics of belonging by making judgements on which institutions are acceptable to the Orthodox community and which are not. It also provides support for institutions over which the Beth Din can strengthen its influence and institutionalise the religious elements of the community. Furthermore, it also draws a line between Orthodox and Reform.

4.11.6 Differential treatment of converts

The programme in effect stratifies between converts and Jews-by-birth. Candidates on the programme are required to make practical changes in their lives to facilitate observance and demonstrate sincerity. One of the most important aspects of the conversion process, as mentioned above, is to observe the commandments by demonstrating sincerity and observance. As the Head of the Beth Din stated, "The convert must take... as I said in the beginning, to live like the *Shulchan Aruch* requires from every Jew to behave". If one (convert and Jew-by-birth) behaves as described by the *Shulchan Aruch*, one is a good Jew. If a convert fails to do so, as established earlier, one is not a good Jew and the conversion itself is in question. However, Jews-by-birth are not subject to this condition on their identity. It is envisaged that converts should behave like (good) Jews, but in practice, higher levels of observance are required of converts than of Jews-by-birth. The pool of observant Jews in Johannesburg, by the Beth Din's measure, is small if the 2005 community survey (discussed earlier in this chapter in 4.3.1; see also Kaplan, 2006:11) is regarded as definitive. Rabbi C confirms that:

We are a very interesting phenomenon in South Africa where 95% of the shuls are Orthodox shuls but 95% of the people in those orthodox shuls

⁷² This is a highly charged and political issue - strict Orthodox authorities do not consider Reform to be Jewish and therefore a marriage between and Orthodox Jew and a Reform Jew, in their minds, would be no different to a marriage between a Jew and a non-Jew.

are not Orthodox Jews. They call themselves orthodox and I am not going to tell them to change it but if you define orthodoxy by keeping *Shabbat* and keeping *Mikveh* and everything else, I might be a bit harsh maybe, but 80% are not.

The Beth Din and the Registrar implement find ways to gain converts' compliance to their rules (e.g., delays in the programme for lack of sincerity, the swearing of the oath in the *mikveh*, the nullification letter, the conversion certificate) to remind converts of their contractual obligations and the expectations they are required to meet and to remind them of the possible loss / withdrawal of their conversion as a consequence. None of these measures are applicable to Jews-by-birth who can choose how/where they wish to live, to what extent they would like to involve themselves in religious matters - if at all - without consequence to their identity and status as Jews. Rabbi E explained why Jews-by-birth cannot be sanctioned in the same way as converts:

A born Jew's decision to live *halachically* or not is their own choice and will not affect their inherently inborn status, the same is not true for a would-be convert. One cannot convert to being a social Jew, or a gastronomic Jew, or even a nice traditional Jew. One can only convert to Judaism to be a Jew who lives by the Torah way (*halachah*) of life, which means *kashrut*, *Shabbat*, *mikveh*, and the whole package deal - failing which it is not a true conversion.

The Registrar explained that the difference lay therein that converts willingly choose to take a vow and observe the religious principles, whereas Jews-by-birth do not have this choice as they were born into it. He said, "The thing is you came into it as opposed to someone who was born into it. Born into it, it is irrelevant what you think about it [being Jewish] that is just how you are born. It is you. Coming into it is a conscious free will decision and so the conscious free will decision is sort of a spiritual moral ethical vow". Because the convert has chosen it and taken a vow, more is expected of the convert. If those identity markers are lacking in a convert, it is more difficult to establish one's identity as a Jew. However, if one is born into it, the identity cannot be removed. The Registrar provided an analogy of why this difference applied: "If you are born into the royal family of England, you are a member of the royal family even if you do unroyal things". The Head of the Beth Din explained:

A person is born Jewish, nobody can deprive him of his Jewishness. Observant or not observant. Somebody who wants to become a member has to prove.

From the above quotations, three points emerge. Firstly, a convert is held to a higher level of accountability for behaviour and religious immersion in practice than a Jew-by-birth⁷³. At the same time, one's identity as a convert is conditional and their conversion - their new social identity - is under threat if the social contract is found to be reneged. Therefore, the Jew-by-birth and Jew-by-choice are ascribed unequal status. This lies in the extent to which the convert is given individual autonomy and is able to exercise authority over his/her religious lifestyle in future. It is difficult for a convert to enjoy confidence in assuming a new social identity under implicit threats and insecurity around the future stability of that social identity. Secondly, Judaism as a religion and Jews as a people - an ethnicity - are distinguished as separate and distinct. There is a difference in the identity of converts as Jews and Jews-by-birth as Jews. Jews-by-birth will always be part of the people regardless of their religious beliefs as they have a social identity which they can determine. In contrast, converts identity is a religious identity and, as such, they may not always be part of the people; this depends on their sincerity and religious practice at the time of conversion and after. Membership and status are defined purely in legal-religious terms and subject to a particular social process pinned only to religious concepts and ideas. Although the conversion process attempts to acculturate - or naturalise - new members into the Jewish community (the people), becoming Jewish through a legal-religious body can at most give one conditional inclusion and the characteristics to live, look and behave like a narrow margin of Jews. According to the Beth Din's viewpoint, ethnicity runs in the blood; thus, it cannot be challenged and this gives Jews-by-birth greater scope when it comes to behaviour. At most, the social identity that a convert can achieve as a Jew is that of a religious Jew; whereas the expression of Jewish identity for Jews-by-birth can be self-determined, even if it is not approved of by the Beth Din. This gives rise to ambiguity the line between ethnicity and religion applies only to converts but not to Jews-by-birth. The religion is part of the definition of Jewish ethnicity even if it is not practised and, in reality, the converts become part of the people regardless of their practices and so do their offspring. The key aspect here is identity around who is a Jew. Transformation of identity is important to maintaining Jewish ethnicity and the identity of Jews is thus reduced to religion. While much of classical sociological theory on conversion views conversion as a

⁷³ Note it is said these observances are also binding on a Jew-by-birth. Those who do not keep to the religious requirements are said to be Jews who have transgressed. However, the Beth Din cannot do anything about their lack of observances as in practical terms many Jews-by-birth - especially those who are secular - are out of reach of the Beth Din. This is unlike converts, who are controlled by the Beth Din. Although converts who no longer keep the observances required of them are said to be like Jews who have transgressed, in practice there is less leniency towards them.

spiritual transformation, the case of Jewish conversions shows there is more to the transformation - genetics, identity, acceptance, inclusion and ethnicity (social) as well as the spiritual. The third important point discussed below is that the Beth Din legalises or 'contractualises' the conversion process with measures to sanction behaviour. Because the Beth Din constitutes a court, it reduces an enigmatic phenomenon - a spiritual process - to a contractual process, which is easier to understand, manage and control. This is particularly relevant when the outcomes do not meet their expectations since there is a dilemma in establishing who / what is a Jew.

4.12 Converts empowering communities

Converts who are successful add value to their religious communities, if they remain. Firstly, as many of these religious communities are growing, converts are welcome as their membership fees are needed and they swell religious attendance. This becomes a political issue whereby rabbis jostle over converts in their communities. Community rabbis are expected to encourage converts to move from their traditional synagogues (in the periphery) to the more religious synagogues (usually in the core) so that converts can learn through observation and receive more religious support. Yet not all rabbis do this. With the rise of the returnee, or religious revivalism, small *shtetls* have sprouted in Johannesburg - particularly in the core areas. Rabbis are keen to build up their own communities from a relatively small pool of people and therefore they want converts to stay rather than to leave. Rabbi G said:

The rabbi on the one hand is trying to build his own community but I think he has to be very honest with himself and recommend that they [converts] move to a staunchly *frumm* [loosely translated as religious] community. I have three cases at the moment. I am dealing with it.... If I was really doing my job right...if I was really doing my job right, if there was one person converting, because with three [converts] you can try and start a whole new group, I would honestly tell them to move on.

Importantly for rabbis, converts make up numbers and fill synagogues as they are obligated to attend services if they want to 'pass the test'. Once converted they contribute much needed membership fees. Furthermore, because converts are expected to be religious, in new synagogues where the congregants are mostly secular, converts help to establish a religious base. Rabbi C, referring to his own community, said:

It is a very small congregation. I mean not very small but it is small. We have about 150 families. I probably do have 10% converts... Maybe a little less. Maybe

ten [convert] families... Having said that, as far as the numbers are concerned, their representation in the daily and the weekly and the yearly and the social aspects of the shul is far more than their percentage in the shul. In other words some of the more recent ones and more dedicated ones are quite involved in shul matters and I would say the daily *minyan* [prayer quorum]... there must be at least three or four [converts]... I'd say three regulars which would be out of 15 people [Jews-by-birth].

The entrance of converts contributes to the building of new outreach and/or new religious communities and benefits the rabbi's own community. However, other issues are also at play. Rabbi F said:

Shuls are in stress today and if you can get a regular to your community - platinum. So now there is almost a frenzy. It has gone from one extreme to the other where if there is a potential convert every rabbi wants them to come to their shul and it is not for these great motives of continuing family tradition or bringing them back... I don't know so much. It is to get your shul stronger in many cases and there is often this tug of war now that is going to go as a result of this. You see the convert by nature of the process has to commit themselves to shul and processes so you are not getting a person to your shul that you are going to see once or twice a year. You are getting a person that will help make the morning *minyan* [prayer quorum] which most shuls are battling for. You are going to have a person who is going to make *minchah-mariv* [afternoon prayers/evening] which most shuls are battling for especially this time of the year [winter]. For the rabbi to have such a family in his shul that is platinum so that is one of the reasons why I think the rabbinate is involved.

Rabbi F mentioned that converts were also sought after for other reasons. They contribute fresh, new energy - an excitement and enthusiasm that is especially appreciated in synagogues that are starting up. Rabbis welcome this as it encourages and affirms the community. As Rabbi G said: "you must remember they are also bringing in new energy. That energy can be very insightful and very helpful". Similarly, Rabbi A, speaking of a particular convert, said, "She has become a catalyst and a source of energy in the community". As mentioned, converts also bring much needed resources such as finances⁷⁴:

⁷⁴ This point is particularly relevant for *shtibls*. As one rabbi stated, in his traditional shul, which is larger and relies on traditional Jews (which are greater in numbers), there was no lack of funds. This is not true of all traditional shuls, however; many of which have closed due to dwindling membership due to ageing and as the Baal Teshuva movement provided more support for *shtibls* (by attracting younger members).

If you can get hold of a potentially rich convert then there is even more benefit for your shul because not only are you getting people into your shul you are getting people who will potentially put money into to shul coffers and apart from a very few shuls, many shuls are under huge financial stress today, huge financial stress. Lots of ulterior motives at play over here.

This situation leads to a tug of war over converts:

What is happening in the rabbinate today? Lots of people will say that they don't want to give letters to the people but they are very happy to have them in their community and the benefits that they are having in their community. If people live in certain areas, rabbis will even fight over where they want that convert to be. They will turn around and say why is the convert going to that shul when they live a little bit closer to mine? The fact that they mind walking because they want ownership of that person because of the ulterior motives.

Converts create additional functions for the Beth Din and an additional revenue stream. Alongside the provision of kosher certification and communal judicial matters (marriage, divorce and disputes), conversion is an important revenue stream for the UOS (even if it is smaller than the other revenue streams). Candidates have to pay application fees, consultation fees, monitoring session fees (6-8 sessions), the interview with the Beth Din and *mikveh* fees. The total costs for the formal process is approximately R30 000 over a two-year period. These costs excludes incidental costs that converts also have to bear, such as having to relocate homes in order to be within walking distance of a synagogue, changing jobs where necessary to avoid working on the Sabbath or other religious occasions, the purchase of religious paraphernalia, such as prayer books and items for religious rituals and festivals, and where applicable, the change of schools to religious Jewish schools for children. The programme can facilitate approximately 150 people concurrently. At the time of data collection, ten teachers were listed on the programme. In 2013, at the time of data collection there 80 people on the programme. Rabbi F illustrated the financial benefits:

[Let's say] R750 for a [monitoring session]... you know if you've got two of those a day you are looking at R20 000 a month of income...So let's say out of 150, 30 are going a month so there you are. Per annum you are getting R270 000 income. So I am saying there is a benefit because it creates activity. I am not suggesting that the *Beit Din* are doing it for ulterior motives [money] but the reality is that there is this quarter of a million rand coming in as a result of appointments. It is a reality.

Furthermore, the more religious converts who enter Johannesburg Jewry, the more support for the religious sector of the Orthodox community and its institutions (e.g., synagogues and religious schools) and resources (bookshops, kosher stores, restaurants etc.). This contributes to the Beth Din indirectly. As a religious body, growing the Orthodox community is in their interest. As Rabbi F said:

There again you see even from the *Beit Din's* side they have benefited from conversions. There is a *Beit Din* benefit as well. It is not just a community benefit. The *Beit Din* benefit is huge. The more Jewish people there are in Johannesburg the better it is. The more the shuls are full it is also beneficial for the *Beit Din*. The more people are eating kosher it is beneficial for the *Beit Din*. When people pay their shul membership a part of that goes to the UOS [Union of Orthodox Synagogues] - small but nevertheless. Everybody benefits in a certain sense.

Finally, many converts become more religious than Jews-by-birth after conversion and act as role models not only for other converts in the process of becoming Jewish but also those who are secular and are becoming more religious. This enhances the efforts of the Beth Din to maintain a particular identity and set of boundaries. Converts validate the decision for a religious lifestyle to others. In section 4.12 it will be seen how rabbis place successful converts on a pedestal as illustrated by Rabbi E when he claimed "That some of our best Jews weren't even born Jewish".

4.13 Identity affirmation, identity contestation: converts and community identity

It is worth recalling the politics of belonging at this point. Yuval-Davis (2006:203) states:

Belonging, therefore, is not just about social location and construction of individual and collective identities and attachments but also the ways these are valued and judged" (Yuval-Davis, 2006:203)

In Chapters 7 and 8, the reasons for converts wanting to belong will be discussed based on converts' reasons for their conversions. However, rabbis' descriptions of different converts shows how converts contribute to or challenge the identity of the Jewish community, specifically the Orthodox Jewish communities within the Orthodox community. Ethnic converts either contest or validate identity (see 4.8 & 4.9) depending on whether they are sincere, successful converts. On the whole, ethnic converts who 'play the game' and only settle superficially into traditional ways or reject religious practice - although not always Jewish identity in

an ethnic sense - contest Orthodox identity as they are not 'good Jews'. They lack sincerity and do not support the institutions of the religious Orthodox community. In so doing, they do not uphold the boundaries of the Orthodox community. Afrikaner converts in the new spiritual category without question validate the Orthodox community and support its religious institutions, boundaries and practices wholeheartedly; they also reject a traditional form of Orthodoxy. Black converts, whether in the new spiritual category or ethnic category, challenge the existing identity of the community because of their race even though they also validate the Orthodox community and support its religious institutions and boundaries wholeheartedly. Ethnic converts have been discussed at length in 4.8 and 4.9, therefore what follows relates only to Afrikaner and black converts.

The Head of the Beth Din claimed, "You have two kinds of conversions...mixed couples [and] obviously we've got now in the last few years the unbelievable phenomenon [of] conversions of families completely non-Jewish and obviously there is no ulterior motive at all" (implying that mixed marriages entertain an ulterior motive). The non-Jewish families he refers to are Afrikaners, not only singles; in particular he has witnessed family units of Afrikaners: "Now we see families, Afrikaner families". Thereby, he identifies a new trend that is not only a change in the conversion units from couples to families, but also to new groups of people - specifically Afrikaner families with no prior connection to Judaism. As confirmed by the statistics, the head of the Beth Din concurred that this is a new phenomenon in conversion in South Africa. The Registrar agreed, "There is a massive increase in Afrikaans families, massive, you cannot believe it. Ten/fifteen families in the last two years." He went on, "I am saying that is like a whole sub-group and it is very amazing. There are more [Afrikaners] all the time". To prove his point, he said, "Let me show you a picture I took last year which is a fascinating picture because every single one of them is an Afrikaner either Jewish or becoming Jewish. I was the only guy not living in Israel [and not Afrikaner] in this picture". Another rabbi, the Dean of a religious Jewish school in Johannesburg has encountered Afrikaners at his school rather than in his shul. He found, "There is an Afrikaner syndrome or energy clearly identifiable" and "we have some [Afrikaner families] at the [school] where I am the dean now so we have seen trends of that as well. People coming and being involved in the school and being successful". As family units converting with children, this new trend among converts is evident in both the Registrar's office and on school level.

The level of religious observance and knowledge even before converting, their commitment to the religion and their desire to live in Israel among Afrikaner converts are distinctive. The Afrikaners who approach either the community rabbis or the Registrar often arrive with a considerable knowledge of observance including familiarity with intricate aspects of

very specialised religious rituals and Hebrew terminology without have received guidance from anyone Jewish. A rabbi described one such case as follows: "A few weeks ago an Afrikaans girl who had so much research that she was way down the line [of becoming Jewish] without even having her first appointment [with the Registrar]. Amazing – learned, studied". He confirmed that the girl was "actually observing and [using] terminologies – *Hashem* [Hebrew name of God] and *emunah* [Hebrew for faith] - and words like that which is quite amazing". Another rabbi describes a similar situation:

I had one guy – he phoned me up and said he found my name on the Internet. He had never been to shul before. 'I will come to you for *Shabbat*'. I didn't know the background and I said okay, why not? Fine, come. He comes to me and his first question – he says, I understand... he looks at my black belt and he says: that is a *gartel*⁷⁵. Can you tell me a little more? What do you know about *gartel*? Nobody at my shul knows the word *gartel*, where do you come from? He is sitting at the *Shabbat* table and he is reading the titles of the books behind me and they are all in Hebrew with no vowels. I said, barely anybody in my shul can do that. I said, some of them can't even do it with the vowels, is it self-taught? [He had] Never walked into a shul, [he was] self-taught. Gave himself a *bris* [circumcision] at whatever age he was. Argued with his parents at 14 to fast on *Yom Kippur*.

The Registrar described a similar scenario regarding Afrikaner converts before and during the process:

I mean the one Afrikaans guy, this new convert, the one guy he says to him, he says, you know, you understand *Gemara*⁷⁶ much better than me. The [Afrikaner] guy has only been learning *Gemara* for six months and this other guy is quite a smart guy. He says I can see your *Gemara* understanding is much better than mine. That is after six months!

It is clear therefore that Afrikaners who enter into conversion are very religious and committed people and throw themselves into learning as much as they can about Judaism. Many are already practising a literal version of Judaism based on their reading of the Old Testament (this was seen in converts' interviews too). They often arrive in the conversion process unexpectedly well ahead of other converts. As one rabbi said, "They are very religious

⁷⁵ *Gartel* is a cloth belt which worn is during prayer to separate the upper and lower parts of the body.

⁷⁶ The *Gemara* is the "Rabbinical commentary on the *Mishnah*, forming the second part of the *Talmud*" (Oxford Dictionaries, 2016)

in the other religions [prior to Judaism]. They are really into it [religion & Judaism] and committed... It is incredible the level of commitment and passion". Another rabbi suggested why Afrikaners tended to be such religious converts.

Generally I think because they come from a very religious background themselves, demanding religious background, the *Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk* so they are generally I think more able to handle a very strenuous demanding Jewish life. I know the *Kollel* [name of a very religious shul] has a number of those and some of the *frumm* [religious] and more *Haredi*⁷⁷ communities have a number of those people in their ranks and they [Afrikaners] generally are driven and committed and take on everything and have been amazing successes.

The above statement also shows that Afrikaners are seen as 'successful converts' - a reference to success was made earlier in a quote from another rabbi. In other words those who convert and maintain a strictly observant way of Jewish religious life are seen as successful (or good) converts purely based on their level of observance and commitment to Judaism. The corollary is that those who do not usually maintain this level of observance are not regarded as successful converts even if they have completed the conversion process with the Registrar's and Beth Din's approval and have received the certificates from the Beth Din. The above statement also shows that Afrikaners who enter the programme prefer the most religious communities they can find and therefore are generally seen in the core areas of Jewish life where the most religious way of life and resources are found. As the Registrar said:

These people are very, very serious. They want the *frummet* communities in town. They are not going to go to Waverly [a traditional synagogue]. For them that is nothing. I say they somehow instinctively hone in on the so called *frummet* communities and they are nice people. It is not like they are fanatics or that they are horrible people. They are actually very, very nice people - they are *menschdik* [Yiddish word for a likeable / friendly / helpful person].

Another rabbi in a peripheral community confirms that religious Afrikaners are generally not attracted to his shul because it is not comprised of sufficiently religious:

Participant: I know a few [Afrikaners / Afrikaner families]. The problem is my shul is not conducive. It is just not religious enough, as well as even the big [traditional] shuls. They are happy to go to the smaller, *frummer* [synagogues]...

⁷⁷ "A member of any of various Orthodox Jewish sects characterized by strict adherence to the traditional form of Jewish law and rejection of modern secular culture, many of whom do not recognize the modern state of Israel as a spiritual authority" (Oxford Dictionaries, 2016).

Moderator: They like Ohr Somayach and Kollel and Maharsha?

Participant: Torah Academy or whatever, but the outreach style shuls or the bigger shuls - maybe *shtibl*/type of shul might be *frummer* - but the bigger main-stream shuls it is just not really conducive for the likes of such serious minded folk.

The Registrar confirmed the above comments about the communities which Afrikaners join: "*Kollel* is your biggest living resource at this point". Indeed many Afrikaners I interviewed had frequented the *Kollel*. "They are really serious people and they are interesting people" the Registrar maintained. Unfortunately, my overtures to interview the rabbi of the *Kollel* did not meet with success.

The desire of many Afrikaners as they advance through the conversion process is to live in Israel. This desire is often fanned by the conversion process as the converts become increasingly passionate about Judaism. The Registrar shared, "Many of them just go straight to Israel. They pass here and they just go straight to the airport, jump on an aeroplane and there they go". He continued, "All these guys [referring to the photo of him with Afrikaner families] live in Sussia. Sussia is a little ancient town in Israel [West Bank]. They built a new town right next to it". To emphasise his point, he mentioned another family (also interviewed for the study) and said, "They have only been converted for about six months - or four months - and they really want to go and live in Israel". Those who decide to go to Israel do not usually wait out the year but get an advance on the conversion certificate based on the strength of their observance and immigrate to Israel as soon as they can. Often they join the settler movement and live in communities in the West Bank. In my interviews with Afrikaners, I encountered a number who are now living in various parts of Israel and the occupied territories. In 2012, a mini-documentary aired on Carte Blanche - a popular journalism programme in South Africa - showing a particular converted Afrikaner family (mentioned by two rabbis in this study) now living in Israel. The documentary can be viewed on YouTube (Carte Blanche, 2012).

Afrikaners stand out as 'serious minded folk'. Even the rabbis on the periphery who may not have encountered them, know of Afrikaners almost as legendary characters in an epic drama. As the Registrar said, "These Afrikaners are a different category [from the converts before]". The Afrikaner converts are highly regarded for their knowledge and observance and are considered successful converts. They are admired and described as "amazing", "outstanding", "very impressive", "driven", "committed" and "successes". They provide support for religious institutions and help strengthen the boundaries of the community. Their identification with Jews as people of the Torah, from and in the land of Israel, is

very strong. They take the practices of Orthodoxy very seriously. Thus, Afrikaner converts seem to have unequivocally won the approval of the rabbis. Through their religious observance and knowledge, they appear to have integrated into the core of Orthodox Jewish religious life - into the most cohesive of religious shuls and their children into religious schools.

Another group of new spiritual converts, similar to that of Afrikaners, are black⁷⁸ converts who also enter for religiously inspired reasons. The trend of black converts is still very small (as shown in the statistics); nonetheless there is an acute awareness of black converts entering into the community. Their entrance into the community stands in contrast to the apartheid years. The head of the Beth Din said:

There were a couple [of black individuals] who attempted [conversion] but at that time you couldn't because of the act of Apartheid. We couldn't accept a black because he wouldn't be able to come to a shul...we had a couple of them that wanted [to convert] and we explained to them you can't live in a Jewish [white] area, you can't go to a shul so we can't really entertain this conversion. So blacks were out and as I said very few that were not for marriages... very few came for conversion.

He continued however that since the transition to democracy, this barrier to conversion for black people had disappeared: "Look the change is now we accept blacks... I've said they [community rabbis] accept blacks into the shuls and they [black converts] are becoming like one of [the Jewish community]". The Dean of the school, Rabbi A, corroborated this and spoke of how the racially divided group boundaries in post-apartheid South Africa had broken down:

Again at the [School]⁷⁹ - in our nursery school - a kid was registered recently and they are being very successful. That is part of the new South Africa because it is almost a non-entity. It is quite amazing how much we have changed in almost twenty years of democracy.

The Head of the Beth Din confirmed that like Afrikaners, black converts were also appearing "pure[ly for] religion" and not only marriage: "We have got some blacks. There was a woman, an intelligent girl, young, came and wanted to convert because she believed this is the right religion. Not for marriage". Although the conversion of black individuals is occurring, the Head of the Beth Din stated, "There is no big mixing between blacks and whites generally

⁷⁸ No other persons of colour had completed the process hence the phrasing "black converts".

⁷⁹ Name of school deleted for privacy and confidentiality.

so it is not yet..." as much of a trend like the Afrikaners. However, the interest from black individuals is increasing as corroborated by Rabbi A:

On the other extreme [from Afrikaners] a number of black people are exploring. Just this week somebody came to speak to me and again I give the same rationale that I mentioned to you earlier – there is no need and no reason and just be a good person and you get to heaven so why do you want to go through...? no, I have heard about Judaism and I am passionate about it and they will come and fight their way through. There are a number of, I'd say three or four presently, black people who are wanting to explore Judaism and find out more about it.

Black converts are somewhat of a fascination but not all attitudes towards them are as positive as that of the Head of the Beth Din and the Dean of the religious Jewish day school. Neither are the attitudes towards black converts, including those without 'ulterior motive', as positive as the attitudes towards Afrikaners. Rabbi D plainly stated: "To my mind converting to Judaism is difficult enough for a white person. For a black person I would just imagine it is so much more difficult". Another rabbi, Rabbi C, expanded on this issue; he considered the conversion of black individuals to be challenging because it would be likely that they would encounter problems in integrating into the community as a result of lingering race-based attitudes.

The difficulties for black people converting to Judaism relate to their colour which is perceived to be an impediment to their communal integration. Marital status and marriage become an issue of concern in this regard and intermarriage between Jews and black converts seems to be a particular anxiety for some rabbis. Returning to the case that the Head of Beth Din referred to earlier, Rabbi C stated:

I told her but you know it won't be very easy for you to find a partner, a Jewish partner that is observant. You know what she said, and I won't forget – she said, I believe that this is the right religion that God wants for me and if God wants me to remain single, this is what has to be.

On the issue of intermarriage with black converts, Rabbi D stated:

Then you have the issues of who you are going to marry unless there is a relationship going on already, but afterwards who are you going to marry and who are your kids going to marry and who are they going to be involved with? In a way it is a little cruel to bring in somebody who is so obviously evidently different and to try and fit them in.

Interracial marriage and mixed race identity, as well as racial integration seems to be problematic for these rabbis. Although legally black converts may no longer be refused, the

rabbis still cannot imagine a Jewish community that transcends colour - a multicultural, multi-racial Jewish community. The answer for them is to defer the issue elsewhere rather than re-evaluate attitudes locally, re-evaluate and integrate a new identity. What some suggested, and what emerged from interviews with converts themselves too, is that black converts should move to Israel. The reasons they provide for conversion of black South Africans in Israel rather than South Africa is that black converts will have Ethiopians (black) communities with whom they can intermarry and into which they can integrate. This suggests that even in Israel, they believe that black converts will remain marginal - or that they will intermarry with Israelis which is more acceptable in that context. The sentiments are evident in the words of Rabbi C:

By the way if a black person was sincere [in other words no ulterior motive] and did go through it [conversion] I personally would advise them to move to Israel because at least over there you have communities of black Jews and you'll feel more at home. Funny in Israel... Israel never had a racial... as much as they accuse us of all things, Israel never had a problem with racial... the Ethiopians came and so they are black. I see them in Israel and ... I would suspect that the intermarriage between black and white is higher in Israel than any other place in the world.

Rabbi D expressed similar thoughts:

My best advice always to people of colour who do approach me, your best option if you really are keen on it, is you've got to go to Israel. You just have a much bigger pool and a much bigger community that you could fit into and there are probably more darker Jews than there are lighter Jews in Israel. There is to my mind a much bigger acceptance... [of Jews of colour in Israel]

Ultimately these rabbis are saying that black converts challenge the whiteness of Jewish identity. Marriage is the channel through which this anxiety is expressed and the race of the convert becomes a complex issue. The rabbis indicate issues with the acceptance and integration of black converts into the community and suggest that the identity of Jews in South Africa must remain white even in the post-apartheid environment. While other converts can integrate through marriage and their spouses' families, this is less of an option for black converts. Since no candidates can be refused on religious grounds or legal grounds in South Africa today, the best practical option, from these rabbis' perspective, is for the converts to go to Israel. Not all rabbis would agree with the above sentiments. For example, Rabbi A felt, "The colour of the skin plays a very small role where it would have ten/fifteen or twenty years ago". For Rabbi D, the issue relates to closed attitudes formed from an aversion to intermarriage and dilution of the Jewish community. Although he felt that it would be harder

for black converts to integrate into Orthodox Jewry, the history of the community indicated that it was generally hard to accept any outsiders regardless of colour. He understood this to be a result of the past insular socialisation of the community - the kind of insularity that strongly disapproved of intermarriage particularly because of threats to Jewish existence as experienced among those Jews whose origins were in Eastern Europe. He said:

There is a much bigger acceptance in post-apartheid South Africa of the converts [referring to all converts regardless of race]. I remember growing up it was like... we were very insular. If you have an outsider... the *goyim* are the *goyim* [non-Jews] and the blacks are the blacks and everybody just stay away from us, we are Jewish and don't try and break into our family circle. It is possible that that also is an attitude that comes from - and probably still does today - from ignorance. When I say ignorance it is because... not maybe in the way that you think, that we don't really understand the process but ignorance in [Judaism]... and here is an interesting point that I think... a family that is unschooled in Judaism have maybe two or three things that they regard as important in Judaism like going to shul on Yom Kippur, not eating pork maybe, and not letting my son marry out of the faith.

Later Rabbi D explained that Jewish parents see intermarriage in the following way: "It's the one thing that I do stand for [no intermarriage] and therefore it is a thing that I am going to fight the hardest. Let my kid break *Shabbat* or do anything but don't let him do this one thing that I have tried to hold pure". The point made was that black individuals wanting to convert would face the same intolerance to intermarriage as any other convert - race is not the issue, rather intermarriage is. Even black converts who convert for spiritual reasons would face this resistance in terms of marriage later on.

In contrast to Rabbis B and C, Rabbis A and D saw race as a less salient issue. They perceived it as a general outsider issue arising from fears of intermarriage. Intermarriage is one of the non-negotiable borders of Jewish identity. Although the social and political environment has changed, within the community and within Jewish identity, an aversion to intermarriage remains and this elides race. However, the identity of the community as white is still protected and resists change. Therefore, a hierarchy of converts (stratification) emerged according to the intersection of a number of social locations (or variables): level of religiosity (success in conversion), race and gender.

4.14 Conclusion

Conversion is a community structure embedded in the dynamics of the community, and connected to power structures, such as the Beth Din. In terms of social inclusion, the implication is that converts should unconditionally accept the religious content of Judaism in order to be included formally within the ethnic group of Jews. This often comes at the expense of the individuality and the manipulation of conversion principles in order to exercise some agency and achieve the convert's goal of formal acceptance. This situation arises from the way that the programme is structured and managed, which is ironically aimed at improving elements, which instead become the very weaknesses of the system. The programme was restructured from a decentralised system handled by individual community rabbis and authorised by a lay committee to a centralised system under the Beth Din. The Beth Din is a religious court so by centralising conversion, conversion has become a legal issue, managed through a bureaucratic structure, with specific, formal, measurable, observable outcomes. What the changes in the system achieve in effect is control over conversion and control over entry of new members (who can enter and in what shape for what purposes - identity and belonging). This gives the Beth Din power over community, further entrenches their authoritarianism and makes conversion part of the boundary maintenance of an imagined homogenous identity. It is justified as part of an upgrade of the community (but in effect the entrenchment of Ultra-Orthodoxy in the community), cements further the Beth Din as the central authority figure for the community and institutionalises religious entities supported and maintained by the Beth Din. It also minimises contestations from other religious bodies who contest the power and position of the Beth Din). These changes coincide with the changes in the community, a movement to the right in post-apartheid South Africa, described by many other community researchers. Conversion in its current form feeds into the entrenchment of a particular form of Judaism according to the internal agendas of its power structures. It also tries to achieve homogeneity in the membership and bring about uniformity in the community.

The community shifts discussed in 4.3.1 show up in conversion and is evident in the timing of changes to the conversion structure, corresponds with shtibl and Ba'al Teshuva movements, and is aligned with centralisation of the Beth Din (with the disbanding of lay committee) and the sidelining of Chabad. There is little room in the conversion process to challenge its structure or express diversity in the community as Herman (2007) shows. As she has shown, voices have been largely silenced. I argue that in conversion there is little room to debate the identity of converts in the community and converts have little agency to influence this for themselves (also to be seen in the forthcoming chapters). For this reason again, the converts' voice is so important in this study.

Conversion reflects the way that Jewish identity is expressed and the form of Judaism that has become dominant in the community as the homogenous practice of Judaism (although most Jews in South Africa are not observant - and there is no one single way of being Jewish). The specific narratives of the community emerge strongly in the implementation of conversion such as: join a religious community or lose your Jewish identity (as will be seen in Chapter 7). This is also expressed as a fear by converts. The community values of authenticity, unity, conformity and survival are still clearly very important in conversion. Any counterforce (e.g., through Chabad or Reform) is contained through narratives of authenticity so as to not unsettle its current homogeneity. Herman (2007) spoke of a counterforce coming through secular and Reform Jews. By promoting a strict form of Orthodox practice and conditions around conversion, this counterforce is again limited through conversion. Converts are also prevented from becoming a counterforce through conversion by limiting the voice of converts and community rabbis alike. While the Beth Din endeavours to cope with the changing South African environment and its impact on conversion by dealing with intermarriage (broaden boundaries), its efforts fall short because as Herman (2007) shows the Beth Din is focused exclusively on one homogenous identity (*Orthodox/Litvak/Mitnagdim*) to which all converts should conform.

Chapter 5: Facilitatory factors of conversion

5.1 Introduction

Two main reasons for conversion in the South African Orthodox community appear: marriage and religion (even if there are other reasons). However, the drivers for these reasons need to be explored, in order to understand what makes conversion so important for the converts themselves. This will assist in explaining the increase in conversions in post-apartheid South Africa and why converts choose Orthodox rather than Reform or Conservative. The interviews indicated both facilitators of conversion as well as the primary and secondary reasons for conversion. As the facilitators of conversion and the reasons are quite dense, they are discussed in separate chapters. The current chapter focuses exclusively on the facilitatory factors of conversion. Chapter 6 covers the primary and secondary reasons for conversion.

Facilitators of conversions are those features in the social environment that makes conversion to Orthodox Judaism more possible in the post-apartheid era than previously. From the interviews with converts and rabbis, six facilitating factors emerged: the nature of the post-apartheid environment that results in questioning and the search for truth and new moral frameworks, religious revival, information age, more lenient attitudes to intermarriage and conversion and attitudes to Jews in general. Some are push factors, and although they fit with the reasons for conversion (see Chapter 4, Table 4.1) they are discussed in this chapter and not reiterated in the following chapter to avoid repetition.

5.2 Post-apartheid environment

The Registrar of conversions raised the idea that the formal dissolution of group barriers between racial and ethnic groups appeared to be a factor directly enhancing conversion rates. He postulated that the removal of group barriers would provide opportunities for more intergroup contact and the possibility for the exploration of different ways of life, cultures and belief systems - the religious 'market' - among a wider range of people. But it could also result in closer intergroup relationships and therefore, more intermarriage. The feeling was

that both could translate into conversion. Rabbi A similarly raised the issue of how transformation of the social environment in South Africa impacted on conversion as it facilitated more acceptance of newcomers to the community:

In the old South Africa the insular nature of communities, the apartheid kind of mentality naturally kept people apart and I think Jews didn't mix to the same degree with non-Jews even if they were not so religious and therefore intermarriage was much less of an issue in South Africa. The openness of society with all its positive elements has presented an issue to the Jewish community where I think people are seeing the lines much less and therefore getting involved in relationships which then need to be serviced and one of the ways might be conversion.

The perception is that because of the social transformation in South Africa, the community is less insular as more openness is encouraged, resulting in a number of new relationships between groups who previously would be less prone to mixing. This includes those of a more intimate nature in groups which need to be addressed in some way or other, but most particularly through conversion when it comes to intermarriage. I searched for evidence of this view in the converts' data. However, interestingly, almost the entire group of converts (across the two categories) stated they knew nothing of Judaism, Jews or the Jewish community they would ultimately join through conversion. The little knowledge they possessed was either related to biblical knowledge as learnt in Christianity ("the heroes of the Old Testament and villains of the New Testament", Rebecca, ethnic convert) or Jewish stereotypes - such as of Jews as pedlars in the early days of South Africa (Frederik, spiritual convert) or that they were rich (Lynn, ethnic convert). A handful of converts grew up close to Jews. From the sample, only a few of those were raised in Johannesburg where the majority of the Jewish population reside. The lack of knowledge of Judaism reflects a background in which social mixing between groups did not occur. The lack of knowledge of Judaism itself may have inadvertently facilitated conversion as it aroused curiosity. There was ignorance about the process and what it entailed making people more receptive to discovery. Further, there were initially no fears about the challenges of the process and an openness to wanting to learn and prove oneself. Another test of whether the elimination of group barriers between racial and ethnic groups would result in more intermarriage is to consider whether the interracial marriage rate among converting couples had increased. In Chapter 5, it was seen to be very low (one couple was interviewed, and at the time, there was awareness of two others not yet on the programme). Perhaps it will increase in time but at present it is still low or delayed. This indicates that the social barriers along the lines of race seem to be firmly in place (as evident in the rabbis' responses on marriage). The hypothesis that greater intergroup contact in the

post-apartheid environment would lead to more conversions is something to be questioned. Firstly the assumption that there is more intergroup contact needs to be established. Secondly, especially in light of Herman's 2007 article that argues that the community has become more insular in the post-apartheid environment, it is unlikely that more intergroup contact would have facilitated more intermarriage. Thirdly, the 2006 community survey shows that 77% of the community have their children schooled in Jewish day schools (Bruk & Shain, 2005:11) meaning that children growing up in the Jewish community have more frequent intergroup contact - until they get to university and unless they do not go to Israel to study. However, the fact that Afrikaners, black individuals and other persons of colour do ultimately arrive at Judaism nonetheless, in spite of the aforementioned militating factors, suggests that something about the post-apartheid environment that should be investigated. The data suggests that Afrikaner converts and persons of colour have not moved towards the Jewish community because of the enhancement of intergroup contact, but rather because the environment has opened to new ways of thinking about the social fabric of society and its authorities. The data suggests that the most significant influencing factor on conversion relates to a 'crisis in truth' emerging from a questioning of Christianity. This commenced towards the end of apartheid and took firm root with the collapse of apartheid. Furthermore, the data shows that in the case of Afrikaners, a common response to this crisis was the development of a strong distaste for Afrikaner identity and a compelling desire to disassociate with anything related to Afrikaner identity. Hence, the converts changed their birth names to Jewish names or to Judaised their birth names and/or surnames (to be discussed further below in 5.3) at the soonest opportunity often before converting. In the group of spiritual converts, there was a strong sense of aligning with the 'right way' after having been misled for so long. What is interesting is the timing - that questioning and crisis in truth as well as the search for alternatives has taken place in post-apartheid South Africa. Given the barriers during apartheid, this would not have been likely. Possibly the crisis in truth (and subsequent rejection of Afrikaner identity) could have only started towards the end of apartheid and was fully propelled by post-apartheid times; this pushed Afrikaner converts towards Judaism. In that sense social barriers were removed but it was not the intergroup contact that led to more conversion but that South Africa had moved into a post-modern environment where everything was questioned and needed redefinition. Thus, the changing of social patterns also resulted in changes in worldview, who the authority was, and how one should worship within this environment.

Egan (2014:260) discusses the realignment of Christian traditions after 1994 and the decline of the Reformed, Catholic and English-speaking Protestant Churches with a rise in Pentecostal and African Initiated Churches. These changes came about as apartheid was

dismantled and the political activities of the Church were discredited or opened new avenues for worship. One convert explained that the change could be characterised as a change from authoritarian rule to something new:

Also I think quite a lot of people have become very disillusioned with their religion because there isn't any meat in it. Hell, fire, and brimstone if you're a Catholic and if you're an Afrikaner and you've gone through the Dutch Reformed system it is also hell, fire, and brimstone. God help you if you don't go to church on a Sunday - you are damned forever. In my opinion there is a huge turnabout in the young people's approach to religion. You go out into the country today which is where we live and a lot of people don't even go to church anymore. There isn't that draw card, there isn't that commitment to religion that there was when the *Voortrekkers* trekked and whatever and the Bible was brought out and everybody was ruled by the rod and that sort of thing. It has changed, it has changed completely. (Elizabeth, ethnic convert)

Authoritarianism was replaced with democracy and the religious environment had changed. People were freer to make their own religious decisions and to explore and this was an important influence for religious converts. For secular converts it had little or no sway except that previously taboo groups would be now more acceptable. The irony is that in choosing Orthodox Judaism, they were moving into another authoritarian environment (as evident in the authority of the Beth Din) with a new constitution of truth (the Old Testament). One convert who had been a member of the Jewish community for approximately four decades implied that Afrikaners were seeking Judaism not because they were escaping authoritarianism, but rather because that was what they were accustomed to. An authoritarian structure provides clear guidelines, which is what Afrikaners said they needed (see Chapters 6 and 7).

What makes me wonder also with the Afrikaans converts - is it because they are coming in from a very authoritarian kind of thing. Judaism can be very authoritarian. (Rachel, ethnic convert)

The difference however was that during apartheid and in the former Christian traditions to which these converts belonged, questioning was discouraged whereas in Judaism questioning is germane to the learning of the tradition. This break was not only refreshing for the converts, but also liberating.

That was the beginning of our journey of searching because you don't question in Christianity so the minute you start questioning and you start searching and you're saying this changed, what else changed? I knew the Bible fairly well – the Old and the New Testament and nowhere in the New Testament did they change

Shabbat to Sunday so who did it – that was our next question. The one question leads to the next question which leads to the next question (Dinah, spiritual convert).

The choice of Orthodoxy in an environment of plurality is an interesting one and reflected on in point 5.3.

5.3 Search for a 'true' moral framework

In Christian communities in post-apartheid South Africa there was a dispersal in Christianity, a meltdown in the foundation of the belief system (Egan, 2014). The transition to democracy thrust South Africa into a post-modern, post-colonial environment which has changed the religious landscape that most religious people in South Africa were accustomed to in their youth. Democracy has also undermined the intellectual underpinnings of Christianity in South Africa, causing its framework to be reconceptualised. Egan (2014) discusses the currents and the changes affecting the Christian ideological framework as a result of the deconstruction of apartheid and the introduction of democracy. He argues, that in the post-apartheid environment, the "Christian intellectual tradition in South Africa has undergone many developments, branching out in varied directions since 1994, in the engagement of faith with an increasingly post-modern society where religion is one discourse among many" (Egan, 2014:263). But it is one discourse that also corresponds with many. This undoubtedly has an effect on congregants and faith seekers in that everything they believed in suddenly falls apart, yet there are a number of substitutes or replacements. The choices are varied and people can pick, choose and experiment. It would have no effect on ethnic converts as they were not searching for alternatives. But it affected the spiritual converts whose foundation had been removed; they now had the freedom to scout and experiment in their search for truth. As the rabbis identified, the search for a 'true' new moral framework related mostly to the Afrikaner converts, but also applied to the black converts. The search for a true moral framework emerged from a crisis that developed around the validity and credibility of Christianity as discussed in 5.2 above.

For the Afrikaners, it started with discontent with the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) that had occurred much earlier (at the early stages of adulthood) and the converts had long since left the DRC and had joined various charismatic churches. The non-Afrikaner spiritual converts had also moved into non-traditional worship environments. They all complained that there were contradictions in the teachings of Christianity specifically as found in the New Testament that many Christian practices were derived from pagan origins, idolatry was still

being practised especially with the worship of Jesus, the teachings they had encountered were contradictory and/or illogical and the Church had 'lied' to them and covered religious matters making them questionable.

You know as you read the Bible – the New Testament and the Old Testament you do get questions in it that it doesn't make sense. (Sarit, spiritual convert)

The same sentiment is echoed by another convert:

We also found a conflict between the Old Testament and the New Testament...You start getting a problem because there is definitely a discrepancy on a lot of things but you basically just carry on with your story. (Dina, spiritual convert)

Dinah gave a concrete example:

Christianity still believes in the Ten Commandments. One of the Commandments is you shall not commit adultery. Adultery says you will be stoned in the Torah. *Hashem* also says in the *Tannach*⁸⁰ that I am the same today, tomorrow and forever; I am not a human that I would change. Then comes the New Testament and all of a sudden he commits adultery with a woman. This woman was engaged to somebody, so for all intents and purposes, in Jewish law she is married to somebody so he goes and commits adultery. Anybody believing that your basis is the Old Testament and the Ten Commandments how can you believe such a lie? That was to me... how could I believe it?

Frederik (Dinah's husband) added:

If I think back I've never really been a good Christian. We had many fights because I didn't really want to go to church. I made a commitment and said I would really try. I took the New Testament and started reading. I think I read the first three chapters or books or whatever and that was it. There are so many discrepancies you can't believe it. I said that is it, no more. I never could get sort of you know... our son... when we go to church, children have to go to Sunday School and we refused point blank from small. Today we say thank God he wasn't exposed to all that. We would threaten him, try to bribe him. He would sit with us in the church bring the tithing book and he would sit and colour with absolutely no interest whatsoever. He wasn't exposed to all this nonsense. Today we say *Baruch Hashem* [Hebrew phrase meaning Bless the Lord], he wasn't exposed

⁸⁰ More specifically, it is a "relatively modern acronym for the Jewish Bible, made up of the names of the three parts Torah (Pentateuch or Law, *Nevi'im* (Prophets) and *Ketuvim* (Writings)" (Robinson, 2001:594). It would be referred to as the Old Testament" by Christians.

to all this nonsense. Christianity is big business to me; it is commercialised.
(Frederik, spiritual convert)

I had lots of questions which made them really feel like I wasn't supposed to be there because I asked about Christmas you know – all these Christmas holidays – why were they celebrating them because in the Bible they are not there. Even in the New Testament the Christian Bible doesn't tell them to celebrate those things. Where do they come from? And they said you know it's been in the church for too long, we can't change people. The leaders were saying as a family we don't do it but we teach the church to do it and I thought but that's hypocrisy. You can't teach what you don't believe in, you know, so I think that was one of the reasons why they had to kick me out. (Tziporra, spiritual convert)

Almost the entire group of spiritual converts relayed similar examples to the above. Concerns around paganism and idolatry were also raised, meaning that practices had veered from the truth and original purpose of worship which in turn implied that the Church had hidden motives, propagated falsehoods and covered its falsities:

If you start learning your Bible in the Old Testament, you read about the Christmas that they had. There is a tree that they cut up and I can't remember exactly where it was but if I can look I will show you. In any way it tells you they cut up a tree and decorated it and that is an idol. That brought me to the conclusion that it is not true. If it is in the Bible telling you that you are not allowed to do it and everybody during Christmas they are putting up a tree and giving out gifts – for what reason? If the Bible stipulates it is not true, then it cannot be true.
(Batsheva, spiritual convert)

We actually went to a Bible school to become better Christians and at the Bible school they said to us do you realise that Christmas is based on a pagan holiday and do you realise that the way we have Easter is based on a pagan way of doing it? Of course that was to us a fair amount of shock but that was the spark we needed to start searching. (Dinah, spiritual convert)

Every time I went to church, at a later age in my life, I felt there is nothing about God here. They are talking all this time about a human being, a human being and if he is making himself a god, then I am also a god. It just worked against me. The older I got, and the more I was going to church, the more it was about a person and not about God. (Naamah, spiritual convert)

Look Christianity has three gods. They can say it is only one in a trinity or whatever but they have three gods. My connection was with God the Father, the father one. The other two never... it was iffy for me. I didn't understand what was going on there so I didn't believe that part as much. I just believed that there is a God. (Tovah, spiritual convert)

The various experiences shared above created an impression of falsity in Christianity to which converts objected strongly. They felt they had been misled their entire lives:

In our process we realised that the ministers in the Dutch Reformed Church studied for ten years and they know it has been changed, they study all these things and they choose not to take the truth at the end of the day. They still choose to have the Sunday and do all of these things. That we found out in the process so it was just how do you know that it was changed by Constantine and it is fine with you? I mean how? (Dinah, spiritual convert)

My husband got onto the Internet and he saw the vows that the Dutch Reform pastors had to take. It was like... while they are studying Christianity in university and so on and they get to know truth or another way they are not allowed to say anything to the congregants and they have to keep it for themselves otherwise they will be fired. That is actually... that started puzzling us. Why? ...I understand better now but the nonsense that they were telling you... when I was a child I used to ask questions. When I was a child they just said believe and follow it. You were a child and couldn't question. Later in years I got cross and then I started asking questions and then the pastors would say you are digging in too deep you can't do it – just believe because Christianity is based on belief. You just believe you don't have to see, you just believe. That is where the problem came in for us, not to be part of a community in Christianity because we were asking too many questions. (Sarit, spiritual convert)

I am sore in my heart because I have been lied to by the world. To me that... you know I don't... I feel everything in my body goes like this... I want to stop it. I want to stop this lie. How did they get it right? (Naamah, spiritual convert)

Many spiritual converts also described how they disliked the doctrines of the church, finding them manipulative and/or fake. Here is an example provided by Riette:

In the NG Kerk they have the doctrine that's called the uitverkiesingsleer which means that you are like selected or chosen to inherit this afterlife.. this... to enter

the afterlife in a certain way and for the life of me I couldn't work out how do you get this done, how do you get this done, and it created tremendous guilt feelings within me because I couldn't work out what more do I have to do because this is my mindset - the harder you work the better things should get. I couldn't work out what more do I have to do now to get this thing. So that was the one thing that I just couldn't work it out. So, there were a few doctrines of the church that I just couldn't .. I couldn't intellectually .. I couldn't... that didn't make sense to me. (Riette, spiritual convert)

in Christianity everybody has to believe what you believe otherwise they are going to hell and are doomed and it was the most freeing thing [to become Jewish] because you have to evangelise everybody in Christianity and coming here I don't need to. (Dina, spiritual convert)

We realised that Christianity is fake and a man-made religion. The poor guy [Jesus] doesn't even know how many people worship him... shame. It is all brainwashing. (Sarit, spiritual convert)

Converts also found that the practices in the charismatic churches which they joined lacking in substance and were sensationalist showstoppers in order to keep those who had become disillusioned by the traditional churches, enchanted and involved. This was some of their criticism of the charismatic churches:

In the Apostolic environment they normally have this thing that they pray for someone and then the spirit is... I never felt I just thought if you are going to blow one more time in my face I am going to lose it type of thing. That to me was quite a show. I was just sitting there. I knew that if I sit there I am listening with a different heart than what is going on around me. (Naamah, spiritual convert)

At that point [after having left the DRC] I tried to experiment more [by] going to a charismatic church. That also didn't work for me because it... even there there was ... also that intellectually didn't make sense to me and if you see what they are doing they actually [use] self-hypnosis and it's a form of hypnosis that they do with people, so even there it didn't work for me as well. (Riette, spiritual convert)

This is a world of escape so now I want something and I speak in tongues and all of a sudden the spirit has told me this is the real thing. Where are all the years of books, of people writing, of guidelines? They don't have this and if they have it they don't look at it because every person now starts off their own... a church group or their own group – I am not happy with this I am now happy with this. Judaism is real it is there. You do something wrong you are being held accountable and have to do something about it. With Christianity I am praying to somebody who is supposed to take it away. What a rude awakening one day because I didn't deal with it here.

I'd gone to counsellors in – Christian counsellors – to try and deal with this and NOTHING they were saying was helping. It just... to me it was talk – empty talk – and it had no substance to it...Just trust in Jesus, He'll help you get through this [suicide of her husband]. You know, just focus on Him and everything was focused on Jesus, on that He will help you through this and it wasn't happening. It just... I wasn't getting anywhere. The pain that I was experiencing and the searching was... I just kept on coming up against a wall and I just felt this is not working for me. They couldn't give me practical advice of how to deal with this and how to cope with this and that... and I had no... I was VERY isolated – it was Gabriel [her young son] and myself one side and that was it. There was NOBODY that reached out to us. (Shifra, spiritual convert)

Two other converts spoke of how the church they were attending had inadvertently pushed them away from Christianity:

They said to me I wasn't doing well. They said to me... basically they told me I had fallen away. You know Christians fall away and get restored and things like that. So they said to me you've fallen away because you are not bringing people to church. You are not teaching people the Bible and baptising them and well, my question was where in the Bible do you get that? That I have fallen away? I'm not the devil. I am a human being and I don't think one can fall away from God's grace. You know even the Christian Bible says "When your brother is weak you must help them". It doesn't say when they have fallen away; it says when they are weak. So they should have been considering me as a weak person, not as a fall away and I said to them if you show me from the Scriptures that it really says I have fallen away, I must be restored and baptised and become Christian again I will do it...I think that is the reason why I became Jewish because I had questions. It made me question things you know with the way the Bible is and the way that Christianity is taught – that made me question a lot of things about Christmas and about the Easter holidays and all these things that aren't in the

Old Testament, in the *Tannach*. So I had those questions which made me leave the church that I was in. I didn't really leave because they kicked me out. (Ester, spiritual convert)

We actually went to a Bible school to become better Christians and at the Bible school they said to us do you realise that Christmas is based on a pagan holiday and do you realise that the way we have Easter is based on a pagan way of doing it. Of course that was to us a fair amount of shock but that was the spark we needed to start searching. (Dinah, spiritual convert)

In both above-mentioned cases, although the Church had intended these converts to strengthen their church participation, their actions repulsed them. Other converts also spoke about how they were rejected by their communities when their questioning led them to the conclusion that they would have to break from Christianity and the central belief in Jesus - even though they had not yet converted or had any contact with any rabbi or Jewish community at that stage. They were portrayed as rebellious, disrespectful and disbelieving and questioning was not tolerated. Their behaviour was tantamount to heresy for some and, in many extremely painful ways, these converts were ostracised, marginalised and punished by their communities. For one convert, this led to divorce and a threat to access to his daughter. Ironically, this propelled his conversion further as he needed to be perceived as a sane person and part of a stable community rather than an individual who had adopted fringe beliefs:

So I have a little daughter...and the divorce was traumatic and an emotional thing on all levels, and it can be ugly, and so now you've got this added tension about this religious stuff, that I'm bringing to the table, and they were ... all my ex-family and my own family, were to an extent, their attitude was you know, leave this nonsense, all this stuff we are pursuing, it's just ...[unclear] and I ended up in a place where they were alone and I - they were making all kinds of ..[unclear] divorce, making allegations about your sanity and stuff like that, which compromises your ability to be a loving and involved parent and if you start, in the context of a divorce and the access to children etc., and because you know it's an antagonistic situation, and the official authorities get involved, they umm...where I ended up was that I needed to be part of a community and seen to be a normal functioning person and not some crazy guy going down some crazy tangent. That's why at the outset I said I didn't really want to do it [convert] but just for the sake of my daughter I felt that I had to. (Joseph, spiritual convert)

Other converts also spoke about the consequences of their resolve to abandon Christianity and the tremendous emotional and financial stress which resulted. Some converts lost their homes and their employment; businesses suffered from the stigma of having attached themselves to Jews. The solution was to move to Johannesburg to be closer to Jews and Jewish resources - even though up until that point there had been no contact with any Jews, rabbis, Jewish community and very little access to Jewish resources. The following converts described how they were punished by their former communities (note, not all experienced community punishment as they had long since left communities and not all communities were as hostile). The below example is lengthy but demonstrates the extent to which actions threatened the local pastor's authority:

It started with him [the pastor] preaching from the pulpit that if anyone was going to have anything to do with us they would excommunicate them from the church. We tried to move away once during that time... we moved away for like a year but we had to go back because we were about to lose the house because of the tenants that were in there who were Christian and they didn't pay. We had to move back and when we moved back we came there to find that they told everyone that they bought the house and that we actually weren't even the owners of the house anymore so we were the liars and the cheats and we were the ones taking everything away from them. We were putting them out on the street. We weren't... we actually said to them look you are struggling – the house is divided in two homes we will stay up top and you stay downstairs and we will help you as long as we can. My husband started doing work there... we just packed up everything and went back. My husband started doing locum work because there wasn't work available. Then the pastor went to all the businesses in Worcester telling the pharmacies that if they employ my husband they will set the church against them and they will boycott all the pharmacies so my husband didn't have work in Worcester. He had to drive through to Ceres, through to Robertson and find work wherever he could and we had to live there. To make things worse the pastor got the guy next door to put his tenants out and the pastor moved in next door to keep an eye on who is coming to visit us and what we were doing. If people came to visit us he would write them a letter and the next day they would receive a letter saying if they continued seeing us they would be excommunicated from the church. The people had to choose between being our friends and the church so most of the people chose the church, they didn't choose to be friends with us. That wasn't even it. They started to say that we were evil so we... it was the Jew's house so nobody would buy the house, we couldn't sell the house...Nobody would buy it because of the fact that it was marked as the Jew house. One of the neighbours actually said that I burnt her

house by cursing her. I was standing in front of the window three times a day, which I was. Not to *daven* [pray] or anything but I was washing the dishes three times a day and looked out the window. I had to take my kids out of school early because it was hard on them. They weren't accepted. They could play with kids the one day and the next day they weren't allowed to play with them. The school that they were in, the pastor of our church was one of the main guys that was on the Parent Student Body that they had so we had to take our kids out of school and I had to home school them in that time. The thing with the curse – [according to the neighbour] I was standing in front of the window three times a day and I cursed my neighbour so that her house would burn. The night that it happened I didn't even know that it happened. We were sleeping and they just made a very large fire in the... you know like that metal fire place that you get – a Jet Master and one of the beams of the house caught fire and now it was my fault. Then it was very bad because we were said to be sorcerers, we were said to be able to curse people, in fact I was cursing my neighbours regularly. Anything that went wrong it was our fault. It was absolutely... you couldn't believe... I actually said to my husband you know, all we have to go and do is go to the front of the house roll around on the grass and they will absolutely certify us mad. It became very bad because I was afraid for my children. I was afraid of what these people could do to us. At that stage we had two families that still came to our home and still visited us. The rest would run away literally when we came or when we approached. They were totally, totally afraid. (Tovah, spiritual convert)

Another similar case:

We had to tell them because we had this church going on at home and we couldn't anymore. Even after my husband decided this is it and we are not believing I had to tell them there are things going on and we can't. I didn't tell them the truth until I made up my mind. I had to say listen, I don't believe in Jesus anymore. Because we were always a group praying together suddenly I said no. You lose a lot of your customers and you lose a lot of your friends, but *Baruch Hashem* [Hebrew for Blessed is the Lord] he sent us Muslims for customers, Muslims that sort of could relate to you about one God and who didn't judge us at all. We started making our business with the Muslims and Hindus. Eventually later on after a couple of months the Christians used to go to church and then they would come for a treatment. They said there was nobody else like me and eventually they saw me as a person – I am still the same person although my beliefs changed and my way of dressing changed (Sarit, spiritual convert).

Yet another example:

You know that church – the friends that I had were part of that church. Then after that [falling away] I had no friends. When I left the church and the way they made people feel was like you are no longer part of the church, you are very sinful, you are full of sin, you are just going to hell. That’s how I felt – that I was a lost cause and I’m going to hell (Ester, spiritual convert).

These experiences of Christianity and of Christian communities (that were meant to be morally strong communities) provoked anger, disbelief, disillusionment and more questioning among individuals who could not understand how a religion and its followers could be hypocritical in their actions. Questioning led to an anguished search and the Internet provided the channel of support. Their often exasperated, disillusioned search, became a quest for truth and stability in a religion that would not collapse or become redundant. This quest for truth was described in great detail and developed over a number of years. The information they found often led them back to the Old Testament to follow the word of God directly and literally; in some cases it led them to Messianic Judaism before they realised they “had to go to the Jews” to learn the truth, to live in truthful ways and serve God “correctly”. The realisation that their religious paths had been erroneous - wasted - and their journey of transition was very painful for them. In essence, it pushed these individuals into a limbo - a liminality - of neither belonging to Christianity, Judaism nor their former communities. At the same time they found possibilities in the Old Testament and Judaism yet this route was still unknown and unguided. One convert provided a vivid description:

Then at one stage we decided that we will follow the Bible literally because for us it just didn’t make sense – the New and the Old Testament so we said we will start in Genesis and we will work through the Old Testament and then tackle the New Testament because we know the New Testament. I knew the Old Testament also fairly well but we said we will start with Genesis and we will do everything this book tells us to do and that is where we started. When it spoke about circumcision my husband immediately went and had himself surgically circumcised. My son during the December holiday said he wanted to go so he went. Where it said that you are not supposed to buy men’s clothes or ladies clothes I got rid of all my slacks. We started eating the meat we were supposed to eat but the next thing is not the fact that we can’t buy at the butcher but it is slaughtered incorrectly so we started as a group slaughtering ourselves. We were now busy with the written Torah and trying to live what it says. The word says the throat must be cut and the blood must run into the ground and that doesn’t happen at the abattoir so we started slaughtering ourselves. Pesach [Passover] – we actually slaughtered a lamb with the blood on the doorposts and the next

morning early burnt up all the leftovers. We tried to live it practically (Dina, spiritual convert).

The husband of Sarit, who wrote an article about their conversion for the "Jewish Tradition", similarly described their literal observance of Judaism prior to conversion:

I remember the first Pesach seder [ceremony / order] we had at home - we read the *Haggadah* [the liturgy pertaining to Passover] and drank 4 large glasses of wine each and ate from the *seder* plate. We were drunk and hungry, we didn't know that you actually eat a big meal afterwards, but it was a very awesome experience for us.

All the factors described above were most significant for the spiritual group of converts. They had limited knowledge of Judaism and the Jewish community. But they were attracted towards Judaism, a religion that was the source, the foundation, the basis and the real truth of what they had known previously. They were going back to the roots of religion as per their ancestors' forms of worship, values and ideals and rejected the reconstructed version of religion - as found in the New Testament - which had become discredited for them. They were doing what they should have been doing in the first place - sticking to the truth and the original ideas. They wanted to move out of the liminal space they had found themselves in in post-apartheid South Africa and into something structured, honest, stable and relevant. They discovered this in Judaism. This is described by an Afrikaner convert:

I just think that why does more people come back to the truth? [It's] the pace of life and what South Africa is going through... as I said I was in the Air Force, my family... my brother was in the army and we defended the borders and today that has been taken away from us and look what it is doing to my country? My boere side... my real *boere* side of South Africa is actually standing up against everything that happens and I think like back in the *ossewa* [Afrikaans for ox-wagon] time; back when the *boere* actually moved to South Africa, they believed in one God... maybe not the Judaism way but they believed in one God. If I look at that... what they stood for then and how strong they were with what they went through I think that is what is coming back into the Afrikaans blood. People understand. Listen if we want to survive, we have to look for God. We obviously lost him. There was a promise made in Pretoria that in South Africa we will protect and we will stand for God if we get the land. I never looked at it like that. From an Afrikaans point of view if you look at the culture point of view I think that is why most Afrikaners start seeking further and then they come across the Judaism. (Naamah, spiritual convert)

In keeping with the above sentiment of Afrikaner survival in Africa, another convert stated:

I think the Afrikaner, obviously yes, they had a few traumatic experiences here in dark Africa, and so you have to make a life for yourself in the bushes, so I am sure you had to, they had to have a unifying paradigm [Chosen People] and something that really represents, that goes deep... that everybody can identify with to carry you through all the hardships, so I totally understand and have empathy with and I think still, I think part of it is on that level, if you're gonna confront some of the things this...[unclear] down in Africa, you wanna believe that you got it ...that you got, that there's truth, that you've got truth by the ears, so I think as part of the new South Africa and all that, so I think a lot of them just revisit it, their views and their assumptions, and when you add up, because it's such a thing that had carried them, they wanted to make sure they are still in the truth or they adhere to it because they believe it makes a difference, so versus other peoples who, whom I suppose didn't face some of the.. didn't need that, I suppose that's true about I suppose everybody I know, more or less, on different levels, ok so, me personally specifically, so what I did when I went to university, I studied economics, and later, I matriculated in 94, when the new South Africa came into being, and I voted for the first time in 94 (Joseph, spiritual convert).

Another convert describes it as part of the narrative of the lost Jewish tribes returning. Afrikaners were envisaged as being one of those tribes:

Afrikaans families are not Catholic. They are Protestant. So maybe in terms of Protestant religion and what the church represented in a protestant way, maybe its lacking and maybe its lacking in ways and people feel unfulfilled and that just doesn't make sense. It's like swinging with the wind this way and that way. I think that there is even, from my understanding, and it's not something that was like that when I was young, younger, when I was a part of it. These religious groups sprouting up where there's a type of a ...you know where they try to mirror the Torah way of doing things and I think that the logical conclusion from that is that at some people really strive to doing it in an authentic manner. Because I think that's one thing about Afrikaans people in general is that they have unbelievable integrity and honesty in terms of what they believe in and you know and the right way of doing things. So I think it gels with who and what Afrikaans people are in general and when they want to do something they do it properly, they don't do half measures, that's not good enough. So I think maybe it's those two things. And apart from that, there's even writings, fringe right wing groups, about the Afrikaners being one of the lost tribes. So I don't know if people have

exposure to that type of reading and that they had that sense and that maybe there's a sort of a natural ...you know that maybe that is what they... and just like culturally I would say that Afrikaans culture is a collective culture so there are similarities between that and Judaism in spite of the that there are quite a lot of differences as well but I do think that it is sort of the easier thing. My understanding of Afrikaans people converting is that it is truly because of the religion. It's a religious conversion not a cultural conversion so it is to try and find that pure understanding of Torah and finding God and understanding what God's will is and doing it in the right way without these fuzzy things of are you one of the chosen ones or are you so scared of the burning fires of hell that you are meant to do something. So maybe ... But I think with Afrikaans people that's what it is. It is purely driven by religion. It's not driven by anything else. And then when you found the religion you have to adapt to the culture. I think that's my sense of it. (Riette, spiritual and ethnic convert)

I listened to a rabbi one day on the internet and he said why are there so many Afrikaners – he is from Israel – and even Dutch people? He said the time for the lost tribe, that curse is over and that is why all the Afrikaans and Dutch people are coming in (Sarit, spiritual convert).

Yet another stated similarly that consistent messages were needed - stability in a moral framework:

The Afrikaans Jews I met.. when we started converting because we were four Afrikaans couples who were converting together and afterwards I met three or four other couples that had converted. It was increasing. I could see it was increasing. A lot of Afrikaans people are coming over to Judaism and there is a good reason for that. They couldn't find in their normal life what they want and if you start studying the Old Testament you can see the path to go especially the books of Moses and if you go further into the rest of the books you get your message. Every time I read a passage in the Bible I can read it tomorrow and experience a different message and that is what I started experiencing. With a lot of Afrikaans people I think it is the same. You don't get the same message all the time and when you get that message, you have to go for it. (Batsheva, spiritual convert)

Among spiritual converts (regardless of their race and ethnic background), the knowledge about Christianity devolved gradually over time in their maturation process from childhood into adulthood that paralleled the demise of apartheid. It did not seem to be

connected to the removal of group barriers, but it was connected to the post-apartheid environment that created space for multiple new identity formations - in this case in the religious realm. Before it was dominated by Afrikaner nationalism and Christian churches but now this movement coincided with the demise of the Afrikaner Church and a flourishing of multiple new forms of Christianity and ways of worship in post-apartheid South Africa. On the other hand, it concerned an identity that had got lost along the way, reclaiming a place under one true authority and being true to the values of their culture.

Another convert spoke of how his place in the world and identity came to be questioned with the rise of democracy and Black Economic Empowerment that led to class formation along racial lines. What is common to many of the participants is that their social positions came to be questioned by the end of apartheid and this opened up a space for new moral frameworks that would make sense in the new dispensation - or that had not been discredited by apartheid. This rather than the removal of group barriers facilitated a process of searching and conversion.

5.4 Religious revival

The literature in Chapter 4 on the Jewish community referred to religious revival within the Jewish community where children of secular families were adopting religious lifestyles in adulthood and raising their children in more religious ways than their parents. This was especially true in the 80s, 90s and 2000s (a number of rabbis also raised this issue). Herman (2007:34) speaks of the increase in religious observance and raises the introduction of religious fundamentalism in the Orthodox community. The increase in religious observance mirrors a trend outside the Jewish community, which has been a general rise in Jewish, Christian and Muslim fundamentalism around the world (Emerson, Mirola & Monahan, 2011) well established by the 2000s (in terms of institutions and availability of resources). Although religious revival was not a direct cause for conversion, it was ultimately important in the decisions of both sets of converts because it created an environment in which becoming religious was more acceptable. It also meant that more resources available for those becoming religious and people - whether Jews-by-birth or converts - would be learning together: converts would be integrated easily with other Jews who were also learning. One ethnic convert explained:

I think there is a move back towards learning and growing in Judaism even... like a lot of the classes I am going to, especially [unclear] they are all women around my age, plus minus ten years outside. Most of them are people who have just been traditional. Sometimes they don't keep kosher or anything. They eat

out. They don't keep *Shabbat* or whatever. They are all learning and quite stammered about what they don't know. A lot of them grew up in the Jewish [unclear] schools and not a lot grow up in State schools. They are Jewish, they know they are Jewish but they are at the stage where they want more. There are a few Israelis. They are Israeli they are not Jewish. They have never been to shul. I mean they do a lot of learning in Israel obviously, but they are finding their Jewish roots again. Maybe it is just what I have been involved in but I think there is so much opportunity to learn more now. Maybe just because I am seeing it in Jordan's circle that it seems to me that maybe the kids are wanting a bit more than what their parents had. A bit more of a community. A bit more of a spiritual life or something...I think it is maybe as a response to the upheavals in South Africa. I don't know if it is happening in the rest of the world in every Jewish community, maybe it is. I think even if it was like the UK, I think if it is happening there it is for the same reason, this whole upheaval. Maybe the growing threat from Islam. The growing economic threats. Political instability. I think it just makes you sort of draw in a bit more. I can't think of any other reason why. Like the old Afrikaners with the *kraal* [protective enclosures]. Gather them all and keep them together. (Vicky, ethnic convert).

The revival of religion in the Jewish community can also be seen in the testimony of one convert. She explained how it facilitates taking on a religious life; this has an impact on those considering conversion:

If I think back to the early days of our married life we used to go to shul, you could count on your fingers on one hand how many people were *shomrei* [observant]. Everybody used to drive to shul. They might have been Sabbath observant excepting for the driving part. They might not have gone to work but they drove to shul. The shul was there and they lived over there. You want your children to become aware of who and what they are. You shove them in the car and you drive to Shul on a Friday night or you drive to Shul on a Saturday morning. By doing that at least they got into the Jewish way of life and the system as it were. Today there is far more emphasis on the importance of observance and it is made easier by the Chabad mix and the Ohr Somayach group and the Torah group because they've opened their arms and said come we will help you, we will help you to go forward, we will help you to make that transition from somebody who isn't observant to somebody who is observant. It is not difficult. It isn't difficult to be observant. When people ask me but it is such a mission to be kosher, it is not. Forty five years ago when there was nothing on the shelves it was a mission to be kosher because there was nothing to have. Today everything is available. You might have to make a little bit of a sacrifice so that you've got

to go to the ghetto to get your milk or your whatever or your meat, but today you pick up the phone or send an email. I send my order for meat by email and say I will collect it on Monday morning. I don't have to be there, I don't even have to speak to anybody. It has become easier to be observant (Elizabeth, ethnic convert).

The religious revival created an environment of acceptability for those with lesser knowledge of Judaism and converts could join and benefit from the wave of religiosity and this applied to ethnic and spiritual converts. But also, if points 5.2 and 5.3 are kept in mind, an increasingly cohesive, strongly identified religious environment provides insulation, sharp borders and emotional security in a broader socio-political environment that feels foreign or unsure. It also provides security in a rapidly changing South Africa that for some was decentering / debasing their identities and uprooting their moral frameworks and belief systems. This latter point is especially relevant to the spiritual converts of this study.

5.5 Information / network age

The interviews with the spiritual converts showed that the technological nature of the Information Age and globalisation, where people have easy access to information from the Internet, was a primary facilitating factor in their conversions. The Internet was mentioned in a number of interviews as the mechanism which gave converts the freedom to question on the one hand, and provided a plethora of answers to their questions. Access to the Internet aided their search for answers to questions that would have been prohibited in the churches, or answers to questions to which they would not have received reliable or trusted responses or would have received recrimination for asking. For example, one convert said, "My son started to Google why Jews don't believe in Jesus and got the answer" (Sarit, spiritual convert). But the Internet was also useful in helping converts find a place for belonging. The Internet connected converts to information that would confirm why they would need to disassociate from Christianity and provided them with information that would ultimately lead them to Judaism and Jews. This would have been more difficult before the Internet - especially in more authoritarian environments when information would have been tightly controlled (as some converts revealed in the enquiries into the Dutch Reformed Church).

I think with the accessibility of the Internet also it changes and it opens the world for you. You don't need to go to a library and you don't need to ask anybody. You go onto the internet and you search. You get a lot of rubbish but also something (Dinah, spiritual convert).

I think the internet has got much to do with it. If you have a question now and you start questioning you don't need to go to your minister to find out; you don't need to go to the library; you don't need to go to a Christian bookshop to find a book or anything you can Google your question and get your answer. I think the internet is opening a whole world to people (Dina, spiritual convert).

Respondent 1 (Wife): This forbidden world is opening up.

Respondent 2 (Husband): If you ask questions you are a stirrer and a trouble-maker. You would be very seriously frowned upon if you start asking uncomfortable questions.

Respondent 1 (Wife): I think a lot of people are searching, finding, and not going back to ask questions (Dinah, spiritual convert).

The Internet is a facilitatory factor more relevant to spiritual converts than ethnic converts. The point relates back to 5.2 and 5.3 where converts felt that in their former Christian environments, they were either not allowed to question, or were given false answers that suited the agendas of the Church when they did question. Therefore, the Internet gave spiritual converts the power to search for their own answers and discern what was truthful. Again, it liberated them from their former authoritarian structures and aided their search for new moral frameworks by making them independent knowledge seekers and providing unrestrained access to a multiplicity of frameworks from which to choose.

5.6 More lenient attitudes to intermarriage and conversion

Rabbis felt that conversion is more possible today as internal attitudes towards intermarriage have relaxed which positively affects conversion. Their argument is because in post-apartheid South Africa, Jews had become more 'tolerant', more prone to intermarriage and therefore more prone to conversion. The Head of the Beth Din explained:

In the past people came from Europe or whatever and to date a non-Jewish partner would be terrible. I always mention, you saw Fiddler on the Roof? You saw the reaction when he found out that his daughter has got a relationship with a non-Jew? This is what it used to be. We became tolerant now so there are people that nevertheless want to be converted... Because of the tolerance you have more people who want to convert.

Changes in attitudes supposedly have come about at a communal and familial level. Whereas previously intermarriage would not have translated into conversion so quickly, nowadays it does⁸¹. Can this be attributed to the growing demand for conversion for marriage? It seems to be a classic 'chicken-egg' scenario: are the communal attitudes towards conversion for marriage changing because more Jewish men are seeking partners outside the Jewish community? Or are more men seeking partners outside because they know that the Beth Din is making conversion more accessible? If the conversion statistics are taken as an indicator of intermarriage, then it is to be assumed that more and more secular Jewish men are indeed seeking partners outside of the community. One possible explanation could be that the diminishing social barriers between groups that came with the collapse of apartheid has resulted in more intergroup mixing and more open attitudes to Jews (as discussed in 5.2 but this is doubted for reasons given above). Another reason could be that there are fewer marriageable women as compared to the 60's when the community was almost double its present size (this would need to be explored separately). A further reason, explored here, could be that attitudes towards intermarriage have relaxed. From the converts' testimonies however, it does not appear to be the case even if secular Jewish men are dating outside the community. There seems to be a continued and uncompromising attitude towards avoiding marriage with a non-Jew. The maintenance of a particular Jewish identity remains deeply rooted and important in the Jewish psyche when it came to choosing a marital partner.

The push factors for many ethnic converts were related to partners who wanted to marry Jewesses and where family pressure exerted much influence in this regard⁸². The ingrained sense of having to marry in, having to please family, and/or to avoid ex-communication from the family were the main drivers - even if they themselves were not religious during their pre-marital relationship (which was the case with all the ethnic converts' partners).

⁸¹ Attitudes towards intermarriage appear to be softening to some extent over time. Whereas in 1974 and 1991, 75.8% and 68.2% of parents with unmarried children were opposed to intermarriage, in 1998 it had dropped to 59% (Frankental & Rothgeisser, 2009). While it had dropped, it is to be pointed out that 59% is still high. However, on the point that a Jew should marry a Jew, the 1998 and 2005 surveys showed that 79% and 81% of the survey participants agreed/strongly agreed (Bruk, 2005:135). At the same time, those who would support an intermarriage increased over time from 0.5% in 1974, to 5.5% in 1991 and 27% in 1998 (Frankental & Rothgeisser, 2009). They also found that conversion and out-marriage increased over the 3 surveys. From 1974 to 1998 conversion increased from 2.2% to 5.3%; and the percentage of Jewish respondents with non-Jewish partners increased from 2.6% to 5.3%. In 2005 it was at 5% (Bruk, 2005:135).

⁸² Not all of these cases translated into conversion before marriage. Because of the difficulties involved in conversion, many became discouraged and returned later after having married civilly.

I think when I first met him he made it very clear that that [conversion] was a condition of being with him. So he planted that seed that if I was to go forward in a life with him, it would have to be... I had to be Jewish (Stella, ethnic and spiritual convert)

Similarly, another said:

When I met and fell in love with my husband and decided okay he was not going to change and what for because I wasn't a religious person (Elizabeth, ethnic convert).

Like the other ethnic converts, Anne's husband was not a religious person. He only started observing and increasing his observance well after her conversion. Yet she had to convert - even if both were not religious.

I think the most important thing is that he spent a long time telling me that he wanted to marry a Jewish woman. It was his second marriage as well, he was previously married to a Jewish woman and he kept leaving me and then finally he had the guts to tell me it was actually that he wanted to marry a Jewish woman. (Lynn, ethnic convert).

Well, you know, one thing that was a huge pressure was when I was still going out with him, his father was very ill for many years and he was an invalid. I would be invited to Friday night supper and they'd all stand up and leave the table and go to his bedroom down the passage and make *Kiddush* [Friday night blessing over wine] and then come back. They would never introduce me to him even though he was that...I don't think very *compos mentis*, because they thought it would kill him and I knew that. He had always said that he would disinherit any of his kids that married out and everybody knew - it was very, very important to him that his kids did not marry out (Ava, ethnic convert).

There are elements that are still very complicated but it does come down to ... it being something that the husband wants and the wife has to do the big changing and deal with a lot of the fall out which never really goes away (Cathy, ethnic convert).

The quotations above indicate that in marriage, women must be the agents of change, not men. Because for the Jewish partner, intermarriage is not acceptable, and because it was seen as important to Jewish men to have a Jewish wife - even if the religion meant nothing to them - the burden fell onto the women. The culture, background, family and upbringing

were not factors of importance to the husband when it came to marriage; there could only be one way. Whether the attitudes to intermarriage are more lenient today than in the past cannot properly be gauged in this dissertation. That question would have to be tested separately. What is noted from the rabbis' and converts' testimonies is that attitudes towards intermarriage seem to have relaxed in favour of conversion as an alternative but that they were still strong enough to weigh heavily on converts' decisions to pursue this path when marriage became imminent. This indicated therefore that they had not completely relaxed.

Given the resistance to intermarriage, what seemed to facilitate marriage under these circumstances was that the women were usually by then non-practising, or secular and were open to adopting a religion. The absence of religion meant there was space for the adoption of a new religion:

My philosophy basically was I believe in a creator so for me that is one God why do I have to... what do I have to renounce? There is nothing that I am renouncing. It is a matter of getting down to brass tacks with the Jewish religion and it wasn't a train smash at all. (Elizabeth, ethnic convert)

I was working at Tara Hospital and I met my husband who was Jewish. He was much older than me and he said 'Will I marry him?' and I said I would but I am not going to convert unless I really look at it. At that time I had dropped Christianity and I wasn't sure what I was going to do. I didn't realise you could marry a Jew. In fact I knew nothing about it and he didn't know much either (Rebecca, ethnic convert).

For some ethnic converts for whom religion had been important growing up, casting aside one's own religion was less important than staying with the person one loved:

If I didn't convert he wouldn't be with me and I think at that point that is all I wanted to do. I just wanted to be with him; I wanted to get married to him and I wanted to have a family with him. Without converting I wouldn't have had any of that. Terrible, hey? (Lynn, ethnic convert)

For another group of ethnic converts for whom religion was also important, the adoption of a new religion meant that their current relationship with God would be strengthened or improved. For them, much like the spiritual converts, converting meant taking on a religious framework that would be strengthening of a personal relationship with God as well as unifying a relationship with a partner. One convert, who at first refused conversion and had a Catholic wedding with her Jewish husband (on the grounds that Catholicism was important to her), described how she became exposed to the religious elements of Judaism through the

family environment. This created a pull that led to her conversion and inclusion even if the case was in the context of marriage:

They were a hectic family and would get into all their discussions or whatever that I was really... I was excluded from it, it wasn't for me so I would be sitting in the lounge reading this. The one night I picked up a *Siddur* [prayer book] and I found the brochas [Hebrew word for blessings] and that was seminal for me. When I realised that a Jew is supposed to say morning brochas [blessings] - every morning - that starts your day and covers the beginning of your day's existence and all those elements. Then I found the *Asher Yatzer* [name of prayer] and I thought, oh my gosh, this is a very, very deep connection that is possible here. It is like you can take this through your whole day and be connected. That was it for me. Then I wanted to know more. I still didn't think of converting. I thought I would take it and I would put it into my life and then I started. I started reading and reading. Then I thought I will come and see the *Beit Din* but I kind of thought I would come and see the *Beit Din* because I wanted more enlightenment, I wanted more information. The whole topic of conversion was irrelevant because my husband at the time and dear Rabbi Bender knocked heads so badly that they spent the session arguing. What I did get was I got a book list and I started to read and that was it. That was it for me. I thought this is here, this is the connection, I felt very comfortable, I felt this is what... I had not been aware of any sort of searching or any unhappiness before but this was suddenly like here is the door to the secret chamber, this is it (Kaylee, ethnic convert).

5.7 Attitudes towards Jews

One (ethnic) convert felt that external attitudes towards Jews had softened since the 60s and therefore the idea of conversion would be more acceptable for those considering it. She was convinced that despite the stricter requirements at the Beth Din, it was much harder to convert in the early 60s than it is today because of the negative attitudes and prejudices towards Jews. She explained:

It was the sixties and Israel was very much a very new State. The Second World War was really just a few years before and what do you want to be Jewish for? For goodness sake. Look at what the Jews had to go through? You are mad. Nobody was actually actively going out and saying I want to convert to become Jewish. (Elizabeth, ethnic convert)

Anne felt that there was stigma attached to being Jewish that today does not exist.

Today I think the perception out there when they see the visual representation of Judaism... let's face it particularly in Johannesburg, you walk into Pick 'n Pay and you have these bearded whatever people and you look at them and you think 'gee they are normal people' also and 'I want to find out more about them and what makes them like that'. I think there is more of an enquiring approach to what Judaism is about amongst the non-Jewish people - amongst the gentile people (Elizabeth, ethnic convert).

The above quotation suggests that the post-apartheid environment founded on multiculturalism and inclusivity, creates and encourages openness and provides an environment for cultures that were previously subdued or repressed, to outwardly express who they are more confidently and to live in ways that are different to the majority and, at the same time, be accepted by and integrated into society. This sparks curiosity among people about each other's cultures and ways. It blurs the stereotypes which positively influences attitudes towards conversion. The hypothesis Elizabeth offered is that that external attitudes towards Jews and the visibility of religious Jews have become more favourable and this facilitates conversion; but this requires testing.

Both in colonial and apartheid South Africa state, the government of the time held somewhat unsettling - if not anti-Semitic - views of Jews. In the post-apartheid South Africa, this is still that case. Although the Jewish community is fully entrenched in South Africa, as a result of Israeli politics and the community's defensive stance towards Israel, the Jewish community feels that anti-Semitic sentiments are rising (see the following articles in SA Jewish Report). Nonetheless, Anne felt that overall the attitudes and visibility of religious Jews today makes people more accepting. She also felt that the post-apartheid environment impacted on attitudes towards the 'other':

There is so much more tolerance in 2013 than there was in 1980's, 1970's, 1960's. There is so much more tolerance and appreciation for other people, for who they are, and acceptance of other people for who and what they are. Yes there is a lot of anti-semitism. You can't get away from it but I do believe we don't see the anti-semitism in South Africa that they see in England and France and Belgium and in the European countries. We really don't see it. We are very protected (Elizabeth, ethnic convert).

However, the softening of attitudes towards Jews could be related more to the post-modern, multicultural nature of the globalised world that privileges openness to all people rather than group barriers. It may also be attributed in part to the American Christian Fundamentalist movements that see Jews as the chosen people and support the establishment

of Jews in the belief that it hasten the coming of the Messiah (see the Price of Everything). These ideas would need to be explored further in separate studies.

5.8 Empathy

It is argued by some (Ben-Rafael, 2002) that the Holocaust has become a part of Jewish identity in the 20th century. One rabbi raised the issue of the Holocaust as a catalyst for conversion in that it created a situation in which people empathised with the suffering of Jews and made them more favourably inclined towards them. However, this reason did not seem to surface in this study across any of the categories. In the interviews conducted, only one convert raised how empathy with Holocaust suffering formed part of her attraction to Jews. The quotations below shows how she had already started to identify with Jews long before she met her husband.

I knew that there were Jewish people and as I got older I became more aware. Also my parents were like just post war generation so you heard about the Second World War; about the concentration camps; about the destruction of the Jewish people and it peaked my interest and I started reading about it. I read everything I could lay my hands on about what happened to the Jews during the Second World War and I'd say by the time I was in Standard 8 I almost knew in my heart of hearts that I would be Jewish one day. It was before I met my husband and before I had actually become friends with any Jewish people – I knew that I wasn't where I belonged...

What I was reading and I don't know I just found like a connection... there was a connection. It is not like you'd say gosh I would like to be a Jew because bad things happen to Jews generally, but there was this connection and I just knew. I remember telling my mom the one day and she said don't talk nonsense. My mother has no time for airy fairy stuff. That is how I sort of... I just knew there was a connection (Leigh, ethnic convert)

What is interesting is that even empathy is linked to identity and belonging and a feeling or perception of having been in the wrong place and the need to find a place to belong is discussed further in Chapter 7.

5.9 Conclusion

The discussions of the facilitating factors of conversion show that internally the Jewish community has not really changed much. Although the community may have become more

religious (in other words, strengthened their ethnic borders and content), they remain against intermarriage although they are more accepting of conversion. Externally to the Jewish community, however, much has changed (this is also why the Jewish community has pushed back its boundaries - the imagined community). Outside the community, an environment has been created where authority and people have changed and the environment facilitates more questioning. Converts are looking for something more stable - hence their attraction to the Jewish community that appears firm against rapid transitions in the social environment. Spiritual converts find answers to their questions and ethnic converts avoid heartbreak and move into strong family networks. The facilitators outside the community are important for converts moving into the community.

Chapter 6: Conversion as belonging and its politics

6.1 Introduction

This chapter discusses the reasons for conversion that ethnic and spiritual converts provide. As noted in the previous chapter, some facilitatory factors and push factors feed link strongly with the reasons. The findings show that the primary driver for conversion is to achieve belonging. As identity changes, or is impacted upon by the facilitatory factors, the sense of belonging is uprooted. Identity is important to establishing a sense of belonging, and therefore the particular identifications one attaches to either enhances or diminishes the sense of belonging. This chapter shows that identity and identifications are very closely aligned to belonging and the action in achieving belonging. With belonging also comes the politics of belonging. Unintentionally, the converts (all) become active agents in the politics of belonging.

6.2 Terminology

Before discussing each of the above facilitators and reasons, as a general introductory note, a few observations are made about the reasons that converts provide regarding their conversion.

Although the literature (and rabbis) identify two categories of converts in a clear cut way (with ulterior motive and without ulterior motive), it is difficult to speak about the reasons for conversion as if they were polarised, separate and mutually-exclusive reasons. At the outset, they can be overlapping at any given point in time during the conversion process for some converts. This is especially true for ethnic converts although not always. Although the terms ethnic converts and spiritual converts have been used, these are ideal-types for analytical purposes. In reality they are not clear cut and motives for conversion overlap, namely, to become part of an ethnic group AND religion.

Four converts who fell into the overlapping zone between marriage and religion. One convert had come to Judaism for spiritual reasons without a partner, and along the way gained a partner whom she married immediately after her conversion. For another convert, although she came to Judaism through her partner (to whom she was engaged), the spiritual aspect of the religion was more important to her in conversion than the marriage. Two other converts

came for marriage but later felt that the spiritual aspects needed to be elevated too. The remainder of the ethnic converts, although had not been seeking religion per se, had accepted "becoming religious" (in varying degrees) and believed it was important to their integration and acceptance.

Examples are presented below. One convert clearly articulated how the emphasis of her conversion changed over time as her relationship with her partner changed and how that resulted in making the spiritual aspect more important:

As I travelled the journey, that [conversion for marriage] got very hazy as a motivation although the seed was there. Then other things started to come in so yes, of course he's factored in but not... it wasn't with absolute clarity throughout the process and certainly by the time I decided to convert, that [marriage] wasn't the primary seed in the forefront of my mind because I didn't even know if I was going to marry him. Honestly, I didn't know – our relationship had broken down so much (Stella, ethnic & spiritual convert)

Stella shows how the decision to convert is not straightforward - that when the notion of conversion for marriage, the 'seed' is planted, this was not in itself enough. In the end she needed to convert for other reasons too. The reasons to convert therefore are not so clear cut, distinguishable and straightforward. Another example of how the reasons for conversion converge or overlap is clearly communicated in a statement made by Savannah and Rachel. Savannah (like a number of other converts) came to convert for marriage, but she felt that connecting with the religion was more important to her. Savannah described her parents as 'born again' Christians, fundamentalists; she came from a strictly Catholic upbringing and attended convents during her schooling. She had maintained her Catholic practices and beliefs well into adulthood. Her answer to those who asked her whether she was converting for marriage was:

I said, you know, I have explained to you what a religious upbringing I have had and how important it is to me. I said, you know, when you come from that perspective you don't change your faith because of a man. You know what I'm saying? You can't. I needed to be sure that I was doing the right thing for my soul or that I was finding a way of relating to the Divine that worked for me and made sense. That is the thing. Whenever people say oh, so you are going to convert and you and Peter will get married. I am like, do you think I would *magay* [Yiddish word for convert] for this agnostic?

Savannah's answer encapsulates what many other ethnic converts felt, especially those from a religious background (whether or not they practised as adults): a religious connection was as necessary for their conversion as those who converted for religious reasons. Rachel, who also came from a Catholic background, highlighted the same sentiment:

You know, it was really my own conviction. I wouldn't have done it for somebody else. I mean, I can see the merit of doing it for someone else to create a cohesive family and I can see the merit of that. At that time I was like I wouldn't do this for you. Something spiritual has to be for myself, I have to feel it. I wouldn't go and do it just because.

From Savannah and Rachel's perspectives, it was paramount that the religion they adopted encompassed a set of beliefs that cohered with their upbringing and sense of ethics. The same applied to others, such as Hadassah, who did not come from a religious background and who knew nothing of Judaism initially. Her reasons for conversion, although first through marriage, came to converge too:

My husband said would I convert and I went and studied...and went absolutely mad about it [Judaism] and absolutely loved it. I quite liked the family unit and just all the sort of how you live by what kind of standards and that kind of thing. It all just appealed to me on a self-help kind of basis, never mind the religion, which I found really interesting.

Thus, categorising converts into marital and religious or ulterior or no ulterior motive underplays or denies the possibility that these two polarised reasons for conversion often converge in the experience of converts. Thus, while for analytical reasons, ethnic converts and spiritual converts are treated separately, their reasons for conversion are not mutually exclusive but are connected - although they may differ in expression.

Furthermore, what will become apparent in the current chapter is that the factors that influence the decision to convert are not only multiple and dynamic but they are also a result of a series of interconnected events. The decision process occurs over a protracted period of time, either during a relationship, or during a search for a new way of life or belief system. Often the decision is not made in isolation - but usually with a partner. This is true for couples and families (regardless of motivation) who want to convert. Although only one person of a unit (couple or family) was interviewed for the study, that person always spoke about a reciprocal influence on/from the other in the decision to convert. Because most of the conversions took place in an established relationship framework (couples or families), the decision to convert was not solely an individual decision.

Finally, the decision to convert culminates from the environmental facilitators (also conceptualised as push and pull factors), the actual reasons and usually also a trigger event. The trigger events, which are not discussed further in this study, are not the defining reason for conversion, but the overarching need that pushes the convert to action. Trigger events include divorce, death of a family member (such as a parent or spouse), and a near death experience, a moment of realisation triggered by a statement or even the discovery of a new religious culture through books such as a recipe book.

Both sets of converts were clear about why conversion was important to them and why they felt conversion was necessary. They provided many reasons that can be grouped into either creating or finding a sense of belonging for themselves, and/or concretising an emerging identity as part of broader process of the life.

6.3 Belonging

A sociological perspective on belonging focuses on “the different ways in which people belong to collectivities and states, as well as the social, economic and political effects of moments when such belongings are displaced as a result of industrialisation and/or migration” (Yuval-Davis, 2006:198). This study asserts that belonging may also be displaced by political change such as change in authority structures and political systems. In exploring belonging, however, a distinction is drawn in the literature between belonging and the politics of belonging. Belonging can be said to be an emotional attachment and a feeling of being ‘at home’ based on one’s social location (comprising of gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality and so on), individual and collective identifications and emotional attachments (as expressed in individual narratives), and ethical and political values (Yuval-Davis, 2006). Belonging is often caught up in the politics of belonging. The politics of belonging can be described as being concerned with the “maintenance and reproduction of the boundaries of the community of belonging...that separate the world population into ‘us’ and ‘them’” (Yuval Davis, 2006:204). Communities of belonging are derived from Benedict Andersen’s conceptualisation of nations as imagined communities. Belonging was first used in the context of the relation between citizen and the state. It not only includes the imagination of who belongs now, but also includes former and future generations (Yuval-Davis, 2006:204). However, the idea of imagined communities has been applied to other social arenas. It is argued by that belonging need not be defined only in relation to citizenship in a state. For example, Castells (2010) argues that belonging in contemporary societies, viewed as network societies, moves from the nation states to what he refers to as “reconstructed defensive identity communities”. The politics of

belonging in the context of reconstructed defensive identity communities would involve creating and maintaining the boundaries around such communities. The politics of belonging comprises three key elements:

- "Potentially meeting other people and deciding whether they stand inside or outside the imaginary boundary line of the nation and/or other communities of belonging, whether they are "us" or "them" (Yuval-Davis, 2006:204).
- involves "hegemonic political powers", such as the Orthodox Beth Din, but also "contestation and challenge [of the boundaries] by other political agents" (Yuval Davis, 2006:205) such as converts and those community members who are outside the Orthodox fold.
- "struggles around the determination of what is involved in belonging, in being a member of a community, and of what roles specific social locations and specific narratives of identity play in this" (Yuval Davis, 2006:205)

All converts across the categories spoke about wanting to achieve belonging through their conversion (and some for their future generations). However, the reasons for seeking belonging emerged from differing places and for different reasons. In speaking about wanting to convert, ethnic converts demonstrated a concern for belonging; spiritual converts (made up of mostly Afrikaner converts) appeared to be engaged in the politics of belonging. A comparison of reasons given by converts in deciding to convert indicates this difference in the quest for belonging as discussed below.

At the outset, ethnic converts were not actively seeking to belong to anything new. Only when conversion was presented as a criteria for marriage did it become relevant. There was an awareness that their relationships were outside of their partner's social circles and to be accepted into their partner's social world was important to both. In many cases, exposure to the partner's Jewish social space had either been limited, exclusionary or distant. In most cases (apart from a few of the Catholic women) the converts were also outside of any religious communal structures. Like their partners, they were generally not practising their religion. This meant that when conversion for marriage was raised, there was space in their lives to take on something more. So when relationships were to become more formalised through marriage, acceptance became important at personal and communal levels. At a personal level, it was to feel that their relationship - and that they - were acceptable. Acceptance was important to avoid being the outsider and therefore to be part of something from which they were already socially excluded. Converting would mean leaving the periphery - the outside status - and moving into the core, essentially becoming an insider.

It was something that I felt was important. I was somewhat an outsider to the broader family....I was clearly an outsider in that scenario [a situation in which she was repeatedly excluded from a religious ritual at a family occasion], I was clearly an outsider. (Ava, ethnic convert)

Conversion was also important to forge unity and a common identity in their marriage and the family they would create together. The ethnic converts' sense of belonging and their ability to feel 'at home' at a social level, through marriage and family, relied on being accepted by the partner's family and extended social networks, such as friendship groups. The stage of their life-cycle - marriage and childbearing - was relevant therefore to their conversion.

I suppose in a way it is kind of acceptance because I found that even when I was in the process of converting and we would go out or would speak to people there was a sense of I'm not acceptable yet, but I will be. Maybe it was coming from me but there was a level... and that almost... for both of us, for Grant and I, that he would be marrying out or have married out and I would be that person. It's a horrible thought that. (Cathy, ethnic convert)

Acceptance. Firstly I couldn't marry or be with my then boyfriend. He wasn't willing to accept me as a Christian. I think that is what it boiled down to. He would only accept me [if I was Jewish]... and he wouldn't introduce me to his family or anything like that...If I didn't convert, he wouldn't be with me and I think at that point that is all I wanted to do. I just wanted to be with him. I wanted to get married to him and I wanted to have a family with him. Without converting I wouldn't have had any of that. (Lynn, ethnic convert)

The converts also felt that conversion would be important for their (future) children in that a common sense of belonging within the family - and therefore unity - would be achieved. Their reason for conversion was to attach a single and unified structure and identity to their relationship and families. This status was important for securing an identity and belonging important for children and for their future.

Well after having a son with Jarred and deciding to make a life together we decided it was the best thing to do...especially for my son because we wanted him to be brought up being Jewish. Obviously having that whole... having a sense of belonging and Jarred [husband] definitely wanted it. (Gloria, ethnic convert)

I kind of...[said] yes I'll go somewhere with you; I'll change my name thinking how hard can a conversion be? Then kind of a few months down the line when

we were talking about having children, because we both wanted children, I really felt that it would be to our children's benefit to have one religion in our home. If I think back now I think that if we didn't have children I don't think I would have converted. That is after knowing what the process was all about (Lynn, ethnic convert).

The concern was to achieve family consistency and identity for children so that the children could belong and enjoy an unquestionable place in the community (for this reason Orthodox was also chosen) and to avoid the confusion of contradictory, multiple belongings which could result in exclusions. It was also to avoid dual loyalties which again can result in confusing contradictions and exclusions in one community or both. One convert relayed a scenario where the requirement for family unity was laid bare to the Beth Din:

There was another conversion case that I know. This Afrikaans girl actually went to the *Beit Din* and said to them I have been brought up as a Christian and I am very happy to be Christian. I am not going to convert because I believe in Christianity but I am prepared to convert because I believe that we need one religion and need to raise our kids in one way so whatever you tell me to do I will do it. It is an amazing thing and they did convert her on that basis which is very interesting. (Rachel, ethnic convert)

Another convert spoke about the asymmetries in her family as a result of living with two religions and how that became the reason for wanting to convert:

I met my husband. We got married. I had children. I wasn't prepared to convert. Then the one day my eldest son came home singing Christmas carols and I decided that was not acceptable because Gerald had a much more... his history was a lot better and he had been brought up with this history and this way of life. I decided that rather... I also always had this thing that I was missing out somewhere along the line so I decided I didn't want my children to feel left out, but I didn't want them to come home with the happy-clappy stuff that they were getting at nursery school so we decided to convert. (Sadie, ethnic convert)

Apart from not wanting her children to be excluded, from wanting them to belong, and to have family consistency in values and upbringing, Sadie felt that her history and upbringing was not as significant and valuable as her husband's. Tradition and a traditional way of life was more important than the more modern "happy-clappy stuff". This indicates an identification with collective identities based on traditional ways. Tradition is considered to be more wholesome, richer and a connection to the past seems to be more valued.

The impetus for identity and family consistency also sometimes came from children after having been exposed to the Jewish family environment:

When we moved here [to Johannesburg] we stayed in Sydenham area so it was right in the middle [of the Jewish neighbourhood] and we were invited for *Shabbat* obviously to his [her husband's] family and also friends. We stayed right next to the shul in 12th Avenue, right behind it. He loved it and the kids loved it. One day the oldest one said, 'Mom, I want to be a good Jew' and then of course you are involved in it and that just grew on me and grew on me. When we moved to Bramley we were having a discussion with his [her husband's] other brother and we were talking about it and I said you know, I actually like what I see. I love it – the *Shabbat* makes a lot of sense and it is so beautiful and I think I want to convert. That is when we started to enquire about it. (Susanne, ethnic and spiritual convert)

Similarly, another spoke of how her daughter, who had grown up in a Jewish environment, had propelled her mother to convert:

She [daughter] came home one day, she must have been six, and she said to Roland, Daddy, how come Mommy is different to you and me? So I was in the other room but I could hear it. He said to her, What do you mean? She said, How come you and me are Jewish and mommy is not? Ooh. So I had to then explain to her well I am not because I was not born Jewish so I am not Jewish and you are not really either, but you can be if you want to be. She said she does want to be and she is. So I said, Well, okay, you can be Jewish but when you are bigger you are going to have to do something to make you properly Jewish. You see she had felt that all along so from there on I said, Well, should I? Will it make it easier for her? blah-blah-blah. (Vicky, ethnic convert)

In addition to the above factors, after conversion, becoming part of a community and belonging to a broader community, was also attractive:

You become part of a community which is great. The Jewish community is a wonderful community to belong to and that sense of community and family and that which we do already have in a Portuguese... it was just a continuation of what I was used to so maybe we find it easier because we come from that continental background. It is more the traditional things that are important for me. (Gloria, ethnic convert)

I just think belonging to the community. It is nice to feel like you belong somewhere and I adore my community or our community. I have such lovely friends in the community. I am absolutely mad about it. (Hadassah, ethnic convert)

When asked why she needed to convert. Stella answered that she wanted:

...a sense of belonging...Communally because I saw what a tight knit, almost insular community. (Stella ethnic & spiritual convert)

Among the ethnic converts interviewed, in coming to the realisation that they were looking for belonging, they also concluded that belonging to Orthodox Judaism was important to them. Five reasons can be found to explain their election of Orthodox Judaism, which was seen to be the longest and most difficult route to becoming Jewish. Firstly, conversion took place in Orthodoxy because it was the affiliation that the partner was born into. Secondly, there was a lack of awareness of what it entailed. Thirdly, a concern for children's future belonging and identity meant that it was necessary. Fourthly, the convert wished to avoid marginalisation in the broader community as an individual and for the sake of his/her children. Finally, the principles of Orthodoxy were considered to be more solid than what Christian religion had become and therefore, preferable to the converts. The first, second and fifth reasons relate to individual and collective identifications and ethical values. The third and fourth reasons are related to the divisions in the community between Orthodox and Reform. Each reason is discussed below.

In the first instance, for most it was a natural extension of a decision to convert since the partners were affiliated with or loosely part of the Orthodox community. Because their husbands (or wives) were affiliated to Orthodox Judaism (even if most were not practising), it was important to them to remain affiliated to Orthodox Judaism. Thus, this is where conversion took place. As Anne explained to the rabbis who questioned her, "I said the person that I am in love with is an Orthodox Jew...Aaron was Orthodox. He was never ever Reform". Converts realised that their partners would not abandon their religion even if they were non-practising because it was part of their ethnic consciousness and identity. The couples also knew that not converting would place them both at the margins of the broader Jewish community, which was defined largely in Orthodox terms. Ethnic converts were therefore led by their partners' existing affiliation with Orthodoxy and their wish to remain affiliated.

The second reason is that up until the time that marriage became imminent, ethnic converts had never explored conversion and did not know what it entailed. Because neither were generally involved in religious activities, they were unaware or only partially aware of what Jewish Orthodox conversion required as evident in the following testimonies: "I said I would convert because I had no idea what it entailed." (Lynn, ethnic convert); another said "In fact I knew nothing about it [conversion] and he [her husband] didn't know much either" (Rebecca, ethnic convert). Despite not knowing much about conversion at the outset, they were willing to convert to embrace their partner's wishes and secure a place for themselves within a framework they felt would be beneficial to them, their marriage and their children.

This point confirms the discussion in 6.2: ignorance of the religion and conversion meant that converts were more open to exploring it.

Thirdly, even if it was a harder process to be involved in, the difficulty would be at the beginning of the couple's life together but the advantage would yield longer term benefits for them and their children in terms of belonging and acceptance. Very few converts in the entire sample bothered to research Reform Judaism, to find out what it entailed and how it differed to Orthodoxy. They unquestioningly accepted the common perception among Orthodox Jews that it was "not authentic" and their decision was made on concerns for inclusion, rather than the alignment of ideological values and interests. They chose Orthodox and not Reform to avoid having to deal with marginalisation as a result of the divisions within the community between Orthodox and Reform. Converts had seen the challenges that Reform converts and their children faced in a heavily dominated Orthodox community (some had prior converted Reform or Conservative and had experienced the challenges directly). They felt that if they were going to convert, it was important that they do it to a form of Judaism that would not be questionable. Thereby, they would avoid problems for themselves and their children later. That is why they chose to remain within Orthodoxy. They understood this crucial point and undergoing conversion to avoid exclusion meant that they and their children would avoid the same situation after conversion:

People said to me do it Reform it is so much easier and I thought what is the point because what if... I have these two girls and what if they meet somebody one day and then they actually find out they are not Jewish, and then the whole process starts [again]... just do it, get it done and finished. I've got...my sister-in-law's ex-husband married a woman, non-Jewish girl, and she converted Reform and they had two children and you know they are not Jewish. The one married out and the other married a guy from Australia but he is also Reform... you know their children are basically [not Jewish]... what if they meet somebody [Jewish] one day? Life is so complicated as it is you don't need the extra [complication]. That is what I decided. Already it [being a convert] was a problem. I knew from day one my daughters would never be able to marry a *Kohein* [Hebrew word for Cohen, or the priestly caste who is forbidden to marry a divorcee or convert] and I said to them from the time they were twelve and thirteen years old that whatever you do, if you meet a *Kohein*, and even if you think it could go somewhere, don't even go there because it is just going to cause heartbreak. (Leigh, ethnic convert)

I also think that if you choose to convert as a Reform Jew it is like a death sentence to your children. I think it is a very, very short sighted view and you only cause problems for those kids because they're neither fish nor fowl and it's the hardest life. They are brought up Jewish; they believe they are Jewish; they are doing everything Jewish and they come to get married and they say oh no but you can't. Or they're standing at the grave of a parent and they're told you can't say *Kaddish* [prayer for the departed]. Those are the tragic stories of children of reform converts. (Ava, ethnic convert)

[In making the decision of which route to go, Orthodox or Reform] Reform kept coming back to me – it is not recognised, it is not recognised. So you can do it but you are never going to be Jewish. You are going to get into a problem if you meet somebody who is Jewish who is Orthodox. You will never be allowed to be married officially and your kids will never be Jewish. So this was always like a fight, like a tug of war. (Taylor, father Jewish)

I didn't even know about it [Reform] until I was in the process...No it was actually somebody from Waverley Shul - her daughter-in-law's mother was converted in the Reform and that was how I got to know about it. Then I actually read a book related to that but not directly and I was quite shocked that I didn't know about it.

Moderator: So you have never met any other Reform Jews?

Respondent: No. Thank goodness. Why go through all of that... it is crazy.

Moderator: Are you saying because it is not accepted ultimately?

Respondent: Yes. (Susanne, ethnic and spiritual convert)

The marked lack of acceptance of Reform Judaism is evident in the words of an ethnic convert who equated Reform Judaism with 'marrying out' and saw it as a problem for the community. This quotation shows the politics of belonging - the boundary protection in which converts become involved and how much more important belonging is over the values espoused in the religion:

I have lots of friends who don't have a problem if you are Reform or not Reform or practice or not practice. I am quite strict about it. If you are going to do it you must do it properly.

Moderator: How did you know that Reform is not proper?

Respondent: I don't really know. I just knew it. I don't know how I knew. It wasn't really acceptable. I don't know. I still don't think it is acceptable. Somebody said to me the other day, what if Jess marries out? I would kill her. She would not be allowed to. I would rip my clothes and kick her out. I don't know. I feel that it is so important to keep the Jewish community going and really Reform or marrying... it is the funniest thing because Roland married out. I think it is something really to be guarded against. (Vicky, ethnic convert)

Fourth, some had previously chosen either Reform or Conservative conversions but divisions in the community along religious lines had proved problematic for them. Their non-Orthodox conversion had ramifications. The stratification in the religious sectors of Jews in Johannesburg affected their social integration into the community and created ambiguity in their identities. A feeling of remaining an outsider prevailed and provided impetus for Orthodox conversions at later stages of their lives. For example, Jonathan had married an Orthodox identified and affiliated Jewish woman. During his marriage he had converted to Conservative Judaism, which is not recognised by the Orthodox authorities and their communities. At that time, being Orthodox was not important to him, although his wife's identity and unity in family identity was, which is why he chose to convert in the first place. Also, since the Conservative community was a thriving community at the time of his conversion, Orthodoxy was not seen as the sole avenue into becoming Jewish and being part of the Jewish community. He and his wife had actively participated in the Conservative community, although rather sceptically by the wife, so the issue of belonging was not at that stage problematic. However, after the Conservative community started to dwindle, and support for the Conservative community had virtually collapsed, his wife returned to Orthodoxy where she felt more comfortable, became Orthodox observant, and he became somewhat of an outsider. Their marriage ended in divorce. His children, by then young adults, were strongly integrated into the Orthodox community and had themselves become observant Orthodox Jews. Jonathan felt in limbo, and as a result was searching for a place to belong, to have his identity accepted and to feel kindred with his children. He then embarked on an Orthodox conversion knowing that he wanted to live as a Jew.

I think it evolved over a period of time that the way I was living wasn't sustainable, wasn't right. If I want to be Jewish... if I want to associate... if I want to live a Jewish lifestyle then I needed a Jewish partner and I can't have a Jewish partner if I am not Jewish [even though he had already converted to Conservative Judaism]. That is kind of a contradiction. If I am going to date somebody that isn't Jewish then how Jewish is this? It was just a realisation that that is the path I want to go and the only way to go that way is to become Jewish...Not that I was looking for a wife. That wasn't my primary goal. It just seemed the

right thing to do on a practical level and I was nowhere in a church so I was like high and dry (Jonathan, ethnic covert).

Similar to Jonathan, Sadie first converted in a Reform shul but by a Conservative rabbi so she followed Judaism according to Conservative principles. After the rabbi left, she recounted how she did not fit into Reform and how her children were not considered to be Jewish in Orthodox circles. This pushed her to convert to Orthodox:

We stayed with Rabbi Wernick (Conservative Rabbi) until he left the country. Then we weren't Reform and we couldn't deal with the Reform so we started going to the Orthodox Shul...in Edenvale and that is when things started going a little bit haywire because then they tried to call the kids up to the *bimah* and Gerald [her husband] would say they can't go up because they are not Jewish. He is a very straight arrow so he didn't want to push any boundaries.

The two cases combined demonstrate how the dominance of the Orthodox community makes Orthodox conversion more salient to converts as it affects their integration into the community, their sense of belonging and their and their children's identity. This would apply only to converts who wanted to be part of the Jewish community. Again, this highlights the politics of belonging.

Finally, some ethnic converts especially those who had religious upbringings and/or whom held that religion was important in their lives, were attracted to the values espoused by Orthodoxy (as was already seen in the testimony of Kaylee). Interestingly, those ethnic converts who had grown up practising Catholicism found the values of Orthodoxy most appealing. Some had experienced Reform conversions but later had moved to Orthodoxy for a number of reasons already described above but also because they had come to a conclusion that Orthodox learning, community and values were closest to their upbringing. They could relate to stringent practices and to the discipline required in the religion. They could not relate to a religion that did not require much from one:

I realised very early on that... yes, as a feminist and stuff like that it [Reform] is nice, the whole egalitarian thing and... the concern for social justice and whatever. Those are some of the nice things about the Reform movement. But then I also thought you know if I think about my upbringing and the way that I was raised, I was raised like somebody from a *frumm* family. Dressing modestly, respect for parents. Not just pulling into church once a week but actually... you know. I grew up in a house where you say blessings before you eat dinner. Even after dinner my dad and my mom would take out the Bible and read something and we would pray or whatever. To me I was like, hmm... the way the Orthodox families work is a lot like how my own family is (Savannah, ethnic convert).

I knew some things about Reform - it was like very watered down and that it wasn't real. I wasn't into going into something which provided no challenges and it just sort of accommodated itself to what you wanted. That wasn't what I was looking for at all. I didn't want that at all. I didn't go there at all but I knew enough to know that it was not what I wanted (Rebecca ethnic convert).

One convert had explored Reform more thoroughly and found a combination of factors that pushed her from Reform to Orthodoxy. The Reform community in South Africa, whittled down to two campuses in Johannesburg, had like the Conservative stream become a fraction of what it once was. The community lacked resources and energy and this came through in Savannah's testimony. Without a "Reform bookstore in South Africa", her knowledge grew from reading books that she bought at an Orthodox bookstore so when she faced the Reform interpretations of particular issues, they felt deficient to her. Further, the Reform community was small, empty and unable to keep its members and offer spiritual growth. They offered a poorly conceptualised conversion programme lacking in substance. These factors raised serious questions about the authenticity of Reform. The weak structure and organisation of the Reform community and its conversion programme ultimately pushed her away from Reform:

There are no young people in the Reform movement. People will come and they will study for *Bar/Bat Mitzvah* and that is the last you will see them. That is where their Jewish education ends. Then you end up with people who are forty/fifty or whatever and their approach to their faith or towards Jewish tradition is on the same level they had as a 12 or 13 year old going for *Bar/Bat Mitzvah*. So it is like how are you really evolving spiritually and growing?

A few months ago I said I actually just want to go say hi [to her friends at the Reform synagogue]...I didn't see a single person that was in the [conversion] class with me. It started out as a class of thirty. The people that finished the process or whatever it was went and got married and have never been seen again. I mean it made me question. If something is really worthwhile and really worth having even if it is difficult you will pull yourself up by your bootstraps and you will do it. I mean I just thought what is the substance of this Reform philosophy that it is not compelling to people? That people think it is the same thing as like oh I want to look punk rock today, hey I will go to Sandton City and buy a leather jacket, like it is something you can take on and off like clothing. I knew that it meant a lot more to me. Then I just realised that the direction I was going in I wanted to be kosher. I wanted to have children and raise them like the proper... well, the Orthodox way

About the programme offering she indicated her disappointment:

I wanted to learn the basics. I said I will look at the other questions later on. I just want to know what a Jew has always done and why and how. There was none of that. I've spent all my money at the *Kollel* [name of an Orthodox] bookstore. That is how I taught myself everything, largely...

Then:

...They [at the Reform synagogue] changed *Siddurs* [prayer books]...Now the intriguing thing about it is that it is transliterated which is great...Then on every alternate page there would be some absolutely horrible cheesy, New Age kind of poem or something from a Buddhist teaching. People don't know anything about the Bible but we are bringing in Buddhist teachings and we are putting them in the *Siddur*! Then they used to do this thing which they call a Torah Breakfast where we would have somebody come and have a chat on a *Shabbat* morning because the service starts at 10h00. I would get up and be there at 08h30 or whatever and the one day they had [a speaker]. The reason they brought her in was to speak about how she rejected Judaism [and went to live in a Hare Krishna temple which she had abandoned before speaking about Jewish identity at the breakfast]... I was like why are they bringing in somebody who rejected her Jewish upbringing and is actually involved in *Avodah Zeirah* [Hebrew word for idol worship] and they are bringing in this woman? I am like how does this enhance... I just said I don't know what the hell is going on here. If I wanted to be a New Age hippie I could have stayed in Cape Town and wear tie-dye and my crystals and spend every weekend going to like... I just thought... I don't know, after a while I was experiencing such a bad cognitive dissonance. I thought to myself, what am I doing here? (Savannah, ethnic convert)

She raised another example that confirmed her doubts about the Reform Movement. She had reached the point of *mikveh* (to make her conversion official). However, the manner in which it was suggested was the final straw that pushed her away:

Eventually the [Reform] rabbi was like no you need to come and see me. I said to him okay what is going to happen now if I do come before the Reform *Beit Din*? Can I immerse and stuff like that? [He replied] We will borrow somebody's swimming pool. I was like hmm that sounds a little bit Fong Kong. That is Fong Kong! I already knew what a *mikveh* should be... Peter ended up going to professionals Midrash [an Orthodox religious learning programme] at Ohr Sameach... and in fact he had done stuff about the *mikveh* and... so already I knew all of this [about the *mikveh*] because I'd sit with him and learn with him. I said to the rabbi I actually can't do this. I can't bullshit myself that going and

diving into somebody's swimming pool is going to make me Jewish... because now this is so far a departure from what I know and what is actually the traditional way... in fact, whatever, it is a farce. He [the rabbi] was very disappointed.

Her experience in the Reform synagogue led Savannah to the conclusion that Reform Judaism did not offer direction, consistent substance, growth and a meaningful place to belong⁸³. This is evident in Savannah's comment that she wants to raise her children "Jewishly", the "proper way" and her experiences so far had indicated that Reform was not proper. What appears to be evident in Savannah's testimony is that the Reform community's practices were viewed as inauthentic and that the community itself was unable to retain new members.

What is clear from the ethnic converts' reasons for conversion and for selecting Orthodox Judaism is that multiple reasons for conversion operate that are interconnected and often overlap. Their combined testimonies go beyond marriage alone and are driven by immediate and future concerns around self, children and inclusion into the community. All the examples above ultimately show, that although conversion is taking place to avoid being the outsider, it is also to achieve acceptance, unity, and common identity, belonging (belonging to something 'real'). The feeling of 'being at home' comes through in a deep concern for wanting to be accepted by the partner's family, friends and community, of wanting to fit in and create a marriage and family that will enjoy acceptance within their extended family and the Jewish world. Marriage without conversion meant that ethnic converts would be connected to the Jewish world but they remain on the outside. Therefore they convert so as to achieve an inclusion that would otherwise be lacking. This inclusion is manifested in a sense of belonging for themselves and for their children. Ethnic converts are not converting because they have experienced exclusion from their own families and friends. Rather, it is to gain inclusion into an area of the social world they are automatically excluded from because of their religious background and identities and because of their gender (since Jewish identity is matrilineally determined). It is a part of the social world they will become connected to through marriage, but cannot be part of until they convert; for this reason Orthodox conversion was important to them too. They did not want to have to deal with exclusion again later by making what they perceive to be the wrong choice about which form of Judaism to convert to. Belonging and acceptance in community for self and children was extremely important in achieving a coherent, unambiguous and unquestionable place in life. Thus, conversion and conversion to Orthodox Judaism was necessary.

⁸³ Savannah's feedback is testimony of the "mistakes" and "failures" of Reform, as discussed by Alexander (2012) in section 4.3 (see footnote 46).

It has been demonstrated that belonging for ethnic converts was an emotional attachment (wanting their personhood, marriage and family to be accepted) and emerges from the convert's gender, age and religious background. However, in accepting the hegemonic authority of the Beth Din and the social norms regarding communal acceptance, ethnic converts also enter into the politics of belonging as they become involved in activities that sustain the boundaries between what they believe is 'authentic' Jews and Judaism and 'other' Jews and Judaism. By accepting Orthodox principles, ethnic converts were also involved in politics of belonging in drawing boundaries between Orthodox and Reform - between Jew and non-Jew. In this way, they were similar to the spiritual converts.

Spiritual converts also wanted belonging in a place that felt right / good but their actions indicated that they were more actively part of the process of a politics of belonging although in different ways. All except two ethnic converts in this sample were married and had children at the time of their conversion. The skew shows that like the ethnic converts, conversion implicated their marriages and families (children). Conversion was as much a personal issue as it was an interpersonal issue, and so integration of identity and belonging had to be achieved at the individual and group level simultaneously so that marriages and families remained intact - although not all did. Some marriages ended in divorce, others converted under strain, and in some, parents and older teenage children or young adult children took different spiritual paths. Since the interviews include mostly Afrikaners (the dominant group of converts in the spiritual category), their narratives tend to dominate the explanations for belonging. Their reasons are, however, parallel to those of the black converts in this sample.

The conversions of the spiritual converts, defined mostly by the Afrikaner families, involved a sense of loss of stable boundaries and a decentering of identity in the post-apartheid environment which pushed them out of their old familiar environment towards something new. Afrikaner identities during apartheid could be said to have been centred on the Afrikaner church, the volk and Afrikaner nationalism (although less so towards the demise of apartheid). In post-apartheid South Africa, this was no longer true. In that sense, they found their identities to have been de-centred as they were relegated to the periphery. At the same time, their former tight-knit communities had, in their view, lost their values and also were disintegrating. From their perspective, the Afrikaner Christian communities were seen to have become contradictory in terms of their original teachings the way they were remembered. As a result of a number of factors linked to the Afrikaner Church and Christianity, Afrikaners felt that their former moral frameworks were disintegrating and needed to be replaced. The Church had given them a 'truth' to which unquestionable submission and loyalty was required,

a truth strongly guarded by the leaders in the Church and the State. This contained a set of narratives which became undermined as power began to shift and as an awareness of a flawed set of practices, logic and set of meanings started to emerge. Democracy opened channels (formal and informal) that proved their truth to be false. As churches realised that their power was dissipating, they sought to cling to their congregations, and the narratives started changing. Churches had become crowd-pleasers in their view. For the Afrikaner and black spiritual converts, truth could not be fluid, could not change and take different meanings at different times. Their belief was that the word of God is unalterable, fixed, unbending. If a religious institution can mould it to their purposes, it is not the word of God and the institution is corrupt.

Christianity is a changing religion all the time. It is not rigid. It is changing all the time to accommodate and to get more people into the church. It is not stable.
(Dinah, spiritual convert)

Matters that had been absolute and those that had been unacceptable were becoming variable and acceptable and so boundaries were contradictory and changing as illustrated in the following exchange.

Respondent 1 (Wife): I think what is happening in the churches now is the churches are changing to accommodate people; to accommodate people's whims. Now even homosexuality is fine in the church. Everything that the people want is fine and the church changes according to the people. That is not stability. That is not the foundation that the Afrikaners had.

Respondent 2 (Husband): That is why they are leaving the church in their droves. Churches are running empty.

Respondent 1 (Wife): The church is becoming people-pleasers. Somewhere along the line if you have a value system it starts clashing with the people-pleasers. Perhaps that is why a lot of people are searching and a lot of people are leaving...

Respondent 2 (Husband): That is why your staunch religious Afrikaner won't accept that the church now accommodates lesbianism and having gay ministers and gay whatever. They walk out. They get lost out there and where do they go? The churches are really losing... it is in the news... the churches are losing...

Respondent 1 (Wife): If you grow up with a value basis, value system and all of a sudden you see everything is changing you still have that yearning.

Respondent 2 (Husband): They compromise, compromise – sorry you can't. There are certain things you just can't compromise. The Torah is explicit about

these things - that is the law – they (gay people) should be stoned to death. Now he stands up in church and he wants to minister to you. No ways. (Dinah & Frederik, husband and wife, spiritual converts)

A religion that alters with the times exposes a lack of values and absence of truth and is flawed and without trustworthiness. A religion of this kind was problematic, highly unstable and undesirable and created insecurity. Boundaries had started shifting or falling away. Yet, converts still wanted boundaries and to feel safe within those boundaries. This was evident in an interview with a husband and wife:

Respondent 2 (Husband): Traditional Afrikaners have always been very conservative, disciplined and conservative.

Respondent 1 (Wife): Very conservative people all along. That is how you grew up. You were disciplined and had boundaries. You knew where you were going and you felt safe in that.

Respondent 2 (Husband): That is all gone.

Respondent 1 (Wife): It is not there.

If we can take a child [as an example]... if we don't give a child boundaries that child feels extremely unsafe and it becomes a rebellious child. That child doesn't know what is good for me and what is not good for me. What can I do and what can't I do because I can do everything. That is what Christianity to me is like. If you give your child boundaries the child feels safe within the boundaries. I know what I can, I know what I can't. Sometimes they try and push but they know there are boundaries and rules so they are safe within the rules. If I can compare the church – Christianity, there is no boundaries. Everything goes. It can't work. How can you be safe in such an environment? Whereas in Judaism there are boundaries and you can feel safe because you know where your boundaries are. (Dinah, spiritual converts)

Rules were boundaries but it was not enough to have stable and solid rules. There was a desire for more rules, not less, which create stronger boundaries and safety within those boundaries:

We are not going to do it [live] as Noahites [people who follow the laws of Noah rather than Judaism⁸⁴] because Noahites have seven laws and I want to be Jewish⁸⁵. I couldn't...from all the laws in Christianity, I couldn't go to less rules. I wanted more rules and I wanted to live Judaism out. (Sarit, spiritual convert)

Therefore, particular boundaries and rules defining those boundaries were important for a place of belonging and stability within that belonging. Lack of boundaries, lack of trustworthy and reliable rules produced a sense of homelessness - a sense of being in the world without consistent value definition, without trustworthy moral guidance and engendered a constant search for a place to fit in, be accepted and belong. In the Afrikaner churches and communities the boundaries were challenged. After having experienced contradictory information and unanswerable questions in the churches and communities in the post-apartheid environment, the liminal space they had found themselves in, where the truth was not defined socially but individually in conflict with their former normative environments and without a moral framework to connect to, they wanted to move into something contained by stable boundaries. This would be where they could feel comfortable: somewhere rational and unbending, accepted and where they would be included because their ideas would be the same. They needed to feel that the conclusions they had reached had support and were commonly held. Their identities were already at odds with their former communities and they had already been excluded from the communities by the time they were converting:

Well, we knew when we started the conversion process that it would be better to be in the [Jewish] community so we had to move. The children actually moved before us because the [Afrikaner] school started giving them hard times because they in their classes... they have one period a week where they've got Bible study and they were talking about their way and they would say the Torah says and actually they started telling them they are not allowed to come in they have to wait outside and then the headmaster wanted to know why are these two girls playing outside and not in classes. He didn't phone me at all he just called them up to the stage in assembly on the Friday morning and he said these two girls have made the example - you are not allowed to play outside when it is the period of Bible studies you have to be in there. They didn't ask the teachers why

⁸⁴ Usually referred to as Noahides.

⁸⁵ The Noahide Laws refer to "God's covenant with Noah in the aftermath of the Flood, [wherein] the Creator extracts certain promises from Noah" (Robinson, 2001:177). Following from this, there is a principle in Judaism that if a non-Jew wants to observe the Torah, they can do so by following the seven laws of Noah. In this way, they maintain the same ethical principles as Jews but remain non-Jewish. As seen in the above quotation, this is dissatisfactory for Afrikaner converts who feel the only way to live ethically is to be a Jew, and therefore living as a Noahide is deficient.

the girls weren't in the classroom. I just decided back then I am not going to fight them I am just taking my kids out and I put them in where they belong. They didn't feel like they belonged so I promise you I think the hardest thing for me was to really just trust in *Hashem* [Hebrew word for one of the names of God] that this is the best thing to do for them. (Naamah, spiritual convert)

Some described themselves as misfits in the own cultures in the first place:

I think if I look back at it, I was always on the line, I was the insider-outsider. Nobody could really take issue with me because academically I did very well, and I did respectable things like I was on the SRC whatever so I had status positions but on the other hand I had these thoughts that just like not gel, and so it was a bit of that, it was that inside-outside thing, I just didn't fit in. I didn't fit in on either side... So I think in terms of that dislocation...and I really at the time because of political reasons I felt that everything that was Afrikaans and traditionally Afrikaans I found despicable. So it was very easy at the time in history to make the transition because I didn't feel that I want to be identified with being Afrikaans and being an Afrikaner and so it was actually probably if you want to say, that facilitated that transition very easily. (Riette, spiritual and ethnic convert)

Riette continued:

It was very easy at the time in [personal and political] history to make the transition [to Judaism] because I didn't feel that I want to be identified with being Afrikaans and being an Afrikaner, and so it was actually probably if you want to say, that facilitated that transition very easily. But then on the other hand in terms of making the transition...

Riette raises a different issue relating to belonging. Like others, she questioned church doctrines but mostly she understood her Afrikaner identity to be problematic. She refers to a "dislocated Afrikaner identity" in the post-apartheid environment that is evident in the narratives of many Afrikaner converts who wanted to disassociate with their identity and seek a new place for themselves to belong. She explained further:

So there was a form of dislocation and I think that I protested in many ways against what it means to be Afrikaans. I protested by, at some point, I think this Coloured, he wasn't my boyfriend boyfriend, but I was on the SRC and I chose this Coloured guy to come with me to the annual concert of the rector, just to, well to make a point in a way and at that point, went to ANC meetings and whatever and in that sense the set up at RAU it was like a very radical thing to do. I think I was the only SRC member with the ANC thing on my blazer at the time. I organised the first and got approved the first protest march at RAU when

I was on the SRC so I had a huge fall out. I was sitting as a SRC member, I was sitting on the committee that was dealing with the transformation of the university, and there was a debate about opening up the hostels and I was kicked off the committee because my views were too radical. So in that sense, there was a, I think if I look back at it, I was always on the line, I was the insider-outsider, nobody could really take issue with me because academically I did very well, and I did respectable things like I was on the SRC whatever so I had status positions but on the other hand I had these thoughts that just like not gel, and so it was a bit of that, it was that inside-outside thing, I just didn't fit in. I didn't fit in on either side.

The identity of the Afrikaner converts ultimately conflicted with the ideas of their church and the religions of their families. By forging a place for themselves going forward, they were searching for a type of belonging with which they were familiar. In the case of Riette, keeping in mind that her decision to convert could not be confined to one element, after a long process of intellectual searching, she met a religious Jewish woman who reminded her of grandmother. This made her feel emotionally secure as if she had found her home:

I did a case and the advocate - that was the advocate - was very *frumm*. She was Jewish and very *frumm* but we spoke to each other in Afrikaans because she comes from... I can't remember where... she comes from somewhere in the Platteland so she spoke Afrikaans. But there were two or three things that just made a huge impression on me. So here was the person I could totally relate to that spoke to me in Afrikaans and she spoke to me in Afrikaans about Judaism and she was very observant and she had a *sheitl* [wig] and she had a kosher home - everything - and that was my first introduction. And something that would have been totally foreign to me, like that, came in this person that I could relate to. And then the second thing that was that she had this unbelievable painting of *Har Sinai*⁸⁶ in her lounge and she started to explain to me the whole thing of all the souls that were there at *Har Sinai*. And then the third thing that was the most bizarre thing, she had exactly the same tablecloth and cut that my grandmother had. And if you look at her hands, the texture of her hands and even her face was exactly the same as my grandmother's so there was actually something that made it for me, and you know think it is nuts that you come to

⁸⁶ *Har Sinai* is the Hebrew term for Mount Sinai where Moses is said to have given the commandments to the Jewish people. Mount Sinai is symbolically relevant as the moment that Moses gave the commandments is said to be the moment when the Israelites became Jewish. This was a conversion in itself, and also that all the souls of Jews, whether incarnated or not, were present at the mountain - this is often offered as an explanation for the conversion - that the souls that were present at Mount Sinai are returning.

..There was things that just made me feel unbelievably at home and that immediately... her whole way, it activated me. That activated me.

Many other Afrikaner converts described a similar sense of going back to something familiar in their past. They described the belonging they were seeking as that which matched the practices of their Afrikaner forefathers, who derived their values from the Old Testament. This was seen as a link to their past. It meant they were going back to the truth - the Old Testament:

If I look back when I was a child my dad always talked about God and Genesis and he always talked about Noah and he always talked about Abraham. Those were the kinds of teachings I got. (Naamah, spiritual convert)

I think a lot of it perhaps... especially the older people in the Afrikaans community can remember they grew up... they didn't grow up with the New Testament they grew up with the Old Testament. Even in the Dutch Reformed every *Shabbat* they would read the Ten Commandments. You stood when they read the Ten Commandments and things like that. Your basis was more the Old Testament than the New Testament. (Dina, spiritual convert)

A lot of Afrikaans people are coming over to Judaism and there is a good reason for that. They couldn't find in their normal life what they want and if you start studying the Old Testament you can see the path to go especially the books of Moses and if you go further into the rest of the books you get your message. Every time I read a passage in the Bible I can read it tomorrow and experience a different message and that is what I started experiencing. With a lot of Afrikaans people I think it is the same. You don't get the same message all the time and when you get that message, you have to go for it. (Batsheva, spiritual convert)

I think it is the last days. I believe that the Afrikaners – their souls were on Mount Sinah [the mountain where Moses received the commandments] because all the nations were there and we choose in this life... we made a choice, maybe with different soul mates. Why the Afrikaner nation is... Afrikaner's come from a very religious background, very *frumm*. I grew up very *frumm*. When I grew up my mom and dad never used to talk about Jesus but God so we actually... the children made Jesus a God later on when we got married and got fanatical. (Sarit, spiritual convert)

I think a lot of it perhaps... especially the older people in the Afrikaans community can remember they grew up... they didn't grow up with the New Testament they grew up with the Old Testament. Even in the Dutch Reformed every *Shabbat* they would read the Ten Commandments. You stood when they read the Ten Commandments and things like that. Your basis was more the Old Testament than the New Testament. (Dinah, spiritual convert)

The choice for Orthodox Judaism is clear to spiritual converts (across all categories race and religious backgrounds). They are not looking for an easy way out. They had suffered and wanted truth and to feel that they had earned something valuable and built on their beliefs - something to stand out and be different from churches and their past:

Because we come out of a church and I didn't want to go into a church again. I wasn't going to make a change – such a big life altering change to just do it mediocre. I wasn't going to go to a church again.

Moderator: Had you explored Reform?

Respondent: No, I did not. Just the fact that the men and the women are together and all of that – for me it was a question of I am coming out of a church, to go to a church? If I listen to what the people say who go to the Reform church then I would have in any case somewhere along the line got to Orthodox because I don't think it would have been enough for me. (Dinah, spiritual convert.

No. I didn't know that exists until I met Tovah and that is where I heard about this Reform thing and I thought what is that? Actually as I said the first time I got knowledge of it when Tovah and they told me their story. I don't think I would have gone for it in any case. I think that is why maybe I didn't even know about it. I wouldn't of chosen it I don't think so. I am too much of a discipline person. It is not... I can't understand it. I don't know... you know what there are different ways for everybody and if that is the route they have to walk before they get... I know a lot of Reformed people who eventually went through normal [Orthodox] conversion. (Naamah, spiritual convert)

He said, Well now we need to make up our minds what are we going to do – reform or orthodox and the first thing we Googled was if you want to make *Aliyah* [Hebrew for immigration / 'return' to Israel] which one will they take – Reform or Orthodox? So we chose Orthodox and only later on, and this is what

a lot of our friends told us, because the teacher who taught us right in the beginning Hebrew was Reform. She told us you don't have to go through the whole Orthodox thing to become Jewish - just Reform - it is quick, quick, quick. When we told some of our friends they were shocked. Then my husband said no. We studied into because we learned... we actually started in Christianity with *Shabbat* – not putting on lights, doing this, doing this and Reform is doing all of that so eventually we could see the difference between them because we already started following *Shabbat* and put your lights on, your food is ready even in Christianity. *Baruch Hashem* [Thank God] we chose Orthodox. That wasn't difficult. I must say my son had a lot of input into it. He always tells me mom one day I will be blessed by *Hashem* [God] because I helped you because I Googled for this. (Sarit, spiritual convert)

We tried to convert during the time in Worcester because... well we phoned the conversion rabbi in Cape Town and they said they are not going to see us and we can't drive to them. The Reform Rabbi said you can come, you can come and drive. I said to my husband I can't drive on *Shabbat*. We haven't been driving for a year I am not driving. My husband wasn't very happy with me but we didn't do the conversion – we were accepted to do Reform, but we didn't. (Tovah, spiritual convert)

Did you ever explore Reform Judaism?

R: No. I asked Lewis about it and he told me there is that one and... I said why don't we go to that one it seems so much nicer and easy? I said as long as you don't eat meat and milk together you can still eat at a fish restaurant and you can eat meat so long as it is not pork or something like that. I can't remember... I said I think I like that one it is much easier, but no. I think I would still... I would wake up to that point that this is not it, it is not touching the spot. This life makes sense. It makes sense. Perfect sense. It is crazy but it makes perfect sense. (Irene, spiritual convert)

I didn't know about any other Judaism except Orthodox and if I had known about other Judaism I wouldn't have done it. I would have done it Orthodox still because for me I have to... I feel like you have to take it all on. It's all or nothing and I believe in taking the word from the Torah as it is and not making it convenient for me. Not that I probably would have tried to understand more about

the other forms of Judaism before I became Jewish, but I feel that I would have still gone Orthodox after learning the other ones. (Ester, spiritual convert)

People were asking me did you convert Reform or Orthodox? And I don't know very much about Reformed Judaism and there is the one that has female rabbis. For me I believe that we all have a role to play and you don't assume a role of another person and then in the Torah there was no rabbi who was female. There were prophets who were female. For me I believe that God says you are a woman and this is your role as a woman. Devorah was a woman – she was a prophet and she was a leader at the time but she was still advising the man who was carrying out everything that she couldn't do and then there was never any female priests that I've seen in the Torah so for me I feel like women wanting to be rabbi's is like feminism – it's like you know, you can't tell me I can't be this because you can be that. I believe that we have – as women – we have a very special role; a higher role than men. They do all these things but in a way – like the prayer says you've made me according to your will – we are much closer to God spiritually and we don't need to do much in order to feel that we are.

So for me I feel like the forms of Judaism that puts women in leadership roles as Rabbi's – I don't understand it when a woman would have to wear a *kippah* and a *tzitzit*, I don't understand it. I don't but then you know what they have their reasons and I don't know those reasons and I don't have a reason yet to know about it. Maybe later on I will try to figure it out. (Ester, spiritual convert)

Both sets of converts discussed that conversion was necessary in order to achieve a sense of belonging and many described themselves as feeling at home. The nature of the belonging however differed according to the types of convert. Ethnic converts described wanting to feel a belonging in the family unit they would create and in the extended family in which they had entered or would enter. Spiritual converts wanted an epistemological sense of belonging: a new moral and social framework because they no longer fitted in anywhere else. They were seeking a "true God" and a religion that would replace the failings of society. They felt that what they had been exposed to in South Africa was lies, insubstantial and had failed them. They knew only to trust God rather than people. While they were looking for a religion - not in the sense of a formal institutional religion, but a belief system that they could follow - they also found a tight knit and bounded community ruled directly by God in their view. This community held compatible views and supported their ideas which was affirming for them. The boundaries were tough to penetrate but this was more affirming and pleasing as it meant they would be safer. They felt they had weathered various storms in South Africa

and were still standing as a community that had not compromised its ideals and belief practices, but had become more steadfast in them, had become more pleasing. In other words, their conversion:

- Provides structure and truth in their worldview through a religious framework that has been unchanged since it was given to Jews at Mount Sinai, and a community that has survived the democratic transition and the opening up of South Africa to modern values of the globalised world;
- Achieves acceptance and belonging in a compatible community where the way they would like to live and the ideas and values they hold are not considered deviant or fringe but paramount, important; they are accepted and supported without question;
- Therefore, they achieve integration between material, physical, social and spiritual aspects of their lives;
- Their inclusion confirms that they belong and matter and are "on the right path" - they have achieved belonging;
- It overcomes tensions at the meeting points between various identities (nationality, ethnicity, religions and race) that were in sharp conflict with each other.

Thus, Afrikaner converts demonstrate agency throughout the process of deciding to convert. The ethnic converts less so - they are in a bind. However, knowing that the situation they are in will not change, they choose to convert in order to move forward.

6.4 Identity and identifications

For both sets of converts, identity reorientation through conversion was required so that one's marriage and family would have a place to belong in a community where the meaning of this new identity would be accepted, appreciated and valued. These were important considerations for a developing person, carving a place in life and society. It required with it a change of identity. What was common to both groups of converts is that the choice to convert - the search for belonging - was an integral part of an ongoing process of identity formation. This observation became clear when considering the point at which conversion was considered important. From the previous section on belonging, for both sets of converts, conversion was part of the process of becoming mature adults, of exercising agency (often in the face of much antipathy) by separating from the identity of one's birth and community and creating a new independent identity for oneself and family. It meant aligning with, and attaching to the identity of either a partner with whom one sought a long-term relationship or

a new and/or a new community. It also meant (re)shaping an identity individually, and also as a couple and family, in order to create an unambiguous, unified, coherent and cohesive unit based on common identity, values, beliefs and cultural practices. It represented making one's own life choices and establishing one's own paths in creating families independent of birth families. Conversion was an assertion of one's own personhood, independence and maturity and an extension of one's past into a self-created path. As one convert stated:

My identity goes back about 30 years, 30 odd years. I suppose the conversion programme was just another part of the further development of my identity.
(Joseph, spiritual convert)

Two spiritual converts discussed how, as university students, they had started questioning their identities and place in life and as a result started exploring their religion. In this process, they had started exploring their identities and their future station in life. A university environment offers young adults many opportunities to shape / reshape their identities for multiple reasons: for many young adults independence from family opens up a new world. University provides an environment that offers the freedom to learn, explore and debate the social world and one's place within it. It also offers a place for students to form their opinions and carve their own future social roles. Identity 'work' is active at this time. These two spiritual converts' identities had come into question as they struggled to grasp the political turmoil of the time and the political activities at their universities, during exposure to new religions and religious organisations, while making friends of different cultural backgrounds and coming under the influence of diverse cultural experiences through their friendships. In both cases, these two converts were exploring new paths during their university days at the time of adult identity formation. At this point they were influenced by close Jewish friends they made at university or during the practice of their professions. This exploration which had commenced at university, over time, ultimately consolidated in a decision to convert to Judaism. Both converts have postgraduate degrees (a masters in economics and a doctorate in psychology). These observations are evident in their testimonies below:

So what I did when I went to university, I studied economics, and later, I matriculated in 94, when the new South Africa came into being, and I voted for the first time in 94... And, umm, so...there were a few traumatic events there as I grew up. You had this 18 year old boy, and he's seen some TV and he grew up fairly oblivious to all this stuff although he / I perceived the tensions on a personal level on this little town, you know, so specifically there I know my Dad was a [unclear] poultry farmer and some of our trucks would deliver chickens in the townships in the Northern Free State, and I know two of them got burnt during those times so it all umm, I had a bit of a... so, it all had an impact, I wanted to

know why everybody was kinda so aggressive to one another and it disturbed me so I eventually ended up doing a Masters on the topic of black economic empowerment, ja, I thought to myself you know it looks like a big part of the population wants to be [unclear] And the other party caused it and they don't have that much so if you can help everyone to be fairly wealthy, you can live in peace. So I wanted to understand personally and I suppose on a few levels why it is like this and how, why it cannot win and umm as far as that, I used economic theory and umm coming to the conclusion that, it's obviously a bit of a long story, that metaphysical perspectives on the world does translate back into economic reality. In other words, what you believe, and what you believe of...how your whole world fits together, influences your wellbeing. So it just again reaffirmed my own, my own... let's call it my growth, you know you grow, hopefully upwards, then you swivel, the reality is you swivel around this, so in my own story...now I'm starting to read the *Tannach* and let's call it a high point and anyway so now I'm completing this master's and now I can intellectualise it - back when I was 12 I was emotional and it resonates with how I feel and now I've, obviously I had some ideas which I've [unclear] to my family, and which we've discussed and had other points of view, and Christian points of views and whatever else, and had that all, juggling that all, making sense of all this. And in my own mind, it was part of the Master's thesis. And just understanding that it does matter so that was on a bigger level, yes, I am glad that did I make a difference to be. (Joseph, spiritual convert)

There were a few doctrines of the church that I just couldn't... I couldn't intellectually... I couldn't...that didn't make sense to me. So even though I still went to church regularly, very involved and well then at university still stayed in the fold... up to probably... but started to go less because it was the same thing, I couldn't intellectually. Everything sounded like pop-psychology to me. So the more sophisticated I also became intellectually, the greater the disconnect was for me and I stayed involved postgraduate, at postgraduate level. At that point tried to experiment more going to charismatic church. That also didn't work for me...Then I gradually got to a point ...but then even when I started working, I still went to church trying another congregation, NG Kerk, it was the same thing for me and this guy was like he had a doctorate he was an intellectual type of guy. Like a more sophisticated kind of guy and I thought ok maybe here I will find it. Couldn't find it. I just sat and listened and, agh it just didn't speak to me; couldn't find it...And, I was looking for something reading, reading, reading, reading. But I couldn't find it. So I was reading more on - not a spiritual level - but more on the theme of what is the purpose in life and tried to find within

psychology it was more on that level that I tried to find something that could make sense to me and then finally got to Judaism in a totally roundabout way. (Riette, spiritual convert)

Certain differences with regard to understanding identity within the conversion process emerged between spiritual and ethnic converts. Spiritual converts with younger children (below their teens) automatically included their children in their conversion and they converted with their family units. This meant that after conversion, children would “grow up Jewish” and their Jewish identity would take hold through socialisation into family life. This was sometimes the case with teenage children. Older teenage children did not always convert with their families as they were already on a path of self-identification and individuation and exercising their own agency in terms of the direction that their lives would take. For spiritual converts, the drivers for conversion were based on parents’ concerns to live within truthful, ethical value systems; children were subsumed into that. Gaining an identity aligned to a desired value system was the outcome of conversion.

However, ethnic converts were driven by securing a place for themselves and their children and, in particular, a concern for the future identity of their children. They sought to avoid a situation where their children’s identity could be contested and where children would find themselves facing the same identity dilemmas (and exclusions) as they had. The decision to convert was therefore heavily influenced by a concern for their children’s future so that they would not experience identity confusion or exclusions. Parents, concerned for the future of their children, made decisions about the identities of their children to ensure that they would ‘fit in’ somewhere⁸⁷.

You know people said to me why are you worrying you love your husband so you will have your children and they can decide what religion they want to take on. I thought you know you can’t ask a twelve year old to decide. They don’t know the facts and you know I think it is important for children to know where they belong. I think it is important to have an identity and I think you nurture that from the day they are born. You can’t have this sort of... you’ll decide and... I think it also has a lot to do with their own self-worth and I just decided you know what I am doing it. (Leigh, ethnic convert)

⁸⁷ Ethnic converts with children faced constraints in converting their children where those children came from a previous marriage and the former spouse was not Jewish. In some cases, even constraints were faced when the former spouse was Jewish and rejected Orthodoxy.

I went to a dinner party once where we encountered a woman that was Jewish and her husband was Greek Orthodox and they were sitting at the table arguing about where the children were going to go for the summer because he wanted them to go home to Greece to his parents and she wanted them to go to Israel on a camp. The one was starting at school the next year and he wanted the child in a Greek school and she wanted the child in a Jewish school. I just remember sitting at the table thinking to myself I never want to go through any of this. When I see my children now and I see how Jewish they are and how happy they are. They are just naturally Jewish - not like me that feels like I'm trying all the time - I know it [conversion] was a good thing. (Lynn, ethnic convert)

I know people who haven't [converted], where they've stayed... the woman has stayed whatever it is whether Christian and the husband is Jewish and they've tried to combine the two elements. I think that brings a whole lot of... another complication which I think is... for me it would be more difficult. It is very clear that this is... you know our home is Jewish so there are things that we do and things that we don't do and it is a very clear line. There is no sense of confusion. I think some people would say that wasn't confusion it would be choice, but I would see it as confusion. For me I would find it complicated and I think relationships are tricky enough. Sometimes it is a case... I suppose we all make some compromises. That is more than a compromise, it is quite a major change. (Cathy, ethnic convert)

As already seen in Chapter 5, and earlier in the current chapter, Afrikaners motives for belonging differed to those of ethnic converts. While identity was important to both sets of converts, they were important for different reasons. Ethnic converts were seeking an identity that would give them and their children inclusion and would allow them to sink roots into a community to which they could belong. Afrikaners were seeking an identity based on a moral framework, in keeping with their principles and values. The attachment to clearly defined Jewish identity markers made their transition into a new community much easier and quicker - they also sought it out because it filled a gap. Judaism had a common and identifiable base (the Old Testament), and it spoke of truth as coming directly from God (one God and one Torah) and not mediated by man (Jesus). For them this meant that the source of the religion was true as it was directly from God and not from man. These two elements were the most attractive aspects of Judaism. In addition, they connected with the idea of land (Israel), and as one convert explained (Tovah) Afrikaners had a connection to land and it was important to them. Land (Israel), language (Hebrew) and a new historical legacy was gained to replace all that they rejected and had lost (South Africa, Afrikaans, boere heritage). The demands

placed on them to practice rituals and maintain particular observances, and learn a new language (Hebrew), meant they could also be identified as Jews and not Afrikaners. In addition, through their conversion, they became part of a new 'nation' and an integral part of a Jewish community with strong boundaries and jealously guarded borders. This enhanced the feeling of the 'chosen people' for them and gave them access to ready-made, vibrant, well-resourced and supportive communities that were unlikely to collapse as they had proved their resilience.

In other words, for Afrikaners conversion could be achieved by attaching to specific Jewish identity markers. This also meant complete rejection of their former ones. Chapter 6 indicated why Afrikaners rejected Christianity and Afrikanerdom. They largely maintained this separation in the Jewish community after conversion.

I can't make an Afrikaans Judaism. I have a lot of people come here...I have an Afrikaans *Siddur* for you and I say no. Why do I not want one? English is the closest to the Hebrew language. Translation you can lose it like that [click fingers]. I don't want to go there. I want to stay to the truth and please God let me understand Hebrew better eventually. I am getting there. I think there is no other way of doing it because confusion can slip in. Today it is one word tomorrow it is a sentence and the next day it is a whole book. I don't want to go there. That is why I am very careful when I look at that to not make it an Afrikaans Judaism. It is not Afrikaans Judaism. Judaism is Jewish and Hebrew orientated and stay to the roots where it is as difficult as it is. Don't make it an Afrikaans Judaism. Stay to what it is. (Naamah, spiritual convert)

They were telling us about when they read the story of how God chose the Jewish people to be his nation and that just did it for me. I went to my dad and said I also want to be a Jew because God chose the Jews. He said you can't be a child of God if he has not been chosen. Why would the Bible tell you he choose a nation so according to me if you can't be chosen, like a netball team (I used to be a netball player), then you are not part of it. You can't be part of it if you are not chosen so I want to be a Jew to be part of this. I didn't even know that you can convert. I didn't know that. It didn't even cross my mind (Naamah, spiritual convert).

6.5 Race, identity and boundaries

The race of the convert was seen as a challenge to Jewish identity, which from a racial perspective, was unquestioningly white⁸⁸. Ester challenged this racial identification by drawing on the Torah to provide a non-racialised reading of identity, deconstructing that notion of hegemonic whiteness in Jewish identity and, in doing so, legitimising a place for herself as a black convert. She honed into the story of the Exodus, one of the major foundations of the Torah, which took place in Egypt and questioned how one could assume that the Jews leaving Egypt were white:

I do feel that there are black Jews who are really black Jews – not because they converted – and I try not to dwell on it too much because it becomes an emotional issue - and people debate about it and say that it couldn't have happened...because for me I'm saying every [Jewish] person who is here was not there when they left Egypt. How do you know what colour they were? So you cannot really say they were all white because we know that they went wide and it all changed through exile and everything so you basically cannot say there were no black Jews. For me that's just not true. And how did people identify Moses as an Egyptian? What if the *kehilim*⁸⁹ were black? So that's in a way...what if *Moshiach* [Messiah] comes and we all have a rude awakening. So it's one of those things and what if *Moshiach* comes from a black person – a black Jew? Is he going to be accepted? It's another... you know because it's possible, he could come from a convert because there has been a line of converts leading to *Moshiach*. He could come from a convert and with the way it says they will first not accept him... So for me I believe that we will find out when we get there that you know... be shocked [laughter] that there were black Jews...Because you see when they [Jews] were scattered all across the world, the Torah says it doesn't exclude Africa – it doesn't. It doesn't mean that they will be scattered in Africa later on – it doesn't. So for people to say that can't be true, they cannot be Jews – rather say we don't know....because you see from what I've heard he [Moses] had four wives – two sisters and the two maidservants. What colour were they? You know we cannot say they were white or they were light skinned but we don't know. Even Ephraim – he was from the East you know so you see with the Jewish people we need to take the colour issue out. Then we will live in harmony [laughter]. We will be okay if you won't have the ones that are more

⁸⁸ See also Tudor Parfitt on a full discussion of racial identity of Jews.

⁸⁹ *Kehila* (plural *kehilim*) refers to a community or congregation in the modern usage.

lighter thinking than darker ones – we will still keep traditions because it's not just about black; it's also about *Ashkenazi* and the *Sephardim*⁹⁰ so it's really a big thing. It's not just one group. It's also with the different – you've got the *Ashkenazi*, you've got the Chabad and you've got the ones who are more stricter and you know all these little groups that are thinking well this group is probably better than that one because they are more learned than the other one. That's a long story, hey! [laughter]

The Torah does not discuss religion in racial terms, yet people do. The way they perceive race within the Torah, has implications for who can belong to the Jewish people - as seen in Ester's quotation above. While the same rules for conversion applied to black converts, their identity would keep them separate. Extending from this, other concerns developed that would limit the extent of black converts' ability to achieve the same sense of belonging within the community. While black converts sought religious coherence, they came to understand, like other converts that with conversion came community integration. However, in achieving this integration, they discovered informal boundaries within the community that kept them as 'outsider-insiders' as a result of race. The outsider-insider status was achieved through informal boundaries that came into play when it came to marriage. It was made clear that single black converts would not find marital partners within the Orthodox Jewish community. Hence, while they would be formally accepted through conversion, their inability to integrate through marriage meant that black converts who were outside of the institution of marriage, would be relegated to the margins of the community when it came to intimate and personal issues. As an outsider-insider, they were first and foremost an outsider, who could never fully be an insider, but they were allowed to coexist with insiders within the community. The limits to how accepted the convert would be meant that they could never be truly considered an insider (i.e., they would always be outsider-insiders). White ethnic converts might have experienced the same push-back because they were converts but generally they were accepted after conversion by their partner's families. But, as the next chapter shows, while the experiences of converts might be common across their race, persons of colour experienced additional challenges to their acceptance in the community because of race. After conversion and after formal acceptance into the community, there were limits as to how integrated they could become. In other words, while the race of the convert does not prevent conversion, the race

⁹⁰There are several subgroups of Jews with different cultures and traditions (Rich, 2015): The *Ashkenazi* are descendants of Jews from France, Germany and Eastern Europe; the *Sephardi* are descendants of Jews from Spain, and Portugal; and the *Mizrachi* are descendants of Jews from North Africa and the Middle East. Today in common language, the *Mizrachi* are grouped with the *Sephardi* and are referred to as such.

of the convert does challenge Jewish identity and therefore limits the extent to which belonging can be achieved for black converts. The limits to their belonging is evident in the experiences of conversion presented by persons of colour. The experiences are discussed and examined further in Chapter 7.

6.7 Conclusion

This chapter shows that conversion is more than a spiritual quest undertaken by an individual. Identity is 'upset' by many factors occurring in the social environment and therefore conversion becomes a process of finding a place to belong in society. Further, because of the specific dynamics involved in maintaining boundaries around ethnic groups, converts unwittingly become involved in the politics of belonging, in maintaining the boundaries around the community and the values that decide who may be included and who may not.

Chapter 7: Converts' experiences of inclusion and exclusion

7.1 Introduction

The reader of this dissertation enters this section with the knowledge of what the process of conversion entails in a real sense for the convert, as well as the dynamics of conversion, the pre-determined attitudes and stereotypes towards them (covered in Chapter 4), and the high expectations and judgements they face (also Chapter 4). The previous chapters (Chapters 4 and 5) detailed the profile of those converting, the environmental factors facilitating their conversion, and the converts' personal reasons and explanations for their decision. Within this context, the voice of the convert throughout the process of conversion is tightly curtailed by the power that the Beth Din exerts over them to ultimately grant what the converts want: formal acceptance into the community. However, treating conversion as a transactional process (seen in section 4.10), allows converts some room to manoeuvre and exercise agency, and it restores to them a sense of autonomy. This chapter shows that throughout the process, converts are left on their own to work out the problems they face either with their partners and/or with community rabbis who have in turn have little scope to influence the process. The chapter also demonstrates that converts' voices have been stifled in the process of conversion and the community. It should be highlighted that no prior study in South Africa has detailed what an Orthodox Jewish convert may experience about the process they have completed. The current chapter provides an overview of what it is like to be a convert - in their voices, according to their own point of view. It addresses the main point of the study, as indicated in the title of dissertation, namely the experiences of social inclusion and exclusion of Jewish converts in the Johannesburg Orthodox community, at a particular moment in South Africa's history, where integration, acceptance and inclusion are counted keystone values in its democracy. At the same time, the ideas of belonging (discussed in Chapter 6) emerge as salient in the experiences of converts and this chapter is an extension of what has been covered in the previous one.

7.2 Experiences of conversion (on the process)

The descriptions of the experiences of conversion are very mixed across all convert groups. Because the aim of providing a voice to converts is to address all issues, this section focuses on what elements of conversion are not helpful to converts. While much of what is said by the converts will hardly be of surprise to other converts, or to rabbis and the Beth Din, it will be revealing to those learning about the process of conversion for the first time. As has already been mentioned in Chapters 1 and 2, the view of conversion as solely a spiritual transformation is to misunderstand the process of Orthodox Jewish conversion. Conversion must be conceptualised as inclusive of social, emotional, political, and financial dimensions.

During the interviews, individual community rabbis and the Registrar generally were spoken of with gratitude and respect for their empathy, support and help. They were also acknowledged for recognising the extent to which the process affected converts and for engaging with converts with concern and consideration. These rabbinical figures were often appreciated for going beyond their roles in helping converts, being reflective of the process in constructive ways and in guiding converts through the challenges. Notwithstanding, the overall experience of conversion was a mammoth undertaking that could not have been anticipated beforehand. In the words of one convert, it can be summed as follows:

Look, everybody knows it is not a plane-sailing process and it's not a smooth ride. It is a big deal. It's a very big deal...it's a big deal and are you up for a big deal because it is a big deal. (Ava, ethnic convert)

As the process of conversion unfolded, converts came to experience it as an unexpectedly formidable process at a social and emotional level - one that many had seldom been prepared for. Being turned away three times was seen as a ritual formality although the first time this happened came as a shock. Many converts felt that the assigned book, "Becoming a Jew", could not prepare them for what they would encounter. Many commented on the process, what it tried to achieve and the various stressors it placed on them:

The whole thing is scary. It is extremely scary because this is... you don't even know who these people are. You don't know what they do; you don't know how they live; you don't know how they are going to accept you, you have only heard they don't want you. The first time you meet him [the Registrar] it is a question of are you crazy? Do you know they hate us? Have you heard about the Holocaust? and he tries to discourage you and says go away and I know I won't see you again. The second time it is a bit better and when you are on the programme, this man embraces you. This man is absolutely so good to you and so is everybody. (Dinah, spiritual convert)

Although the Registrar was seen as embracing of converts and “good” to them, the process was nonetheless considered tough and stressful for most. Even so, the Afrikaner spiritual converts felt most gratified by the process since the difficulties they experienced in their journey prior to conversion were considered greater than the difficulties of the conversion process. They showed resilience in the face of hardship during the conversion process, often saying that what they had experienced on the conversion process paled compared to what they had experienced before in their former Christian communities. But they were also generally upbeat because, despite the challenges, the worst parts of their lives could be put behind them. They were excited that a new chapter was starting with a new people, a new ideology and community. Indeed one Afrikaner convert, a psychologist, denied an interview on these grounds - that he no longer wanted to dwell on the painful past and wanted to move forward after the conversion. The spiritual converts, the Afrikaners in particular, generally enjoyed the learning during the process, encountering the community and its tight-knit bonds among members and appreciated feeling that they would fit in - as if it were “a match in heaven”. The ethnic converts had mixed feelings. Many were supportive of the process, understanding of the underpinning reasoning, in agreement with the requirements, and accepting of the expectations. They argued that it was right that they should be differentiated and treated differently from Jews-by-birth since converts had to earn their place in the community. But many other ethnic converts disagreed and found the process to be unnecessarily difficult and emotionally conflicting because of the particular approach and lack of psychological support. These ethnic converts understood that they were unwanted because of their motivation for conversion (regarded as an ulterior motive) and felt that they had to work harder and endure more resistance from the Beth Din. Some were turned away by the Beth Din several times at the final interview stage which left a bitter taste. Spiritual converts also recognised that ethnic converts were treated more harshly by the teachers and/or Beth Din. One stated:

I was in a class obviously with married couples and couples that one partner is Jewish... my whole class basically. I was the only one that was doing it for spiritual reasons, not for marriage – the rest were – and I kind of saw the hard time they were given; that there were a lot of comments that he [the teacher] would make towards them that he never made towards me. (Shifra, spiritual convert)

Black converts, because of their race, felt trepidation from the authorities and in their experience their conversions had taken longer. They were fully aware that their future integration was a concern for the authorities.

7.3 Commonalities in the experiences of the conversion process

Regardless of the motives for conversion and race of converts, there were other commonalities in the experiences of converts. As a starting point, the approach was considered to be very single-minded in its objective: to prepare converts for a particular way of Jewish life. For some, a number of negative issues related to this. It was seen as rigid and as “a very strong indoctrination process” (Stella, spiritual and ethnic convert). As one convert explained:

It’s trying to take individuals or couples and put them through a conditioning process where they come out thinking and doing a very specific set of behaviours and reflecting beliefs – thinking the beliefs and doing the behaviours. (Stella, spiritual and ethnic convert)

Thus, the diversity of the forms and expressions of Orthodox Judaism was lost. Since absolute conformity to the rules was required, it meant that individuality was stifled, as well as autonomy over one’s life decisions. She continued:

Can I introduce the concept that keeps coming up in my head – the cookie cutter? That’s what the process feels like. When you ask me what it is, it’s like taking an individual and putting them through a process in a factory where they’ve got to be cut in that mould of the cookie cut and come out looking like a round cookie. (Stella, spiritual and ethnic convert)

The “cookie cutter” effect removed the choice of the personal expression of Judaism forcing compliance to a homogenous view of Judaism, according to only one way.

I feel that the way in which the material is presented is an all or nothing – this is the content, it’s all, there’s nothing else. Whereas in the world at large of Jewish thought historically – or even within the world at large geographically today – there’s multiple ways of seeing things and thinking about things which is a very accurate Jewish principle. I came out of the conversion process with content that didn’t make me feel that....it showed a very myopic world view – Jewish world view – on how to think and behave and having been out of the process and exploring different, very viable Jewish thought forms and practices – there’s a lot to be said that I wasn’t exposed to so that’s why is limited. (Stella, spiritual and ethnic convert)

Apart from limiting individuality in terms of how and where to practice Judaism, the approach insisted on uniformity and compliance to a particular set of practices and behaviours that would make one *frumm*. Since people were forced to behave in a certain way to reach

a goal, their behaviour was harder to sustain and integrate into their lives. In the words of one convert:

I don't regret anything but... but I would have preferred to doing it differently. To me the process isn't... I suppose nothing is 100% but I don't think it is the right. If they had to change their whole approach to things and the way they are, people would be more [committed to their Judaism]... I think their actual success rate from what I see, not actual figures, I don't think it is great. The amount of people that have remained very *frumm* or have actually embraced the religion to me are very few that I see out there. I think more are...once they have finished with it, they are done and over, and they just carry on with their lives. They have done what they had to do and they carry on. I think from that point of view they are losing a lot. If they approached it differently I think people would embrace it more and would actually want to become more religious and take on more. Like I say it is the approach – that is the negative for me. (Gloria, ethnic convert)

Another convert similarly said:

If you oppress people and you make them hate you, they are not actually going to carry this out. As soon as they can break those shackles free, they will [stop observing]. (Rachel, ethnic convert)

Due to the emphasis on particular rules and obligations which aimed to make one appear and feel religious, not only was the practice of being religious less sustainable, but converts also found that the process detracted from the spiritual elements of the supposedly religious process. This was disappointing since many hoped they would gain a deeper spirituality. Those who sought spiritual upliftment had to find it outside of the process. Again, concurred with what rabbis had said in their interviews (Chapter 5).

The process has nothing to do with spirituality. My sustainability in this whole thing has been my independent spirituality and my personal relationship. If anything – in my opinion – the process squashes that. It doesn't allow it to breed or blossom or... it seems to be... my experience of the conversion was that this is the civil courts and my personal and spiritual relationship needs to be taken care of outside of the civil courts. The two can't co-exist. Yes, so we are talking about the process and for me there was very little spirituality in that – all of that that's been sought after and experienced outside of that process. I can't say I found spiritual mentors through the process you know. All of that has happened outside of their process. That's why I can't talk about it because it wasn't part of it. (Stella, spiritual and ethnic convert)

In addition, most converts spoke about how the requirements of the process placed them under tremendous pressure and created stress:

The whole process is that you are constantly under pressure you know. You are pressurised because you've got a certain period of time and then you've got to go for your monitoring session and in that period of time you've got to be able to read this and this and this. The Hebrew I found a HUGE [strong emphasis] ... because of having to learn the language or to be able to read it. I still don't understand it which is going to change now [chuckles]. The pressure of when I go for a monitoring session I must be able to read this in Hebrew to him and that stressed me out. There were times that – especially before a monitoring session [laughter] when I was a wreck because of that. Mentally you've got to be ready for it; spiritually you've got to be ready for it; and yes, it's a daunting thing. (Shifra, spiritual convert)

I still feel very emotional when I think of the conversion because it was very stressful. I couldn't eat, I lost weight, and I was so stressed! During [the process] and towards the end. Towards the end it's very hard. (Ester, spiritual convert)

In addition, converts were burdened with coping continuously with negative stereotypes towards and judgement of converts regardless of their own intentions and individual actions. The judgment was made according to a limiting set of criteria that failed to permit individuality in the way one chose to live and worship:

You know at the end of the day everybody is different and everybody takes things on differently. I know I keep going back to Chabad but look at Chabad - you get and you get. The Chabad we go to, there are lots of people that walk and lots of people that drive, but you are not going to... for me what I have learned from the Jewish religion is judge favourably. First of all I don't think we should be judging but if you are going to judge then judge favourably. The minute you have an environment where people are judging you negatively that already has lost the plot for me and that is the problem I have with the whole thing.

Moderator: The judgements?

Respondent: Yes, I think one of the biggest [unclear] in the whole thing is judging. (Gloria, ethnic convert)

The judgment occurred in other areas too. As one convert's overall testimony conveyed, her adult life to date had been traumatic and it was made more difficult by her choice

to convert. She also experienced further difficulties in navigating the change with her children. Yet she believed in the conversion, was wholly committed to Judaism and a religious life and was uncompromisingly devout. When the moment of conversion arrived, she experienced so much excitement and emotion that it produced a nervous reaction: a fit of giggles. Far from being open or understanding, the dayan officiating at the *mikveh* responded in a way that demonstrated how converts are judged in negative ways against a stereotype. The stereotype in this case was that the convert was insincere and would not maintain her Judaism for very long:

When I went through the *mikveh*, I giggled so much that the rabbi actually thought I thought it was a joke. The first words when he saw me was: I hope you are going to keep this for at least a year [researcher's emphasis]. I was giggling so much that I couldn't answer him. I didn't even get mad at him. With my personality I would have just told him right there but I wasn't. I was just giggling and I thought you don't know. You don't know what I went through to get here. (Naamah, spiritual convert)

Her awareness of being judged negatively was accompanied by the knowledge that one was constantly under pressure to prove oneself worthy of acceptance. The message converts received from this was that they were not good enough. Converts also feared making a mistake that that would jeopardise their chances of conversion.

When you are on the programme, it is stressful. You realise that everybody watches you. You go to Rabbi Hendler and he knows more about you than you know about yourself. It is extremely stressful and you go through ups and downs and emotions and like am I good enough? Will I be able to do it? And then just before you convert it is I don't think I am ready for this; I don't think I can do it; what if I make a mistake. It is extremely, extremely stressful and I think as a convert you put a lot of pressure on yourself as well. You put a... they put a lot of pressure on you but you put more pressure on yourself at the end of the day. You feel I know nothing and have to get to know these things and you have all these books to read and you have to learn for tests. Rabbi M used to test us and we'd have written tests. The whole time it is this stress and it is busy and you have to go for classes and you have to go to *shiurim* [religious lectures] and you have to do this so your life is... while you are busy in the conversion programme. It is extremely busy. (Dinah, spiritual convert)

The pressure to prove oneself constantly also created the feeling of being checked on. One convert discussed how the community rabbi who koshered her kitchen visited her home several times during the conversion programme. In hindsight, she claimed that his visits were

more than an offer of support. She stated, "I realise now they must have been inspections, I never realised that [at the time]" (Kaylee, ethnic and spiritual convert). In addition to such experiences, some converts felt under constant surveillance. This finding was inconsistent among converts; some never experienced it (ostensibly those who were considered 'sincere'). Others came to the realisation at a later stage. One convert who had had felt invisible in the community during the process later understood that her and her partner had always been under scrutiny:

During the conversion process... there was a *Shabbat* in between the conversion, the *Beit Din*, and us getting married and at that *Shabbat* they announced it at Shul that we were about to have a *chuppah* [wedding ceremony] and they wished us *mazel tov* [congratulations] and everybody got so excited and there was this whole party at the *brocha* [communal tea gathering after services at synagogue]. I was shocked because I had felt like a complete ghost in that community up until that point. I had gone to shul every Saturday, I had stood with the cousins and nobody had greeted me or few people had greeted me (maybe just a smile), no conversation, I had formed no friendships in that community over those years. I was convinced that they didn't see me. I felt invisible. All of a sudden everyone was all excited and I was like how do they know who I am? How do they know who we are? What is this about? It was a radical shock and after that I felt watched. I felt very much watched. Everybody was watching – how is this new convert doing, what are they doing, what are they doing now? Sometimes with mixed reactions – sometimes some were very warm and supportive and others were critical and whatever. It was a mixed bag. (Kaylee, ethnic and spiritual convert)

The stories of being watched go beyond events at a communal level in synagogue. Rumour had it that there were 'spies' reporting on the behaviour of converts to the Beth Din and that the latter set traps for converts. The notion of a trap was confirmed to me at a luncheon during a conversation with a former conversion programme teacher. He mentioned a convert who had claimed to maintain the Sabbath principles (e.g., not using a telephone) but that in private, he was suspected of violating the laws by using his phone on the Sabbath. It was decided that someone who was not Jewish (as the Beth Din could not be seen as condoning a Sabbath transgression) would call this individual on the Sabbath to see if he would answer the phone. He answered the phone and the expected repercussions followed. The individual argued that he had answered the phone as he thought that if his phone rang on the Sabbath, it must have been an emergency.

Being watched and spied upon was something that some converts' Jewish partners also experienced. Because the conversion process demanded that partners should journey with converts through the process, the expectations required of the convert were also the expectations of the partner. Both had to progress at the same time and at the same level in ways appropriate to their gender. As a result, the converts' partners were also under surveillance if it was suspected that they were also not performing. Therefore partners experienced similar pressure, stress and strain to converts. This sometimes had very harmful outcomes for the individuals involved:

My husband was a doctor and I think it was a bit more difficult for him because they wanted him to wear a *yarmulke* [Jewish skull cap] which most guys don't. They wear it to shul and then put it in their pocket. He used to put it in his pocket and cruise around the hospital and the *Beit Din* hooked on to that and they phoned him one day and said to him, you don't have your *yarmulke* on. He didn't know who the spies were – was it his secretaries watching him and then they [Beth Din] started to put the pressure on me and started to be nasty to me. Shaun ended up having a heart attack. They [Beth Din] failed me three times and I knew absolutely everything but they weren't happy – it was actually more with him than with me. He landed up having a heart attack – I think he was completely stressed out about it. I suppose being the role of a doctor he always called the shots and there was someone else now calling the shots so he took the strain I didn't. In fact Shaun has grown more in the journey than I have because I found my journey easy. He has found that he loves it and he fits in and everything but it took him a long time to keep *shomrei* [observant] and only eat kosher and that kind of thing although he always had a kosher home. After his heart attack... then they started with me about a *sheitl* [wig] and I wear a *sheitl* and [still] cover my head (Hadassah, ethnic convert).

Converts also felt that during conversion, they were constantly reminded that they were non-Jews, making them feel like outsiders despite the lengths they were going to in order to be like a Jew. In Judaism, in order to prevent mixing of non-Jew and Jew⁹¹, many barriers in the forms of prohibitions are set between non-Jews and Jews in social settings. Converts are expected to learn and practise as if they were Jews and face consequences if they do not. Yet in certain settings, they were still regarded as non-Jews and prevented from performing the rituals they were mandated to perform. Immersing in the culture meant participating wholeheartedly and enjoying festivities and learning. But they could not do this fully

⁹¹ As a result of historical persecution of Jews and the punishment for conversion (discussed in footnote 5 in section 1.2).

as they were still non-Jews and were not always allowed to access or perform the requirements. In these situations there were always reminders that they were outsiders and not fully acceptable. One convert describes two painful instances she encountered:

On the conversion process I always feel like you're a non-Jew and only when you finish it then you're supposedly supposed to feel like a Jewess and I certainly didn't. I just... simple things and they're very hurtful things because where I come from you don't treat people with such disrespect; you treat people with respect. If people are attempting to do something, you help them. I remember going to a family for a *Shabbat* lunch and the woman of the house... I was helping her because again I come from... you help; you set off; you set the table; you help. You don't sit like a lazy bones. I wanted to... I don't know if I wanted to pick up the... pass the grape juice or the wine or something... I don't know what I wanted to do and she was very quick to remind me that I'm not allowed to touch *the* wine because a *goy* [non-Jew] is not allowed to touch the wine⁹². I just remember immediately feeling like I had germs; I was different. Every time we have *Shabbat* at home I always think of that when I take the grape juice and put it on the table... it is such a stupid thing but it is to show that you're different (Lynn, ethnic convert).

Another situation where division between convert in the process and Jew is explained. This convert continued to speak through a river of tears; her pain was so palpable and exposed. She was raw with emotion:

I remember with Rachel [her firstborn daughter] when we were on the process. There was a *bikurim*⁹³ and one of the rabbis said if your daughter is not Jewish [and] you haven't finished the conversion process she is not allowed to go up with her little basket to the front for *bikurim*. I remember crying to Saul, saying I hate the Jews for doing this to our child. I am doing this for her and yet she has to be punished because... [I am not Jewish] she was... [crying] what was she... she was two [crying] (Lynn, ethnic convert).

Some converts felt that the process was designed to deliberately push them away. They felt unwanted rather than appreciated for making the effort to preserve the culture.

⁹² This refers to the concept of *mevushal*. Kosher wine is pasteurised so that it may be handled by non-Jews without rendering it un-kosher.

⁹³ During a harvest festival called *Shavuot*, which occurs 49 days after Passover, one is required to donate fruits to the synagogue during a religious service. Traditionally children decorate baskets and with much excitement and pride present the fruit at the altar in synagogue. In return children receive sweets and ice cream.

They felt it was designed to keep them beholden so that a particular behaviour pattern could be forced from them in order to guarantee the outcome desired by the Beth Din.

I think the conversion process is trying to chase you away. I think they try to... I almost think that they try to scare you and to scare your partner into maybe believing that he has made the wrong choice; and that it is too hard; maybe he should just find a nice Jewish girl and things would be a lot easier. I really believe that the process is there to make you afraid of what you have actually started and that you really need to realise that what you are doing is serious. I feel like every step of the way it was a challenge. I feel like every step of the way you were flagged as somebody that is not a Jew. The process was there to highlight that you are not Jewish and you won't be Jewish until you have your certificate or your *Ketubah* [marriage certificate] and only then when you have your *Ketubah* you are still not really Jewish because they're going to hold back the certificate for a year to see if you're going to remain Jewish. If you get that then they are going to hold back your child's certificate because she wasn't Jewish and she is still not Jewish until her *Bat Mitzvah* so let's hold onto you for another eleven years or whatever it was and let's see if we can keep holding and forcing you... forcing you to remain a Jew; and be a good Jew; and do the right things as a Jewish woman and observe, observe, observe. (Lynn, ethnic convert)

Another convert regarded the process of delaying and rejecting people for punitive reasons and forcing particular outcomes through certain practices as "abusive". She used the term abusive at least three times during her interview. She explained:

I like my space, I like my own integrity and do not put me spread eagled in a bath of water [the *mikveh*] with the shadows of rabbis asking me whether I am going to keep Jewish purity; asking me if I am going to keep my head covered all the time; and asking me if I am going to be a good Jew. To me that is forcing me to do it and not telling you, you can do it on your own time. I found that really...(Sadie, ethnic convert).

These practices aimed to produce a successful convert provoked much anger and resentment. The anger engendered seemed to defeat the purpose of conversion:

They [Beth Din at the final interview] say come back in whatever [time] and sometimes there is no reason, it is just the way it is. I think it was because Jarred walked his dog on a Sunday instead of going to shul on a Sunday or something... whatever it was, it is irrelevant. Those kinds of things make you angry and you know it is... it puts you off the whole process and I don't see the point to it. An intimidating approach – what for? ...I don't know it is just all these threats. What

is it all about? What are you teaching people by threatening them and intimidating them? What kind of environment are you teaching them? Is this what Judaism is all about? Is this the kind of person you want to be? (Gloria, ethnic convert)

She later continued:

Nothing positive can come out of that so why do it? That is why I don't understand. What are they trying to build? People that go through the process and are doing it for the love of it or people who are just going through the process because they have to and once it is done they put it behind them and don't want anything to do with it – what is more important? (Gloria, ethnic convert)

Even if the Beth Din did not regard the motivation for conversion (e.g., marriage) as a respected reason, many ethnic converts were still sincere in taking on Judaism and did not appreciate this treatment. Beside anger, the process produced fear. Many converts commented on the fear they felt:

I found it fear based which I don't believe to be an ACCURATE [strong emphasis] Jewish principle, to adhere to one's faith purely out of... you know, meet the set of conditions or else there's some kind of negative consequence. (Stella, spiritual and ethnic convert).

I don't know why they have to make it so scary; so hard; so hurtful; so isolating; so impactful and really just put the fear of death into you the whole time. I don't know why they can't make it, not easier, but just more supportive is the word; more encouraging; more wow you've decided to do this, let's really get you interested in the religion; let's not scare you (Lynn, ethnic convert).

Why have this fear? People are doing it out of fear. Why are you doing it? Out of fear. Not because I want to do it because I embrace it because that is what it should be like. They want somebody to go through the whole conversion process out of fear – it doesn't make sense to me (Gloria, ethnic convert).

The fear arose out of a process perceived as very intimidating:

The *Beit Din* during that final interview – that is in the Yeoville Court which was a bigger court than this one here was an intimidating setup. When we were taken into the court they weren't there yet and we had to sit there and I remember thinking I have a brother who is a regional magistrate and I've been to his courtroom a few times and I remember thinking this is a court room – this is a

court room, what gives here? Of course they came in very somberly and sat up on their bench and it was quite intimidating...objectively it was an intimidating situation, physically – absolutely. Just thinking back to that... they were up there – these tall men... tall... big men (Kaylee, ethnic convert).

Once again it is a very intimidating set up. For me it is a very intimidating approach. For me if somebody tries to intimidate me it doesn't work because I am not there to be intimidated. Whether I come here once, two, three, or ten times is not the point. Why make it difficult and intimidate? You have to learn, you have to study, you have to do whatever you have to do and when you are ready you are ready and that is it. [But] It doesn't work that way (Gloria, ethnic convert).

Some converts spoke of feeling isolated as a result of the fear and intimidation as illustrated below.

I think isolating by imposing all the rules and regulations which immediately make you feel like you're on your own. Even though you've got a partner who says he will support you, these are all new things that you have to face on your own. They come naturally to your partner they don't come naturally to you. You are then starting a process where you are almost pulling yourself away from your normal, natural everyday things that come naturally to you and you isolate yourself. I think you have to isolate yourself, but the process does that to you. By drawing away from your friends – you can't drive to your friends for dinners; you can't do a million things so you have to withdraw and that is a form of isolation. They also... the isolation from them is... I think it is that kind of pointing you out and making you feel like you are not a Jew. You're being isolated to feel like you are not one of us and until you are one of us this is what you are going to have to do. The rejection... you hear that they are going to show you a way three times, but when you actually go to the meeting and you get interviewed and you feel like you are not good enough to come into this incredible... I mean do you know... I remember the rabbi saying do you know what you are doing? Do you know anything about Judaism? It made me feel like I wasn't good enough; like I was a substandard low class individual that had no grounding; no values; no morals; no principles. I remember kind of going home feeling really deflated and thinking geez, it must be an incredible religion because they make you feel like you're not good enough. (Lynn, ethnic convert)

Fear and isolation seemed to go hand-in-hand. Fear of not being good enough, fear of not performing adequately and therefore fear of not being converted meant that converts

became isolated and were too scared to voice their feelings and address their issues with the rabbis or the Beth Din. Isolation emerged from fear; it reduced the chance of converts receiving assistance and entrenched the powerful position of the Beth Din.

You don't always tell the rabbi or the people of the community what you are battling with because you are scared they are going to say Judaism is not for you. You keep a lot of things inside. There is a lot of trauma you are going through. It is not just me or my daughter or my son. All the converts we spoke to are going through the same thing. (Sarit, spiritual convert)

Another agreed:

When I had issues I kept quiet. I didn't... I don't want to rock the boat and put anything out there that could jeopardise the process. So that is one thing; that is one aspect that I really think the Beth Din should look into – having something; giving the converts some sort of tools to help them cope because I don't think they actually do realise what actually goes on, on a daily basis. (Shifra, spiritual convert)

Two Afrikaner converts, who had enrolled their children in a very religious school, spoke of how their children had been repeatedly scapegoated for various activities that occurred in the school by Jewish-by-birth children. One example (of many) follows:

There was one incident that was an absolutely nasty [strong emphasis] incident. I was called in, another convert's parents were called in – because we were all still in the process with our kids – to say that one of the kids in the class (a rabbi's child) had found Gabriel and said that Gabriel had pornographic material and the same with the other boy and it was so bad that we as parents go together to try and get behind this story – where on earth is he going to get pornographic material? There is nothing in our house. Where would he find it? It turns out that this child's mother is a midwife and this child was the one that had brought a mother giving birth and I don't know what exactly... what was it? It was pictures and stuff like that that he showed to them. But then he was the scapegoat in the end. They just turned it right around and what do I know? I've got to try and support my child. (Shifra, spiritual convert)

Because their children were firstly non-Jewish at the time and hailed from secular public schools, the material discovered was cast as deviant and they were immediately considered to be responsible for the events at the school. In the mother's words: "because our kids come from a secular background; they were in a secular school; so they are coming into a religious school so it's got to be them. It can't be anyone else – it has to be them that brought it in you know and it left a nasty taste – a really, really bad taste". Both sets of

parents were very hurt by the responses towards them but felt they could not challenge the principal neither bring this to the attention of the Registrar "because he'd suggested that my child goes to [that school] and I didn't want anything to complicate our conversion. You know I thought I'd rather keep quiet about it and not discuss it with him and try and deal with it as best as I can." (Shifra, spiritual convert)

What is evident is that male power over mostly female converts was tangible and this created much anger, as evident in Gloria's words. Another convert commented specifically on the gendered nature of the power and how it alienated her from Judaism:

I found that the process - as a woman - was run by men and there was a total misfit. I'm a woman and what was being taught and how it was being taught from men was not what I needed to learn and not even what I wanted to learn, but I mean the resonance from a male ego, authoritarian point of view. You know, being the male teachers of that process could not authentically reach me like Jewish women can...I think the conversion process needs to include women for other women converts because you don't get the ego when there's other women involved. It's not as strong and you don't get that whole you are beholden to me. I've got all the power. Like I definitely think women need to mentor women converts far more than what's going on (Stella, spiritual and ethnic convert).

Another convert, who had completed the process approximately 30 years prior to the interview, spoke about how she disapproved of the arbitrary and harmful way that power over converts was exercised by the Beth Din. After witnessing the treatment of the partners of sons of friends, she approached the Head of the Beth Din to object on behalf of the younger convert. She understood that forcing people to comply with a set of rigid rules through fear and lack of choice would ultimately undermine the process of conversion, producing angry, disinterested converts instead of "successful converts" like herself - those who had remained religious and committed to the faith and Orthodox community.

I actually went to see Rabbi Kurtstag because there was another girl and they were giving her a very hard time too...It was two years ago. I went to see him and I said now listen, I want to just tell you something. There were two big cases that I knew of where they [Beth Din] were giving a hard time to two women. I said listen I have got to understand this. One of the reasons why my conversion was so successful and my life as a convert for thirty-four years has been so successful is because of the support of the community - the encouragement and the support and the kindness of the community. Why are the *Beit Din* so horrible to these people because in the end why would they want to carry this

out? He said look, we don't want to make enemies of people and I said but you are. The people that work here for you, people are actually saying it is such an ordeal and they are so awful to you. They will go through it because of their spouse, because of their partner but actually why should they continue afterwards? Maybe they will just have a very watered down version of what you expect. We actually did discuss it and I said it is arbitrary so what I am picking up is it is really up to them, they have a lot of power, and they abuse it... I said have a rubric, have a checklist to say okay now you have stopped driving on *Shabbat* okay let's tick that off. How many *shiurim* are you attending per week, okay let's tick that off. If you have met these requirements you are ready. Now you are going to do an exam. Make it strict but make it fair. Be transparent about it and make it fair. What is going on at the moment is ridiculous...To treat people like this is just not okay. Simply because you have the power and you can do it. He heard what I said. He said they can't do a checklist. I don't know why (Rachel, ethnic convert).

Older converts therefore do act on behalf of younger converts where and when they can although it may not be effective. So, faced with many challenges and feeling isolated, converts (at the time of the interviews) described many conflicting emotions about their conversion. Many converts primarily felt a lack of support for the enormous transition they were undergoing. Much like that feedback from Rabbi D (section 4.11.2), in general, converts could not have anticipated how the process would affect them emotionally and in their relationships and that they were not prepared for this:

I think where the emotional aspect really came into it was that there were times that I felt I'm on my own. You know with having to deal... because the community don't really understand because they haven't come from that background. They've grown up in it so they don't really understand what you are going through emotionally because having this... You grew up with a religion that you thought was the right religion and that you based your values and that on and then all of a sudden you realise whoa! This wasn't true! So now you've got to... to change that mindset, I found that trying (Shifra, spiritual convert).

The same convert continues:

I think the one matter that our group of converts experienced is that they don't prepare you for the psychological challenges that you have to deal with – the emotional challenges that you have to deal with. It's as if they actually don't have a clue what you are going through; your mindset that has to change; absolutely every single aspect of your life has to change; and the impact that that does have is that, if they... one course that I found that really worked for me

was with Rozanne Gordon – the [unclear] course – that there were a lot of aspects there, emotional aspects and things that she dealt with that I felt that is maybe something that they should think of incorporating into a workshop for converts just [emphasis] starting – to give them coping mechanisms; give them the how do you deal with this instead of you going through that and having to figure out for yourself Whoa! This is a huge challenge. How the heck am I going to cope with this? (Shifra, spiritual convert)

Another convert explains:

So in my process there was very little emotional, psychological support, counselling – you know attention to those processes that I was going through – it was very much more a theoretical... I don't know if I should use that word... I want to say indoctrination, but giving over or teaching but very little accounting for the fact that I'm a human being in the emotions and psychology and family issues now and identity issues now and THAT [emphasis] I feel was very lacking. It needed to be much more addressed to be a healthy personal transformation experience (Stella, spiritual and ethnic convert).

In addition to dealing with the emotional and psychological issues, many converts realised they had to navigate a new culture. This was daunting since there was no guidance and one had to learn on their own by immersing oneself in Jewish experiences, observing and trial and error:

The process itself I think getting to know the lifestyle; integrating the Jewish way of life into your daily life – because you haven't grown up with it so it was all new things that you had to learn – the *brochas* [blessings] that you had to learn; the *kashrut* of having separate meat and milk and the [waiting] time period between [eating] meat and milk and all that of making you so aware of what you are actually doing on a daily basis which we take for granted – that was a big change. The whole way of thinking; how you go about things; that changed for me (Shifra, spiritual convert).

This often produced culture shock: converts did not anticipate that a religious conversion would be an ethnic process:

It really is a culture shock because you... it's a culture you don't know. It's strange; it's foreign to you and slowly but surely you've got to integrate that into your life (Shifra, spiritual convert).

Another convert who had been battling to adapt to the community during conversion, heeded the advice given to her by a psychologist from within the community:

Leonard [psychologist] said something to me that was very valuable and he said to me remember you are not converting into a religion you are converting into a culture. And if you are not going to start to understand what the rules of the culture is, you are not going to, you are not going to fit in. You are not going to be accepted. So I have made it my business to try and work out what the rules are of the culture and try to find ways of blending in but it took me a long time. I mean I suppose like it probably takes most people, it takes some time to do that (Riette, spiritual and ethnic convert).

A few converts mentioned that while on the conversion process, many community members lacked sensitivity and respect for the converts' privacy regarding their motives for conversion. It was mentioned - more than once - how converts' personal reasons for conversion would be openly discussed in group scenarios (e.g., Sabbath meal tables) without regard for the convert's comfort. Some converts enjoyed the open discussions as it brought catharsis, validation and admiration. Others however felt uncomfortable with the invasion of privacy:

I found Jewish culture very without boundaries. I found Jewish people - they feel they can ask you anything about everything - intrusive, that if you convert they have license to ask you anything about your life. So I found it - it was a very different culture (Riette, spiritual and ethnic convert).

Another convert, who converted on her own, related how the combination of having no prior connections to draw on through her conversion, plus the constant questioning she experienced whenever staying with a religious family in a new neighbourhood, left her emotionally depleted. Like the converts above, she felt that others felt entitled to extract from her the motives for her conversion without sufficient regard for her privacy, her feelings and the impact of constantly repeating her story:

I was living the whole Judaism per say vicariously through their families because there was no sense of my own base which was extremely [emphasis] frustrating and often painful and I was a point of immense curiosity – that I would have to expose myself all the time to people's curiosity as to why and what, my story and by the end of my stay in that area – not just that community, the whole Jewish community if I had to be in another community for a meal or whatever – very, very exposed and depleted... It was more like absolute fascination [for them]. Like why would you do this and then having to... and then opening up the story to explain that. By the end of it I'd lost my story. You know? You say it so many times you lose it (Stella, spiritual and ethnic convert).

In addition to the perceived insensitivity of community members towards their feelings, converts also felt that many people were ignorant about what a convert has to deal with. This revealed a lack of support:

I don't think they [community members] know how to handle us. One of the ladies I go to *shiurim* with spoke to me on Monday and said you know Susanne, I never realised how involved it is for you converts to actually go through this process and I now look differently at you guys. People simply don't know. They think we just come into it to take over. We are working hard to get there. It is a long process. It is a hard process emotionally and everything (Susanne M, spiritual convert).

Moreover, converts realised that others also assumed that they were generally ignorant about Judaism. However, because of the intensity of the conversion programme, converts frequently knew more about religious law than many Jews-by-birth:

What I've learned is not to ask people about the *halachah* [Jewish law] issues because they don't know most of them themselves [followed by laughter]. So most people get surprised when a convert knows more than they do, I think (Ester, spiritual convert).

This ignorance towards the experience of converts can be linked to three other points. Firstly, it was mentioned converts are too fearful to voice their concerns or problems and thus, become isolated. This implies that they shoulder their problems on their own without support, guidance or empathy. Secondly, this is connected to the converts' lack of voice. The more intimidated and fearful they feel, the less they are able to speak for themselves. Instead, it translates into a need for psychological support. This point is returned to later in this chapter. Thirdly, it was a reminder that they were different, outsiders within the community and could not have the same kind of knowledge as Jews-by-birth.

Within the convert sample, a few felt that Chabad was discouraged. The Chabad rabbis whose communities were too assimilated to support the process did not mind sending converts to more 'religious' communities. They understood that it was an important part of the process to support converts by placing them in contexts that could provide them with religious role models (even if the converts preferred less religious environments). These rabbis and converts did not perceive this requirement of the Beth Din's to be a consequence of a possible resistance to Chabad but rather that it was necessary for a successful conversion. However, in one case, where a new and small but growing Chabad synagogue in a religious area attracted converts, the negative attitude towards Chabad started emerging and the converts felt that Chabad was not encouraged. Three converts felt this way, but it should be

kept in mind that most participants in the study attended non-Chabad synagogue. Very few converts gravitated towards Chabad and experienced resistance to their membership and integration into Chabad communities, which supports this point. All three converts attended the same Chabad synagogue and all three refused to submit to pressure to leave that community:

They don't like Chabad and don't want you to go the whole Chabad approach. If you are converting Chabad they take you out of it. They don't want you to be in a Chabad environment.

M: Is that what they tried to do to you?

R: No, because we were Chabad [unclear]. I think now they are being stricter from what I hear. They are not allowing you to go to a Chabad if you are converting. What they tried to do to me is when I went for lessons I couldn't take a Chabad woman to teach me. It had to be one of... I said Chabad is where I go, this is who I have ties with, and this is what I want and I did – I went to a Chabad woman...You know at the end of the day everybody is different and everybody takes things on differently. I know I keep going back to Chabad but look at Chabad you get and you get. The Chabad we go to there are lots of people that walk and lots of people that drive but you are not going to... for me what I have learned from the Jewish religion is judge favourably. First of all I don't think we should be judging but if you are going to judge then judge favourably. The minute you have an environment where people are judging you negatively that already has lost the plot for me and that is the problem I have with the whole thing. (Gloria, ethnic convert)

[He] says to me the one time I think you should go to this *Sephardi* shul in Sydenham, 12th Avenue. [But] He knows I'm committed to Chabad of XYZ⁹⁴. He knows I am one of the guys that built the damned place and now he wants me to go to the *Sephardi* shul. I don't speak Hebrew very well. That is such a long way from my house what is he doing? Why is he sending me to *Sephardi* shul? (Jonathan, ethnic convert)

Then obviously they weren't happy that we were involved in Chabad. So again it was non-negotiable. I just said my sister [convert] went through with Chabad, my mother [convert] went through with Chabad. I said I am not a Lubavitcha

⁹⁴ Name removed for sensitivity and confidentiality.

but I am very much involved with people in Chabad. I like their approach. I like their warmth. I like their acceptance. I said I am not leaving the shul. I said I don't live in the area [Glenhazel] and I am in no position [financially to move]... I lived at home. (Taylor, ethnic convert with Jewish father)

Taylor gives another example:

I never felt that [warmth of Chabad] in the other [shul]... and that is what they give you during your conversion. They don't show you the other side. It is like a taboo subject. Chabad is taboo. There was an Afrikaans family, their conversion came through just-just before Rosh Hashanah last year and a proper Afrikaans family from Midrand. They moved here and they got in touch with Rabbi H. They started [conversion] with Rabbi H. The *Beit Din* pulled the handbrake. They said if you are going through a conversion you are not going through Chabad. You will have to join *Kollel* [non-Chabad religious shul in the area]. They were very upset but eventually they did. They went... they are happy now... they are there and she always says if she had her first choice she would be back in our shul. So the *Beit Din* have a lot of resistance to Chabad (Taylor, ethnic and family convert).

Despite the perceived negativity about Chabad from the Beth Din, overall that Chabad provided great support for converts outside of the conversion process. Many converts, even if they did not attend Chabad synagogues, benefitted from Chabad services such as their bookshops, rabbis and lecture series. The establishment of a new Chabad synagogue offered converts a place to feel more involved, included and "part of the family" and attracted many converts into its congregation.

During the conversion process, integration into some synagogue communities was not always smooth for some converts. Many spoke about how they had to "shul-hop" before finding the right place for themselves. This is because during the process many converts were quite transient - moving from another city / town / suburb into a broader community consisting of many smaller synagogue communities that they did not know. Trying to find the most suitable place meant sampling a 'shul', an area, a community and its rabbi first before finally buying a new home to establish oneself Jewishly. Some shul-hopped because they saw that they could benefit in different ways from different shuls. This was especially true of the Afrikaners who would pray at one shul in the morning, go to another shul for the lecture and then in the late afternoon, pray at another shul where they could learn with peers / mentors.

Conversion was understood to be a difficult period, but it was confined to a particular time frame and a reasoning that some defended and others criticised. Some remained neutral

or ambivalent, and were non-judgmental stating that they understood and accepted the justifications. Some converts, while speaking about how it affected them, would simultaneously declare - in elation - that it was the best thing they could have done for themselves, had no regrets, and would do it again. Others acknowledged the difficulties and said they would still do it again: "If I think back I will do it again even though it is hard. It was hard but we had all the help of *Hashem* (God). Without Him we couldn't do it. I can just say *Baruch Hashem* [Blessed God] He helped us" (Sarit, spiritual convert). Even those who were critical of the process were reluctant to express regret. One (black) convert claimed, "If I had to do it again I would but I would rather be born Jewish than go through the conversion again". In addition to the difficulty she experienced during conversion, this convert's race could be seen as relevant to the reason she made this claim. Given her race-based experiences and the perception she had that Jewish meant being white, it raises the question of whether she stated this because of the negativity she felt from others towards her identity and that she was grappling with hegemonic whiteness. But, one has to wonder how easy it would be for someone to regret such a life-changing event with so much connected to it? It would be tantamount to admitting to themselves, their families, friends and the Beth Din that their decision was wrong, that they had made a mistake and others were right. It would also cast regret on all that had come after - a husband (or wife), and marriage as well as children. Only in one case did a convert claim outright that the reasoning that led to her acceptance for conversion was in hindsight "stupid", that others doing it were also "stupid", that she had suffered tremendous emotional pain to its effect on her family and that she had made many personal and familial sacrifices. She stated:

No, I wouldn't [convert again] - definitely not. I think that if I had the knowledge; if I... you know it is like saying if you've never had a baby you don't understand... well you don't. If I could have the knowledge that I have now when I met Saul I would have had... I think I would have stood up. I think that is what I believe... I didn't stand up for myself. I would say to him that if you want to be with me you be with me; if you don't want to be with me then you know what buddy but... and I actually in retrospect think that he would have actually have stayed with me, but I didn't have the guts; I wasn't brave enough to say take it or leave it. I didn't have enough faith in myself and enough strength actually... that is where I keep thinking about that weak side of me (Lynn, ethnic convert).

I think the process of three years makes you... the entire time you feel like you are being watched and that you're not good enough and that you're not Jewish. They don't ever say it... welcome you to feel that you are on the process doing

it and so it would be like studying a degree. You are a BA student studying BA... you haven't got your certificate yet but you are a BA student (Lynn, ethnic convert).

However, in spite of this, she realised she could not go back. She could never reveal her true feelings to her family for fear of making them worry about her. Her isolation from her family for conversion had been hard enough for her and them and to admit that she should have done things differently would be even more painful. In order to ensure that the conversion was not lost, she made many close friends in the community, made important professional contributions to the synagogue she belonged to and took ownership of her new Jewish life. Most converts in this study have remained committed, strongly integrated and very active in their communities. Perusal of converts' Facebook and noting their Facebook friends after their conversion is evidence of this.

Much more can be written about converts' experiences of the conversion process and how it affects the converts' families, their personal relationships with their partners and their children. Each issue is extremely dense and complex and to include them would further exceed the length requirements of this dissertation. Their omission from this dissertation is not meant to convey that these issues do not arise, are unimportant or irrelevant. The process, although well intentioned in dealing with requests for conversion, seems to pose unexpected difficulties and dilemmas for converts. Converts, who have to grapple with these problems on their own, seek psychological assistance rather than challenge the system. Many converts volunteered recommendations for the Beth Din to improve the process and much of this is mirrored by what Rabbi D said in Chapter 4.9.2 - that converts need psychological support⁹⁵:

I wish the Beth Din would help and not make it such an awful process. (Lynn, ethnic convert)

There need to be proper mentors to handhold individuals in the process that it becomes a healthy psychological and emotional process. (Stella, spiritual and ethnic convert)

⁹⁵ Like Rabbi D, the Registrar also raised the issue of the need to support converts psychologically and had introduced ad hoc sessions relating to life coaching and group therapy. The psychological stress was something he had worried about frequently and had explored many avenues to support converts as best as he could.

Maybe what the Beth Din should think about, and I don't know if they do it now, maybe they need psychological counselling for converts whilst it is happening. (Nicola, ethnic convert)

When I had issues, I kept quiet. I didn't... I don't want to rock the boat and put anything out there that could jeopardise the process. So that is one thing; that is one aspect that I really think the Beth Din should look into – having something; giving the converts some sort of tools to help them cope because I don't think they actually do realise what actually goes on, on a daily basis. (Shifra, spiritual convert)

If the *Beit Din* needs to realise that they need to build a support group for the converts that would be great...I felt I was tired after the conversion. I just had to find myself, my soul, and *Hashem* again. Even my daughter said that and even my husband said it. You know you can't tell... we felt that way and I couldn't tell anybody that because you are so scared it is going to harm your conversion. (Sarit, spiritual convert)

To me the process isn't... I suppose nothing is 100% but I don't think it is the right... I think the approach is the main... if they had to change their whole approach to things and the way they are people would be more... I think their actual success rate from what I see (not actual figures) I don't think it is great. The amount of people that have remained very frum or have actually embraced the religion to me are very few that I see out there. I think more are once they have finished with it they are done and over and they just carry on with their lives. They have done what they had to do and they carry on. I think from that point of view they are losing a lot. If they approached it differently I think people would embrace it more and would actually want to become more religious and take on more. Like I say it is the approach – that is the negative for me. (Gloria, ethnic convert)

Later she suggests that the Beth Din should draw from the Chabad approach to improve the process, since they are warmer, more embracing and helpful:

I think they can learn a lot from Chabad and the whole Chabad approach (Gloria, ethnic convert).

What is evident in this section is that converts and community rabbis identify the same shortcomings in the conversion process. There is consensus that the process suspends the

spiritual aspects of conversion, shifts the emphasis of conversion to the social realm (aimed at acculturating converts into a strongly and clearly defined ethnic group) and measures converts on a combination of their motives, sincerity and externally demonstrated behaviour to achieve the envisaged homogenous identity. The current process inadvertently makes a mockery of sincerity and produces negativity unwittingly. The result is that both rabbis and converts felt that psychological support was necessary to facilitate the process. Many converts made direct pleas to make the process less intimidating and to learn from other organisations. This constituted an appeal to reconsider the implementation of the process. Rabbis mentioned they preferred the decentralised system since it created stronger bonds and was likely to improve the results in conversion. Similarly, the converts valued one-one relationships with community rabbis and the Registrar, as it afforded them recognition and opportunities to work through difficulties and thus gave them agency in the process.

7.4 Experiences in the community

Once converts had completed their conversion process, they integrated into the community via marriage and the families they created, through their children at schools and through their occupations (many had left their jobs outside of the community). Converts became quite involved in their religious communities and in many other Orthodox institutions within the broader Orthodox community. A purview of the various Facebook pages of converts confirms how happy and integrated converts appear - at least at the surface.

Community integration has been easier for some; for others it has been a challenge. The reasons given by converts were always pinned on personal strengths or shortcomings (shyness, being reserved, not talkative, "unsociable"), as some of the testimonies have already shown. The interviews showed that converts often applied their professional knowledge and expertise to the broader Jewish community, which helped them to achieve greater integration. Some converts benefitted their religious communities by leading fundraising and event management, giving inspirational or professional talks in the area of their expertise (e.g., psychology), especially in the interest of family institutions and communal wellbeing. Or, due to higher levels of education among Jews-by-birth, some converts provided skills lacking in the community (e.g., bookkeeping, secretarial work, specialised beauty services for religious women). Other converts used their previous career experience to innovate, such as the development of beauty products compliant with religious laws, guiding women on grooming

suitable for religious women and delivering courses in this regard. Others found jobs as teachers at religious schools in science and physical education, for example. Converts concerned about the future of their synagogues also became board members.

But while integration was achieved, some converts moved away from their religious communities after conversion. Three converts who no longer remained religiously active and visible within the religious community were contacted for an interview. However, they all declined the invitation or did not respond. Their refusal / non-response is significant and requires interpretation. Several questions can be posed: is it because they hated the conversion process and wanted to re-establish their lives and identities in their own way? Is it because they didn't want to be exposed and made vulnerable to the Beth Din again? Is it because they wanted to forget their conversion? Is it because of the dynamics in their marriage? Or, did they fail to achieve what they wanted from conversion? Irrespective of the reason, converts who had withdrawn were no longer in a religious community and were barely remembered. They were not visible in any of the religious communities and difficult to locate for interviewing. A chance meeting and an informal and brief discussion with one such convert revealed that she no longer "keeps *Shabbat*" and she "ran away from it all" as soon as she could and as fast as she could. She explained that it did not make sense for her to raise her children "that way" (observant) since it was not part of her or her husband's upbringing and she was not interested in religion. Another went through a bitter divorce shortly after the conversion and made it clear that, while her children would continue to attend a Jewish school, she would not have any part in religious activities in future and would not remain part of any religious community. Her ex-husband maintained contact between the children and the religious community. She did not respond to a request for an interview. The other convert who was contacted responded in a hostile, aggressive and angry manner to a request for interview. The person who had put me in contact with her explained that she had been through a harrowing experience as a result of her divorce, having been left with young children with very little support. One rabbi had spoken at length in his interview about converts who do not receive adequate support from the community after divorce or if the husband had an affair following the conversion and marriage. What he said related to this convert's experience in terms of feeling abandoned after conversion. Rabbi D, although not referring to this case, explained:

Something that maybe is also not thought about enough. I want to tell you something... Imagine that a guy marries a girl and takes her away from her family and her religion and everything she was brought up to be. The marriage doesn't work out and then she is dumped. I use the word dumped because I

want to use the word dumped. She is dumped emotionally, physically, and religiously and now what. This is something that I've seen too often. I don't have the answer for it. I once went to the *Beit Din* with a proposal when I was going through one of these. Maybe I was just emotionally caught up in it but I said the guy signs a special document when he marries a girl who converts that... now we can't say you have to stay married to her forever because that might be abusive for her as well, but he has to take on extra obligations for her upkeep and welfare and whatever because when he dumps her she is going to leave the religion. So now you have converted a girl, she has come into the community, she has maybe a couple of kids and she has no family, no support system - what have we done here? So okay let him divorce her like anybody else. Surely there has to be something that obligates a guy a little bit more than that. They said they thought it was impossible and they couldn't do it. I argued that there has got to be something because it is completely unfair...She is worse off than anybody else.

Another convert who faced the possibility of divorce chose to rather address the relationship with her husband and improve matters, as the prospect of being a divorced convert in the community was too daunting. Reflecting on a period in which she and her husband had separated, she found:

In our separation the rabbi... nobody even noticed that we didn't go to shul for three months or pick up the phone and say where are you guys? My rabbi didn't even know. Plus if we had divorced I know the community wouldn't be there for me. I would slowly disappear or I could disappear. There would be no fighting or support or anything. (Samantha, ethnic convert)

On the topic of differential treatment between Jews-by-birth and converts, converts either accepted and defended the Beth Din's position that more was required of them or found their own way of balancing the requirements against what they felt was being true to themselves as individuals. The position was defended as necessary to demonstrate Jewishness. Without the emphasis on behaviour that would define one as a religious Jew, one could not be identified as Jewish:

I feel that there is nothing that makes me Jewish other than living a Jewish lifestyle. A piece of paper does not make me Jewish. The fact that went to the *mikveh* makes me partially Jewish but... you know... the only thing that makes me Jewish is living a Jewish life daily. (Ava, ethnic convert)

However, the differentiation is not always readily accepted and takes time to be absorbed. At first Stella found the high expectations of observance demanded of her due to her

status as a convert extremely judgmental, confusing and distressing (note many ethnic converts first encountered non-observant Orthodoxy through their partners):

A Jew from birth seems to have – whether it's correct or not from a Torah point of view – a freedom to set their own level of observance where I definitely feel that there's a sense that converts don't have that. It's not even a right because it's not a right. I mean the Torah says this is the way to do it – but a South African Jew it seems to be very acceptable that I choose my level and I don't feel that that same allowance is there for converts. There's an expectation for converts that isn't there for your other average Jew... And it drove me to the point I remember so clearly asking Rabbi G – I remember exactly where I was, it was at night standing in the driveway of his house. I said just tell me. Is there a thing in the Torah that says converts are judged more harshly if they don't adhere to the laws than a Jew? That was such [emphasis]...He said no, not that I can think of and you know, he knows the Torah backwards and forwards and every way and he was just humbled to say no, not that I'm aware of. I saw him like searching his mind to try and find something and then go no. Once you're a Jew you stand in the same part as everyone else. But that sense! Where did that sense come from? That [deep intake of breath] I've chosen it and I didn't have to choose it and now I'm not going to do what's right and now I'm going to be judged... – that comes from somewhere in that fear based process. It has to. Or it comes from the community but there is that expectation that if you chose to do it, then you [emphasis] have to live it according to the ideal, but we don't have to (Stella, ethnic and spiritual convert).

Taylor, who had attended a secular Jewish day school and who had a Jewish identity prior to conversion, at first battled with the idea, but had come to accept it provided that she could justify the explanation. Her response clearly indicates the narrative that converts receive when questioning the differences between Jews-by-birth and converts:

I mean one of my biggest gripes which I could never understand was I used to say well it is not fair. Why is it that somebody who is born Jewish can eat *treif* [non-kosher], doesn't have to wear skirts, doesn't have to be *shomrei* [observant]? It was actually my sister who said to me, who said that? Who said that they don't have to do that? Actually they do it is just through the years of becoming so secular that they don't have to do it anymore in their minds. That it is okay... I am Jewish, it is my birth right and I don't have to keep the Sabbath and I don't have to keep kosher. As a converting Jew if you were there receiving the Torah you would have done everything that you are going to do now as a convert. So for me that was always hard. It was like, but why, but why, but why? It did take me time to just mull it over. I need to understand something. If I

understand I will stop fighting. If I don't understand I will continue with resistance until I understand. In the beginning I did, I used to think it is so unfair. We've got to do this and we've got to do that, but it is okay if you're born Jewish. It was only when it was just put into perspective that it is actually not okay that all these born and bred Jewish people who aren't doing what they actually commanded to do that is all. Except you are commanded to do it and you have to do it or else you are just not going to be Jewish. The theory is there are enough non-practicing Jews that don't want to convert more. So you either accept that this is what it is to be Jewish or you don't. It was a choice. I was either going to do it because I wanted to or I wasn't going to. For me it is like all or nothing. I can't do and then what suits me, so okay I will keep a kosher home, I will eat out *treif*. I will wear skirts when I am out in case I bump into a rabbi, but if I go out at night and whatever I will wear pants. I just knew I couldn't do that. So it was... for me it was always gradual. I never just gave up wearing pants, never. That was the hardest thing for me to do. The kosher was dead easy, but the pants that was hard. So I knew if I was going to do it, it was going to be in my time...So I believe everyone is on their journey and even those who say, I am Jewish but it doesn't matter I don't have to keep kosher. I don't judge them. That is their journey. Deep down they know right from wrong. They do. It irks them when they see other people doing it. I have always believed, if something irritates you it is a reflection of yourself that something is missing in your life. That is my little take on it. (Taylor, ethnic convert and father Jewish)

Others felt that being "forced" into keeping certain observances that others were not required made them imposters to themselves. They had learned how to navigate their spaces so that they would not offend, cause harm and remain true to themselves. The idea of pinning identity down to an external set of criteria, rather than an internal sense of being, was problematic:

I have got *sheitls* [wigs]... I had been wearing skirts... I had been wearing skirts since I'd mageid [common language for converted]. I wore skirts and covered my arms and did the whole thing. I kept my head covered after *mikveh* and after getting married I'd say for the first two years... two/three years and I wore skirts for about six years. Then I decided that I was not being true to me because I can be Jewish and I don't have to pretend. If I go to Shul I actually have a *sheitl* I will put on. If I go to a *Bar mitzvah* or wedding or whatever I have a *sheitl* I wear. I have got hats, I love hats. I have skirts... whatever. As a normal person if I am running around doing the shopping, heaving boxes in and out the back of my car and this type of thing I am not going to trip over a skirt. Also when I was doing the AIDS work I was working on mines. You are not allowed to wear

things that flap. It is sort of a fire hazard and danger so you are not allowed to so it sort of became a whole... I just decided that is not where I am. You see I was being true to myself during the time that I was *frumm*, very *frumm*. I was being true to myself and my beliefs. Then when I realised that my beliefs had changed, my attitude had changed...

I didn't have to have outward expressions. I can do all the other stuff. I keep kosher, I do that. I have a caravan that has milk and meat in it. I do all of that. I will drive to shul because I can't walk anymore. I will walk to shul when I am staying with Kaylee and carry a walking stick. Basically I don't have to pretend and my husband actually had a problem with it at one stage because he used to say to me you can't come to shul because you drive to shul. Of course being the strong person that I am I then went totally off the rails and told him to go to hell. Basically it was... I don't have to do an outward thing and he realised that at times... because there was a time that he walked out of shul and a friend of mine who lived across from the shul her husband had shot himself and it was on the *Shabbat* and he walked home and said you must go to Anne. Now because I can do counselling and all the rest of it I jumped in my car and went to Anne and that he was fine with. He wasn't fine with it until he realised that the outward stuff that I do actually doesn't hurt him. I used to be much more religious than he used to... now he is totally *frumm* and a pain in the neck. (Sadie, ethnic convert)

Another convert felt that others were at fault for not accepting the requirements of conversion and the responsibilities of their new roles:

Anything in life... I believe when you make a choice you've got to go with it 100% and be happy with it forever. That is a choice you've made, make peace with it, that's it – the end. Don't two years down the line look back and look at the girl and the fashions have changed and gosh look how nice those leggings look and I wish I could wear that instead of wearing a dress or a skirt every day and oh my gosh I would love to go skiing in the Alps but there is no kosher food... poor me I am so sorry for myself... I can't go on that holiday. It can make you resentful. It really can, but there are so many other opportunities, there are so many other things. You don't have to do what everybody is doing. So you won't go skiing, so you'll eat aeroplane food – it is not the end of the world. If you want to do it you'll make a plan and that is how I feel. If you are going to make that commitment you have to make it 100%. You have to make peace with it. That is how it is – the end. That is how I've gone through it. You can't go to a Michelin Star Restaurant and have a fancy meal and drink fancy wine like

the film stars do – so what, big deal – it is not going to make you a better person. You might say oh I have been to that restaurant but really in the great scheme of things who cares. That is how I see it. (Leigh, ethnic convert)

Ethnic converts grappled with the differentiation between Jews-by-birth and converts more than spiritual converts. Spiritual converts accepted the conditions of the conversion without doubt or regret. They felt that they had to be as Jewish as possible to protect Jewish identity so that it is not diluted and protect the Jewish religion. In this, these converts played a special role in guiding Jews who were "off the path". This shows how they had internalised specific religious narratives that would support a uniform set of behaviours, measurable in terms of religiosity.

One of my customers is Israeli and she said that her rabbi in Israel is saying that converts are like a pest. I looked at her and she said a lot of converts bring in a lot of Christianity with them... it is true, it is very true. Even a lot of Jews, if you listen to them, mentality of Christians. Then she said that is where the Jews learn all this stuff and I agree 100%. They are pests for the Jews because they make the Jews jealous and you actually let them feel guilty. It was really beautiful the way she said it because it is true, it is really true. That is why I always say to them on the table you don't appreciate Judaism and you got it on a golden plate. I used to get very cross because if you see Jews driving on *Shabbat* and doing this on *Shabbat* - it used to upset me so much to think wow here we have to work hard to do this and why don't they care. It is like... you know in Christianity you also learn the fear for God. It is like, aren't they scared they are doing it? I pray that the Jewish people will start seeing the light to become religious so the *Moshiach* [Messiah] can come. (Sarit, spiritual convert)

Hearing the convert's voice in the community is a matter that requires attention and this was touched upon earlier in this chapter. Because converts are expected to conform to dominant social practices and religiously defined norms, in general converts' voices are not heard in the community when their opinions diverge from the dominant narrative, on issues of disagreement or negative experiences. As one convert explained:

I don't think you are [allowed a voice]. I think it [the situation] is 100% bureaucratic in the sense that this is the way we do things; this is the way that things have always been done; you will... you know... tow the line 100%; do this when we want you to do it; do that etc. and then at the end when we eventually decide, right, then we'll give you the prize. (Cathy, ethnic convert)

In other words, the voice of converts must be in line with the dominant voice of the community and this is an implicit condition of conversion. Converts were also silent on political

issues relating to the community, such as Israeli politics, anti-apartheid activism and racism, and the Holocaust, for the same reason. In some cases, the view was that they could not empathise with Jewish suffering, such as that in the Holocaust because they were converts:

Heaven forbid I ever try arguing the case of the Palestinians to anyone [chuckling] or to Doron...I can't bear it. Doron and I had such a fight the other night. On Carte Blanch Julius Malema's tirade after... did you watch it? He was like the whites just want us to say apartheid is finished and we must move on and we mustn't talk about it anymore. Doron was like but it [apartheid] is finished. I said to him Doron, the Holocaust happened seventy years ago... is it time to not talk about it and put it behind? Oh my word... but that was genocide... I said Doron this was an oppression of a people, there were murders it is something that stays in the psyche. He was like how can you compare apartheid to the Holocaust? Can you understand? (Samantha, ethnic convert)

The same applied to religious topics. Asked whether she would ever challenge a religious idea that she did not agree with, a convert said:

Oh no. I don't think I'd do that...those kinds of areas where - as a convert - I would be very wary of going because part of me would think people would all say well it's because she's a convert, she doesn't know what she is talking about. You're right I think that even afterwards there is definitely a sense of kind of watch... in a way it is almost to protect myself because I don't want to put myself in a position where people are saying what do you expect because that's hurtful. Rather don't rock the boat because if you do it is going to come down to that. It is not going to come down to the fact that you've read something; you've thought of something. It can't come from there it has to come from the fact that you... you know (Cathy, ethnic convert).

Converts would not speak out to authorities or publicly against communal or religious values or views they did not agree with. They also kept silent on personal issues where they encountered problems (such as difficulties during conversion; see section 7.3 in previous section of this chapter). Furthermore, during conversion, due to the nature of the power relationship with the Beth Din, it has already been seen that few converts challenge issues affecting them outside of direct conversations with the Registrar or community rabbis. These grievances are raised only in private and confidential settings. Public airing of views is avoided because it was perceived to threaten their chance of conversion (as already seen in feedback from converts). The issue of voice links back to an earlier point made: no speaking out due to fear which further increases isolation and lack of support in dealing with personal and familial problems (this is links to the point Herman (2007) makes about dissenting voices in

the community, see section 4.3.1). Some converts would not even share any of their difficulties with their own families (as already seen earlier in this section 7.4) to avoid any negative light shed on their decision to conversion. Further, they also felt that they could not share these views with their own husbands who would not understand their position and would put it down to them being not Jewish:

I can't discuss these types of things with my family because they're so anti some of it as it is.

M: Also you [have said that you] can't speak to [your husband] about everything either.

R: And I can't speak to some of my Jewish friends either. I always say... I remember saying to Doron a few months ago, I said you have to understand that from when you were a baby Jewishness was put into you and there are things that you have pure faith on and it's in you and that I didn't have that. There are things that I still struggle with and that I... there is no switch. You can't suddenly decide I'm Jewish tomorrow and just [flick that switch]. (Samantha, ethnic convert)

Older converts (i.e., those who had converted three or more decades previously) were generally more outspoken and acted as advocates for younger converts - as was seen in the earlier testimony of Rachel (see section 7.3). Older converts could do this because they had achieved standing in the community because of their individual contributions or leadership in the community, for establishing secure and solid Jewish families, remaining within the community and keeping compliant to religious principles to varying degrees. Also, as their children were adults, they did not need to "prove their Jewishness" and had nothing to lose. They were no longer threatened by the Beth Din having lived more years of their lives as Jews than as non-Jews.

But it would be wrong to say that converts had no voice at all. 'Successful' converts were encouraged to speak publicly and were promoted as icons of success. The platforms they were given served to demonstrate the personal benefits of the adoption of Judaism, provide affirmation to their religious communities and to endorse the cohesion of the community and its strengths, as well as reflect on the beauty of the religion and religious community. Converts would be held up as role models and beacons for the community to affirm the community and the convert in supporting her/his religious lifestyle and serve as examples to secular Jews-by-birth interested in becoming religious. One convert who was contacted for an interview and ultimately refused, was considered to be a successful convert. Throughout her conversion, she became extremely religious and had consistently maintained a high level of

religiosity following her conversion (even though at times in an internally conflictual way). At the time of my request for interview, during our telephonic conversation, she mentioned that she had been given multiple chances to express her journey and experiences of conversion in the community. She had been requested for an interview for the "Jewish Life" magazine and the Beth Din had asked her and her husband to write a book on conversion for other converts to share how they achieved success. However, she had refused all other opportunities to speak and write about her conversion publicly, and refused the interview. However, this example shows how converts' voices have a particular functional role in the community. When their voices are seen as adding value to the affirmation of Jewish religious values and life, converts are given public platforms.

Black converts were also given public platforms. There were two such famous successful converts. Swazi prince, (Rabbi) Natan Gamedze, converted to Judaism many decades ago was invited to share his journey with members of the community. As a young student at the University of the Witwatersrand, he became enchanted with the Hebrew language and studied for a PhD in Hebrew in Israel. Subsequent to that, he converted and is now a rabbi living in Jerusalem. He speaks openly and publicly about his journey to Judaism, including a number of times at community events in Johannesburg. His profile may be viewed on his website (Gamedze, n.d.) and his videos are available on YouTube. Ilana Skolnik (see footnote 17 in section 1.3.3) returned to South Africa after the passing of her husband in the late 2000s and began advocating for the Chabad movement. She has publicly spoken about her conversion to Judaism. I attended one of her talks at a Chabad event in Johannesburg in preparation for an upcoming religious festival, Shavuot, associated with the reading and celebration of the Book of Ruth. The Book of Ruth concerns the role model presented by the convert, Ruth, who gave up her past and unconditionally accepted Judaism. As a successful convert, her journey, like that of Ruth's is presented to Jews and converts as an inspiration. One of her talks may be viewed on the Chabad website and more are available on YouTube. Both speakers hold inspirational value and their race is not insignificant. These speakers help foster the impression of an embracing, non-racial community. In other words, the voice of converts was considered valuable if it promoted a particular beneficial view of the community.

7.5 Afrikaner converts, their experiences and integration in their communities

There were a number of interesting elements about Afrikaner's and their integration, which was unique to the pattern of converts up until that time. Because of the betrayal and

pain associated with their past, which other converts generally did not encounter, Afrikaner converts generally distanced themselves from their past completely and in many cases severed all former ties (except for immediate family, if the family were understanding about their conversion). By doing so, a new belonging, a new home, could be achieved without any strings attached. Through conversion Afrikaners totally transformed themselves and presented themselves to the world as new and different human beings - as if they were completely born again (as discussed in Chapter 2 about the symbolic meaning of conversion). Conversion gave them this opportunity by providing them with a new name, a Hebrew name which they used daily, and they changed their surnames too (in many cases). This in effect eliminated their former identity. Conversion gave them a new structure to life: set of ethical values, religious framework, historical legacy, culture, language and a new land in the sense of the opportunity to assume new citizenship in Israel. Conversion replaced everything they had distanced from, or that was painful to them, in the past. It filled a gap and gave them a new identity, a new life. Relocation to Israel provided a new start in life to live out a new identity without the negative associations of the past. One convert illustrated this:

A friend of mine who went to Israel and actually *magired* [Yiddish word for converted] in Israel 2 months ago, they flew out to South Africa and we met up – a whole lot of us - people who had *magired* and were in a group together. We met up with them and she walked up to me and she said to me what’s happening - I thought you were going to Australia? And I said it didn’t happen. The paperwork just didn’t come through and she said to me that’s because *Hashem* wants you in Israel and when she said that I immediately was so [emphasis] emotional and I had this lump in my throat and tears were running and I said you know, you are right because the minute she said it, it was like she pinpointed – put her finger on exactly where I should be. Spiritually that is where I should be. I know it’s not going to be easy. I know it’s a hard life but I’ve had a hard life. I haven’t had an easy life so for me this is an opportunity to start afresh – a new beginning. I was battling in South Africa (Shifra, spiritual convert).

Many Afrikaners saw living in Israel as the end goal of their conversion. Apart from the other interview extracts already presented, Dinah explained:

The land is really part of your soul. Because we’ve gone through the word and everywhere it just reiterates you have to go back to the land, you have to go back to the land. All the prophets talk about going back to the land. We still want to... with my whole being I want to live in Israel...I would love to live there. I would love to live on the land. I think it just makes much more sense religious-wise. It has more impact. I would love to go into a *frumm* community if possible (Dina, spiritual convert).

It has already been indicated that many Afrikaner converts and families left for Israel as soon as they could, depending on their age, profession and economic circumstances. The age of the convert was especially significant in this regard. The older the individual at the time of conversion (e.g., 50 plus) and the closer to pension age, the harder it was for them to immigrate to Israel. This was based on financial and familial reasons. In moving to new cities and suburbs to become Jewish, and in making occupational adjustments to be able to live an observant Jewish life, many families had already made several costly financial adjustments that impeded a new start in Israel at a later time in their lives. Because of their age and the language barriers, finding jobs in Israel and starting again would not be easy. At a family level, they did not want to separate from their children and grandchildren. These converts would have liked to have gone to Israel but chose to remain as part of the Johannesburg Orthodox community to avoid further hardship.

I would like to but I am too old now. I am nearly on pension age so what is the use of going there and everybody you know are here – your children and grandchildren are here – not that they are going the way you are going but you still want to see them. To go there in our age and to find a job there is going to be very difficult. We rather stay here and keep what we have and keep up what we have and we are happy (Batsheva, spiritual convert)

I will even clean homes to go and live in Israel but I cannot go until my son either gets married or decides he doesn't want to or he converts. If he converts one day we will go otherwise he must be settled and then we will go (Dinah, spiritual convert).

Despite the difficulties in emigrating to Israel, some did go ahead and they did tend to cluster in the same kinds of communities, or even in the same community.

Among those who remained in South Africa, once converted, Afrikaners integrated as deeply as possible in all aspects of Jewish life. As mentioned, Afrikaners usually converted as entire family units with children, rather than as singles or couples. This was especially true if children were pre-adolescents. As such, unlike singles and couples, they formed 'instant' Jewish families. This had benefits for their integration as their reach into the community was wider: through synagogue, schools and work. Afrikaners who converted with their children as complete family units created more generations of Jews quicker than ethnic converts who were starting out with marriage and family creation. Afrikaners entered the community as middle-aged couples with pre-adolescent or adolescent children. The age of the converted children is significant: they were approaching marriageable age and conversion therefore

placed them in contexts where they could only Jewish marriage partners. In keeping with religious ideas, converts' children marry soon after and produce the first generation of Jewish grandchildren. In other words, with their conversion, these converts produce in a shorter space of time, compared to ethnic converts, three generations of Jews (grandparents, parents and children). As a result, Afrikaners assimilate and integrate into the community very quickly and their former lineages fade rapidly.

The Afrikaner converts also stood out as the most active, committed and stable synagogue congregants and continuous learners of the religion. In this regard, after their conversion, it was not unusual to find they had taken the learning of Hebrew to new heights, surpassing other converts and many Jews-by-birth as well as the expectations of the Beth Din. A Hebrew teacher who formerly taught at the University of South Africa (UNISA) offered an advanced course in Hebrew to all members of the community. The classes were known to be stringent, extremely demanding and accepted only the highest level of performance and attendance. A special class for Afrikaner converts was created because of the demand from them, particularly the men. These classes helped Afrikaner converts with integration as it contributed to their religious learning in synagogue, won admiration from their communities, and would ultimately help them in Israel. Above all, it demonstrated their commitment to Judaism which was applauded by their communities, which in turn encouraged them to keep studying. In addition to learning Hebrew, Afrikaner converts tended to find jobs in the Jewish community which enhanced their integration. For example, Batsheva and Naamah are both bookkeepers and now work for Jewish organisations and businesses. Working for Jewish employers had benefits in that the converts did not need to explain their observances to anyone. They also felt that they would receive more support. Batsheva said:

I work between Jewish ladies all day long. My senior is Jewish. Our boss is also a convert – the big guy in the finance department. We fit in because they treat you the way they should treat their fellow Jews so that is actually amazing (Batsheva, spiritual convert).

In addition to working as a bookkeeper for a kosher business, Naamah is a physical education teacher. She noticed that the Jewish schools that her daughters attended did not offer any sports and so she created a netball team at the school.

However, in integrating into the community, Afrikaner converts did not want to make an "Afrikaner Judaism" (see section 6.4). This reluctance was based on the possibility of getting 'lost in translation' which could lead down the "wrong path" (as they had done previously in their perception); it also meant that Afrikaners generally did not want to create a

community of Afrikaner converts since that is what they had left behind. Although the Afrikaner converts came to know each other, were friendly and supportive of each other, went to the same synagogues, and became friends, they generally tried to make new social circles:

We came into the community and it sounds a bit harsh but from the beginning there were a lot of Afrikaans people and we decided we don't want to be in an Afrikaans club. We decided to join the Jewish people to become part of the Jewish people not to be a group within it. I have to learn from the Jewish people and they can teach me. The Afrikaans people cannot teach me because they also still have to learn. From the beginning we decided we are in no Afrikaans club and to be very honest we don't really mix... we know these people but we don't mix with these people. It was our choice to become part of the Jewish culture and not to be separated into any situation. (Dinah, spiritual convert)

Another convert felt, "I have to learn from the Jewish people and they can teach me". For that reason, she justified not creating a clique of Afrikaners within the Jewish community. She continued, "The Afrikaans people cannot teach me because they also still have to learn" (Dinah, spiritual convert). Although it appeared that she was referring to Christian Afrikaners, the immigration of many Afrikaner converts to Israel demonstrated that they had left their legacy behind and, like Dinah, felt they had nothing more to gain from Afrikaners.

7.6 Race, racism and experiences of integration in the community

In earlier chapters a conflict in identity between race and ethnicity (that of being Jewish) was discussed. This section shows how the anomaly between being black and Jewish raises many uncomfortable situations for black converts, which challenge their feelings of acceptance and belonging within the Jewish Orthodox community. Conversion raises the question of who is a Jew, but race amplifies it. As mentioned in Chapter 1, Jews in South Africa have historically been classified and accepted as white. Black people in South Africa have historically been defined according to their African ethnic tribes, follow either African indigenous religions or Christianity and so members of the Jewish community do not naturally conceive of converts of colour as Jewish, as one black convert attests:

Black people aren't considered Jewish. When people think Jewish, they think white – they don't think black (Ester, spiritual convert).

This quotation indicates the conflation of ethnicity, race and religion into one category of people: Jews. The conflation between ethnicity, race and religion resembles findings in studies of converts to Islam in Western Europe where converts who are for example, ethnic

Germans, Dutch, or Danes, could not possibly be Muslim (Jensen, 2008; van Nieuwkerk 2004; Wohlrab-Sahr, 1999). Western Europeans are seen as indigenous, white and Christian, whereas Muslims are seen as foreign and either Middle Eastern or Asian. In South Africa, as indigenous people, black converts are a challenge to the white identity of the community whereas the race of white converts is inconsequential. For black converts, their colour indicates that they are outsiders to the Jewish community, and when they are encountered by members in the community, the possibility that they may not be outsiders initially does not arise. As a result, problems emerge. This has been especially evident in the responses they receive from Community Security Officers (CSO)⁹⁶ who view them as security risks. Unknown white visitors entering a synagogue without an escort may be stopped, but black visitors are immediately stopped because they are automatically assumed not to be part of a Jewish congregation.

You see when I go to a shul that's new and the security stops me I know they are doing their job – they must stop everybody – but for me I was stopped by one and he said to me... I explained who I was and that I've been to the shul about 4 times, it's not my first time here and then he wouldn't let me in. He said but you understand I have to ask your friend and I said but I don't even know if she is there because we didn't arrange to meet here at shul. Then there was another lady coming who goes to Waverley shul and I said do you know that lady? and he said no I don't know her but if she knows you then you can go in and I thought why is she okay to go in if that's for security reasons? That means I am a suspect – I'm just a natural suspect because of my colour because he didn't stop her. He said it was fine if she knows me. He doesn't know her but if she knows me it's okay. He doesn't know – she's white so she can go in. So for me that felt really... I cried the whole *Shabbat*. I didn't *daven* [pray]; I couldn't *daven* – I cried and I haven't been there since you know and I think my friend will invite me to come there and I don't know how I'm going to feel going there. So I went once and then I spoke to the rabbi about it – the rabbi of that Shul – but he didn't say anything. He said look it was an accident and I apologise and you are welcome to come here

⁹⁶ The CSO (Community Security Organisation) is a community initiative created to protect Jewish life in South Africa from security threats and acts of terror. One of the protective measures is preventing unknown individuals from accessing community facilities, such as when there are social and religious gatherings.

but I felt like you know what, he didn't make me feel like it was a security issue. He made me feel like a criminal; like a suspect because he wouldn't stop that woman and ask her even though he didn't know her. So those are the issues that I go through. I don't mind being questioned at the gate because they question people that they don't know but I don't want to be questioned and suspected of being a criminal simply because of my colour because nothing like that has happened to South African Jewish communities. You know there has never been a black person going in there and causing damage and hurting people – thank God for that. So for me it makes me feel... I feel like I can't just go to any Shul by myself. You know even if I've been there once I don't feel I can just go there because they will stop me and they will be doing the right thing but I will still hurt you know. And I'll still be thinking would they have stopped me if I was white? because I mean I dress up the right way [according to the modest dress expected of women]...I have to learn to accept and expect it to happen (Ester, spiritual convert).

Ester appreciates the role of the CSO in securing community facilities. Her objection is not about being questioned, but rather that black individuals are automatically singled out whereas unknown white individuals are not necessarily so. In other words, there is unequal treatment to strangers approaching synagogues by race. Furthermore, the underlying assumption that she is a security threat or a possible criminal because of her race is very upsetting to her. Other black converts had experienced similar encounters trying to enter synagogues. One stated that she had been prevented from entering shul on the holiest day of the year, Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement). Since her white Jewish friends who were not regular shul goers (implying were also not known to the CS Officers) were allowed to enter she concluded that it was "racial profiling". CSO's behaviour towards black converts is therefore perceived to be occurring discriminately towards black converts. What it indicates is that there is an equation between race and security or criminality from those who are protecting the community. This in turn reflects the existence of racial prejudices.

Aversive racism is a new form of racism that has come about as old-fashioned, blatant racism (based on the biological superiority of the white race that justifies oppression, discrimination and segregation) has become socially unacceptable over time - especially post apartheid. Unlike old-fashioned racism it is very subtle and generally difficult to detect. It consists of deep-seated negative stereotypes buried in the unconscious mind of individuals and is only revealed in subliminal testing techniques. Aversive racism focuses on people who believe they

are not racist and generally act as though they are not (Durrheim, Mtose & Brown, 2011:73). These people may even express tolerant and sympathetic racial attitudes but “will act in discriminatory ways in situations where their behavior can be attributed to some other factor besides racism” (Durrheim, Mtose & Brown, 2011:74). The CSO may possibly defend their position by arguing that in the interest of security, profiling occurs regardless of race. However, not all white individuals are assumed to be criminals or security threats. For this reason, even though the CSO may deny racism, implicitly there is a negative association between blackness and security or blackness and crime which points to aversive racism despite possible rejection of such claims. The conversion authorities indicated they were aware of converts’ experiences with CSO and were looking for ways to resolve it with the organisation. The issue with the CSO tends to fall away once the convert is known in the community.

There is one negative response to converts that tends to persist and until now, has gone unchallenged. When single black individuals ask to be converted albeit for spiritual and religious reasons, they sometimes receive discouragement that is related to marriage. Conversion for marriage is usually frowned upon yet ironically black spiritual converts encounter a concern that they will not find a Jewish marriage partner as a result of their race. One convert explained:

People tell me even now how hard it’s going to be for me to find a husband which for me if it’s hard, it’s hard, but whatever *Hashem* ... because when God makes a person, their days are numbered according to what God says and this is what he will go through and these are the blessings he will get and everything... if one is going to get married *Hashem* has already decided that. So for me whether I am going to get married or not does not bother me. I would love to get married and have children but *Hashem* will make a way if that’s my journey. If my journey includes getting married it will happen. People tell me that for me it’s going to be really hard considering the history of South Africa – apartheid and everything – for me to find a husband in South Africa...Because I am black. Yes, because I am black...For me, what’s that? So I have to say what is that? Is that racism? So those are the things. That hurts. That really [emphasis] hurts and I think to myself okay, you like me sitting at the Shabbos table and just eating but you wouldn’t want me to be part of your family and anyway, there are men that have said that to me...lots of them - and I think to myself did I even ask you to marry me? Do you think I want to get married to you – your kind – people with that kind of attitude? So those are the things that hurt – they really, really hurt. I mean and I think to myself why would a man go out of his way to tell me that? If he is so concerned why can’t he speak to his wife or find something or phone Israel and find a husband for me that is black? So that is

one of the things that I think the community – it's the weaker side of the South African community. So it does hurt and I think some women would say that no, don't think about it and I would think to myself what if it was your son saying I want to marry that woman? But I don't ask those questions because I don't like to hurt people. I don't like to hurt people because for me I have no racist bone in my body. We were not raised like that. We were not raised to hate people because of their colour. You know we were raised to know that we are all different, we have to be different. (Ester, spiritual convert)

Ester's quote shows that there are community members that display blatant racism toward her in not wanting to marry her because of her race. Rabbis however feel justified in stating this as concern to black converts almost as a warning of the attitudes that they will encounter in the community. In Orthodox Judaism, marriage and family form the core around which communal life revolves and rabbis foresee that marriage will be important for the future integration of the convert in the community. This poses a dilemma for single black converts who want to be part of the Jewish community and live as an observant Jew in the full sense, but whom will experience limits to their social integration. Even if their individual journey is deeply respected, their integration into the community is limited. The general responses from community members towards single black converts show a resistance towards interracial marriage and therefore they cannot be fully accepted into private spheres of the community - such as through marriage and family. The implication of this message is that black converts can never fully belong. Having become 'Judaised' is not enough since because of their race, they are not ethnically Jewish by birth even if they become acculturated and conform socially to all the community's norms.

The justifications given for the non-acceptance of black converts as marital partners were: "South Africa's history" or the fact that Jewish men are "conservative" and "white" or quite simply, this is what happened in the apartheid state. However, today South Africa is different so blaming apartheid is an excuse. These views have the effect of discouraging black conversions and limiting the community from becoming diverse:

I mean say somebody plants a garden with flowers, are they going to put only roses? It won't look beautiful. They have to put all different flowers so it will look nice and attractive and that's God's world – all different people to make it beautiful. So I'm black, you are white; I have my role, you have yours; but I love you. See that's it but people don't see it that way – they blame it on apartheid. It's like black people blaming apartheid for lack of everything. Some people don't even want to study and they blame it on the government so I feel like those are all excuses and it hurts (Ester, spiritual convert).

Referring to the comments about marriage, Ester mentioned in her interview that she had learnt “to accept and expect it to happen”. She refrained from challenging the issue as she did not like to hurt people and was not raised to speak badly to others. This is a noble expression of self-restraint but it does not challenge the issue. Furthermore, she had also internalised the view that if she were to find a husband, she should find him in Israel. The idea that Israelis could be free of racism simply because Israeli society is made up of different ethnic Jews across the colour line had not occurred to her (or anyone else) as illogical. It is like saying that South African society is free of racism purely because it is multi-racial and multi-ethnic. The suggestion that black converts find marriage partners in Israel is also expressed by other converts (white) across the political spectrum from conservative to liberal. Some stated that although they found the view offensive, they all supported the idea that the best way forward would be for a single black convert to find a partner in / from Israel because it was unlikely that the attitudes of “conservative, white, South African Jewish men” would change. Rather than seeking solutions elsewhere and leaving these views intact, they should be challenged. It is not only morally and ethically necessary, but it militates against the citizenship values of the post-apartheid state.

While it is understood (especially as more persons of colour enter into the programme) that conversion cannot be reserved for white candidates, boundaries are still firmly in place in terms of how far black converts can integrate. While conversion is equally applied to all candidates regardless of their race, and while integration into the community is achieved, and the community is becoming more diverse, there are still boundaries in place in terms of how far that integration can extend.

Looking farther afield, similar findings arise in the case of ethnic Brazilian’s voluntary conversions to Islam. Like Judaism in South Africa, Islam is a minority religion of less than 1% of the population in Brazil (Peres de Oliveira & Mariz, 2006). Brazilian converts to Islam also experienced limits to their integration in their Muslim communities because of cultural gaps between indigenous Brazilians and born Muslims (of Arab descent). However, they compensated for this lack of integration by participating in Islamic virtual communities because, again like Judaism, being part of a community is an important element of the religion (de Oliveira & Maria (2006:109). The Brazilian study showed that as a result of their lack of integration, Brazilian converts started proselytising to create and strengthen a community of their own (2006:115). At the time of this study of Jewish converts, there were too few converts of color in the community to establish whether they were in some way responding to their distance. As more converts of color enter the community, it will be interesting to see what unfolds.

The finding of limited racial integration in the Jewish community is not unlike other religious communities in South Africa. McEwen & Steyn (2014) argue that Christian communities have work to do. Furthermore broader literature of racial segregation in post-apartheid South Africa indicates that patterns of racial segregation continue to occur however in new and informal ways (McEwen & Steyn, 2014:4). For example, in residential areas, this has occurred through processes of 'semigration' (Ballard, 2004) or through the formation of gated communities (Landman, 2006) indicating how white communities in particular tend to self-segregate. Therefore the finding of limited racial integration is consistent with these other patterns.

What this section shows is that in South Africa, Judaism and the Jewish community's ethnic character is beginning to change. Again this is like the Brazilian study of converts to Islam in which "The data analysed also signals that Islam in Brazil starts losing its ethnic character that has marked it since its arrival with the Arabs immigrants" (Peres de Oliveira & Mariz, 2006:114).

7.7 Reflections on inclusion and exclusion

In Chapter 1, the concept of social exclusion and inclusion as "acts of social stratification" was introduced. The preceding chapters show that conversion is an act of stratification and by being selective about who and how the Beth Din assigns membership (granting inclusion) is part of the process of stratification. As such it determines the social position of the community in post-apartheid South Africa and converts in the community in relation to Jews-by-birth and to other converts.

Exclusions in the Jewish community in South Africa, and Johannesburg, exist along the fault lines within Judaism according to denomination, sect, gender, and sexuality (not discussed in this dissertation) and race (as found in this study). Within Orthodoxy conversion is also designed to exclude one from one's former community by creating social and religious distance through religiously defined practices (e.g., *kashrut*). This effects dissociation and reduces social mixing, in which case more inclusion will follow. For some converts, such as new spiritual converts, the exclusion from their former communities is voluntary and often occurs prior to the commencement of conversion. For ethnic converts, this might not be the case and therefore achieving inclusion at the expense of the former family ties (although these may not be absolutely cut), is often painful. For converts, inclusion is conditional on:

- Motivation, behaviour, knowledge - in Orthodoxy, language (Hebrew) and liturgy.

This point shows how conversion is more a social and cultural process than a spiritual one.

- It is also conditional on acceptance of the ethnicity of Jews. It implies leaving behind one's own community - converts cannot be a member of both or be a religious member of Jews but not an ethnic member. One is only a Jew if one does both.

- Inclusion is not a homogenous experience and Orthodox versus non-Orthodox divisions make it a very political issue. Converts may not know or understand this at the time of their conversion - although many discover the divisions when considering conversion. However, the result is that the selection of a community becomes important for the absorption into Judaism as well as the experience of being Jewish.

- Even among the Orthodox there are different ways: Orthodox and Ultra-Orthodox (both in various manifestations), religious versus traditional. These options confuse the issue for converts as it creates different expectations and standards as possibilities for converts to follow - although this goes against the Beth Din's intentions and objectives.

- Secular Judaism also exists and this is often where the convert finds her partner who then expects her to convert. Religion may not be important in a secular context but at the level of ethnic identity and family social reproduction it is. For the authorities religion is important for identity and a tension may develop between the way of life of the secular converting couple and the requirements of conversion.

- There are multiple boundaries and entry points into the Jewish community, although in Orthodoxy only three are considered: birth, adoption and conversion. However, inclusion for a Jew-by-birth is experienced differently by a convert. Firstly, there are no conditions, it is not questioned and they receive different treatment. Secondly, because of the white identity of the community, black converts will either be considered as outsiders or as converts, from whom distance is maintained. Therefore, a hierarchy is created between Jews-by-birth and different kinds of converts (according to their motivation for conversion, post-conversion behaviour and race) and also non-Jews.

Inclusion is dependent on who recognises it (e.g., Torah, religious and communal authorities and religious / secular / Orthodox /non-Orthodox communities). It also depends on whether the convert him/herself accepts his/her conversion too. Inclusion is rarely considered from the convert's perspective since it is an individual within a broader group and group needs are placed first.

Stratification therefore occurs as follows:

- Conversion is caught up in the internal divisions and battles between Orthodox, Conservative and Progressive. This results in a marginalisation of some converts depending into which form of Judaism they convert. Thus, conversion becomes a struggle over identity and

inclusion of the Jewish 'factions'. Converts are absorbed into this and are stratified accordingly.

- There are ideological and socio-cultural divisions within Orthodoxy too – although not discussed in detail in this dissertation. In South Africa it is predominantly *Ashkenazi* and *Mitnagdim* versus Chabad. Converts are encouraged to keep to *Mitnagdim* practices rather than follow *Hasidic* practices (such as that of Chabad), although many converts defiantly opt for Chabad.

7.8 Conclusion

During the conversion process, a person's life is radically restructured and redirected; new values, ideas and culture are internalised and prioritised, new social networks are formed, others are abandoned or adapted. This takes place while the convert is trying emotionally to process the change and integrate into a community previously out-of-bounds to them. It is a time when the boundaries in a person's life are traversed. However, this time, the boundaries are conquered with the approval of those who previously enforced the exclusion of converts. This takes place under conditions where high expectations are placed on the convert, who is seeking acceptance and a place of belonging so as not to remain and feel an outsider indefinitely. The magnitude of the social change that an individual has to grapple with during conversion is enormous. In dealing with this change, many converts encountered positive and negative experiences as they transformed themselves into recognisable, socially acceptable Orthodox Jews and became members of the Jewish community in Johannesburg. Their experiences of social inclusion varied according to many factors such as race, age, marital status, conversion unit type (individual, couple or family), children, and time-lapse since conversion. Finally, the voice of the converts appear aligned with the dominant narratives of the Beth Din around conversion. This point about narratives and the impact on conformity was made in Chapter 4. The voice of converts in line with the dominant narrative is clearly shown by the convert's words, showing that with converts, through conversion, the Beth Din is succeeding in creating an imagined homogeneity and in capturing converts' conformity and acquiescence.

Chapter 8: Towards an understanding of conversion

8.1 Introduction

This chapter explains the findings of Chapters 5, 6, and 7 with the benefit of sociological material in order to better understand the reasons for voluntary conversion to Orthodox Judaism in South Africa's multi-ethnic, multiracial environment in post-apartheid South Africa. This chapter also expands on how the social environment influences different responses to religion and identity. The aim of this chapter is to add to the diversity in conversion studies generally by offering Jewish Orthodox conversions as a contribution.

8.2 Making sense of conversion for Orthodox Jewry in Johannesburg

Structural-functional theory sees "society as an ongoing equilibrium of social institutions which pattern human activity in terms of shared norms, held to be legitimate and binding by the human participants themselves" (O' Dea, 1966:2). The totality of the social institutions together make up the whole, referred to as a social system, in this case, the Jewish community in Johannesburg. The institutions making up the social system, or community as the case may be, are interdependent, and change in one will produce change in another. The institutions exist to maintain the equilibrium in a social system and in so doing bring order and stability to that social system (Macdonis, 2014). Each institution and structure in the social system has a particular function - they exist for a reason. These functions can be "manifest functions", in other words intended and direct, or they can be "latent functions", and function in unintended ways (Merton, 1957). An institution may have dysfunctions too, those being negative, harmful or disruptive (Merton 1957). Furthermore, those in positions of power within institutions make use of positive and negative sanctions in order to maintain the role expectations of members (thus ensuring order and stability). In structural-functional theory the central questions revolve around exploring the function of structures and institutions to the broader system, in order to understand their role and value in achieving stability, order and balance for that social system. In these terms, conversion is one form of institutionalised human behaviour regulated and managed by a religious body of men (the Beth Din), which functions to control entry into the Jewish community in Johannesburg, to grant acceptance and assign membership to newcomers (mostly women) to the community thereby drawing boundaries between those who do and do not belong. The question is why does it want to

control entry into the community, how does conversion function to achieve these goals and of what value are these functions to the community? And how does it impact on the lives of converts?

Essentially conversion is about assigning a Jewish identity to those who are not born Jewish. But since there is no uniform way to “be Jewish”, there are conflicts in interests as to what kinds of Jews are brought into the community. Further, the notion of control is a question. In this context, the Orthodox Beth Din exercises control. One could answer that the Beth Din does not want to control entry and that rather it acts as all other Beth Dins do, which is to judge matters legalistically, to discourage conversion and protect the community. They control entry, it may be argued, because it is a historically derived response to hostilities which has resulted in a universal attitude across Orthodox communities that conversion should be discouraged because it would be bad for Jews (result in death, punishment, intermarriage or assimilation) as explained in section 1.2 (see footnote 5). As a result, one could dismiss these matters as outside the control of the Beth Din. However, based on what is understood from the interviews conducted, it appears that the Beth Din would like to protect a particular uniform identity (*Litvak/Ashkenazi* or *Mitnagdim* orientation rather than *Sephardi* or Chabad), set and maintain a particular standard of religious practice and control the outcomes and the people (converts) involved. This point is argued on the basis of what rabbis say about conversion and this points to a concern for the community's identity in post-apartheid South Africa (in this regard intermarriage remains important) and a concern for maintaining a perception of a particular homogeneous character (this view seems to fit with the literature in Chapter 5 about the nature of the Jewish community). In other words, the Beth Din controls conversion and entry into the community in order to maintain a particular character of individuals within a community that meets a historically defined identity⁹⁷ in a changing social environment (post-apartheid South Africa). In so doing, it provides justification and support for other religious institutions (e.g., synagogues and schools) invested in the community which can benefit from converts. Moreover this strengthens and retains power within the Beth Din. Furthermore, it ensures continuity of the community by resisting change (as seen in the attitude towards race) and drawing symbolic and tight borders around the community - distinguishing itself from other Jews (Progressive and Conservative) and non-Jews. By doing so, conversion feeds into an established order and assists in maintaining its balance. How does the conversion of individuals do this? Based on the way that conversion is structured and functions, three elements of conversion are the most important and demonstrate the above

⁹⁷ By continuing its attachments to what is known and established traditions but in new and self-serving ways.

argument. Each element has a function and a dysfunction (the same functions and dysfunctions may apply to more than one point). These are elaborated below and then presented in Table 8.1.

The first element is the rationalisation and bureaucratisation of the conversion process in the Weberian sense of "instrumental rationality", when a traditional system becomes modernised. In Chapter 5, it was argued that the conversion process was rationalised as a pragmatic response to managing intermarriage, which could not be avoided, and which appeared to be increasing (because of changing attitudes towards Jews and changing attitudes within the community towards conversion as shown in Chapter 6). The process was rationalised by applying a uniform set of criteria and standards based on religious-legal terms and by centralising the entire process under the authority of the Beth Din (Chapter 5). This entailed removing the process from communal locations, taking tuition away from community rabbis, and disbanding the lay committees which dealt with converts. By placing it under the Beth Din, all conversions could be managed consistently and bureaucratically. The manifest functions therefore were to provide consistent legal criteria with which to judge candidates, to establish sincerity of conversion and to improve the chances of successful converts. However, the centralisation of the conversion process meant that community rabbis became somewhat muted in the process of conversion, converts' direct personal relationships with community rabbis (the gatekeepers of community) were diluted and the role of the Beth Din became strengthened in conversion (by overseeing the *mikveh* and issuing certificates to control converts' lives at least for the duration of the programme and in some cases longer). In so doing, the latent functions emerged. These latent functions can be identified as creating uniformity in religious practices and behaviours of converts in order to support a homogenous community identity. Rationalisation of the conversion process also served to strengthen the Beth Din's role and power over converts and the community (recall in Chapter 5 that the Head of the Beth Din felt that this move was part of a general trend within the community to become more religious and was seen as an upgrade of the community and the Beth Din's role). Centralisation and bureaucratisation established them as the authority, and brought in authoritarian rule over converts and therefore increasing segments of the community. Thus, the Beth Din's authoritarian scope in the community was extended. It brought the Beth Din absolute control over the process, as only they decide who, when and even to which community a convert must belong. By instilling this power, the Beth Din can also control outcomes which is what they could not control in the previous system. The outcome is a particular kind of Jew - in their view hopefully, a mirror image of who they are (which is why they reject Chabad as seen in Chapter 5 and 8); a perception of homogenous Jewry so that converts fit the mould

of religious Jews and in so doing maintain the character of the community over which their religious rule is legitimate. The Beth Din is the power through which conversion is controlled and they are interested in maintaining a particular identity within the community, not just for historical purposes, but to guarantee a particular homogenous outcome (in identity and religious practice) over which they can retain their authority, control and potency within the community. The dysfunctions it produces are multiple and counterproductive to the Beth Din's manifest aims - as it relates to ethnic converts who were not specifically seeking religious lives. As discussed in Chapter 5, by removing the communal rabbi, there is less personal investment in the convert and tuition is less 'customised' as it was felt that this worked against the system of producing successful and integrated converts who were invested in the religious aspects of conversion. Both rabbis and ethnic converts felt the lack of spirituality in the process, in favour of bureaucracy, was limiting. It restricted the agency of converts which produced anger. Because there was a less direct, warm, personal connection to a community, it was felt that it actually created less successful converts, and less sincerity as converts were interfacing with a system and a court rather than a community and its rabbi. Otherwise, it was felt that converts needed more time to integrate into communities.

The second element relates to sincerity based on whether there is full acceptance of the commandments. The elevation of the concept of sincerity (as discussed in section 4.9) functions to ensure that the Beth Din achieves its legal responsibility and again bring about conformity to a process defined for converts by the Beth Din (rather than an organic spiritual process according to the needs of the individual), which in turn achieves uniformity in practices and knowledge of converts, within a particular style of being Jewish in a religious sense within South Africa. This in turn brings about homogeneity in the identity of religious Jews in Johannesburg, and all the benefits of control and justification for the Beth Din. An unintentional consequence and dysfunction was that it developed into a counter response (i.e. 'playing' the system) by ethnic converts whose main concerns were not in harmony with the Beth Din. Conversion became a transaction between converts and the Beth Din, and identity was traded for expedience and completion of the process (section 4.10). Thus, conversion feeds into a system of less successful converts, 'insincerity' according to the community rabbis and fuels negative perceptions about ethnic converts.

The third element is the role of rituals in the conversion. The Beth Din places a high value on rituals in conversion both in what they expect of converts to do (e.g., daily, weekly, monthly and seasonal practices, dress code, eating requirements etc.) and in what they do to validate a conversion (e.g., judge, *mikveh* and circumcision). Durkheim explained that a "unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart

and forbidden...unite into one single moral community called a Church, all who adhere to them" (Durkheim, 1912:44). Beliefs and practices (rituals) unite members of a community, and this is true in the process of conversion to Judaism. In other words, these rituals help to build a religious community and integrate people into the community by giving them common ground to identify with and distinguish them from others. Because the Beth Din and converts are both involved in rituals in demonstrating that a conversion has taken place, the effects of rituals are reciprocal. The Beth Din sees that convert is integrated, sincere and observant and the convert feels that their conversion is real by being the recipients of the rituals conducted by the Beth Din. It signals to each party that they are accepted and acceptable.

Table 8.1: Elements of conversion and their various functions

	Manifest function	Latent function	Dysfunction
Rationalisation and bureaucratisation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide structure for judgements of candidates • Establish sincere converts • Produce successful converts = successful convert	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Achieve uniformity in religious practices and standards • Support a homogenous community identity • Establish power and control by Beth Din over converts and associated segments of the community 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Loss of spirituality; • Less communal integration • Loss of agency for converts • Negative stereotyping = less "successful converts"; = insincerity
Sincerity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Produce successful and converts • Beth Din has done its job = successful convert		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Trade / barter: showing conversion as a farce • Transactional - identity can be traded • Exercise agency by converts • Negative stereotyping = less "successful converts"; = insincerity

	Manifest function	Latent function	Dysfunction
Rituals and observances	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Meet the requirements of sincerity as explained by <i>Shulchan Aruch</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Integration, acceptance and acceptability Draw boundaries between community and others 	Ethnic converts not always interested in being overtly religious and find this restricting

Table 8.2: Types of sanctions of the conversion process

Negative sanctions	Positive sanctions
Nullification	Public praise e.g. in sermons
Recitation of oath in the <i>mikveh</i>	Showcasing of converts by giving voice
Signing of declaration	

Negative sanctions and positive sanctions are used within conversion to achieve the Beth Din's desired outcomes. In section 7.2, converts described how they felt fear which the Beth Din used to achieve their compliance and conformity during the process. In section 4.8, the head of the Beth Din mentioned the threat of nullification as a negative sanction. Reciting the oath in the *mikveh*, which implies a vulnerable state (naked underneath a white 'gown' in the water awaiting the nod of approval) and the signing of a declaration were both threats. Furthermore, having to return after a year to prove observance and the need to produce the certificates of conversion within the community to prove Jewishness of self and children (e.g., at school, for membership in synagogues, to conduct children's *bar mitzvahs* and weddings) are not only reminders of a former outsider status but also a reminder to converts of their conditional access and their obligations that could be removed if there is lack of compliance or in the case of transgressions. Positive sanctions on the other hand included rewards, such as public praise for converts in sermons and providing a public platform for the voice of successful converts (section 7.4).

Essentially, what the functions and sanctions combined show is that the Beth Din is a communitarian body that asserts a clearly defined collective identity of Orthodox Jews based on the above practices (rationalisation and bureaucracy, judging of sincerity and rituals) so as to draw borders around itself - between Orthodox Jew and Conservative or Progressive Jew

and between Jew and non-Jew. In this way, by tightly controlling its borders between Jew and Jew, and Jew and non-Jew, the Beth Din is involved in the symbolic construction of boundaries "by which the community differentiates itself from others" (Cohen, 1985 in Delantey, 2010:33). By doing so it is symbolically constructing the realities of belonging (Cohen, 1985 in Delantey, 2010:33) for converts and its other members. It is also therefore involved in the "dirty business of boundary maintenance" (Yuval-Davis, 2006:204) - the "maintenance and reproduction of the boundaries of the community of belonging" (Yuval-Davis, 2006:205). In other words, it is an active agent in the politics of belonging by maintaining ethnic identity markers, specific values, and by appealing to insecurities of belonging and creating a space where Orthodox Jews and Orthodox Jewish converts will feel they belong. In other words, in the words of Yuval-Davis (2006:2014) in describing the politics of belonging, it is about:

...deciding whether they stand inside or outside of the imaginary boundary line of the nation and/or other communities of belonging, whether they are 'us' or 'them'.

Through 'border control' the Beth Din secures the collective identity of Orthodox Jews (the 'us') in a transitioning environment of the broader nation that is imagined to threaten communal identity through inclusive multicultural democracy and globalisation. This confirms what Herman (2007) argues. Finally, by acting to secure the place of Jews and its borders between itself (us) and others (them), the Beth Din justifies a role for itself within the community. It brings to mind Bauman's (2006:169) words:

In order to survive, they [communities] need to be defended by appealing to their own members to secure that survival.

Again, securing a role for itself is a feature of the politics of belonging, since only a body with power protects the boundaries "in order to promote their own power positions within and outside the collectivity" (Yuval-Davis, 2006:205). Conversion contributes to the survival of the community and the Beth Din is one of the bodies that protect it. But at the same time, securing community survival means placing community before individual needs which comes at the expense of individualism (as seen in Chapters 4 and 7), spirituality (again Chapters 4 and 7) and lack of voice of converts (section 7.4). Again the words of Bauman (2006:169) sound clearly:

One cannot be a bona fide communitarian without giving the devil his due, without on one occasion admitting the freedom of individual choice denied on another.

What is described above in this section is relevant to converts, though at the time of their decision to convert, few know what they are entering and they discover it along the way.

This contributes to the development of anger for some and their eagerness to leave it behind them once it is done. Only those converts with prior connections to Jews (through marriage and family) or who have witnessed the conversions of others, are wiser as to the above. This often deters them from conversion.

8.3 Explaining new spiritual converts

The question of why people voluntarily want to change their lifestyles by adopting a new religion requires explanation. In the case of Afrikaner spiritual converts, changing identity, a failed nationalism, the yearning for truth in religion and the search for a place of belonging brings them to Judaism and the Orthodox Jewish community. The explanation for black spiritual converts relates more to a search for truth. Both groups are discussed below.

8.3.1 Afrikaners, nationalism, identity and community

For some Afrikaners, like those in this study, the post-apartheid state might be reminiscent of a Durkheimian nightmare in which major social transitions in society (in this case democracy) results in a decline in moral authority and the collapse of their Christian churches and communities. This causes a change in solidarity, putting them at odds with the consensus of the social networks, which ultimately results in their exclusion (with that ostracism and rejection), less social integration, and more individualism, as well as a feeling of anomie⁹⁸. Their testimonies show that Christianity failed them, even pushed them away, rather than gave them salvation. These Afrikaners do not give up on religion, however, and they continue to search for answers to replace what they had lost. Through their journey from one Christian church to the next (from Calvinism, to the charismatic and in some cases, Messianism), they become more isolated, more anti-establishment, yearn for more and more support, guidance and security and realise that they need a new alternative. This explains why some religious Afrikaners experienced what they had experienced and turned to Judaism. It also explains why they did not start appearing for conversion immediately after 1994 but post-2000; their journeys took approximately ten years before reaching Judaism.

In thinking specifically about Afrikaners, who make up a third of the interviews, it would seem that this Durkheimian explanation suffices. But to leave it there would be lacking

⁹⁸ Anomie may be described as a condition of anxiety and disorientation that is experienced by individuals when a society's transition results in normlessness and little moral guidance to them (Macionis, 2014). Durkheim described anomie as one of the factors resulting in suicide (anomic suicide).

in full explanation. Firstly, the explanation above could apply to any existing religious group experiencing anomie - as it does with the two black spiritual converts interviewed for this study. The problem is it does not specifically explain Afrikaners who have a special place in South Africa's history as the architects of the racially-ethnically segregated order imposed on a multicultural population - an order which no longer legally applies today. Secondly, it can be argued that the explanation is limited since the conditions of post-apartheid South Africa (globalised, networked, late modern society) in the 21st century are very different in nature to the conditions of social change in the 20th century in Europe. While this may be true, it does not mean that anomie will not develop. But it does mean we need to analyse what is going on in the specific factors of the time (conditions of the time are different and may become obsolete). In response, it can be argued that anomie is likely to develop out of any conditions that threaten perceived stability and moral order and create insecurity. In other words, anomie can come out of conditions that have the same effects. So, while anomie may produce a response as such in Afrikaners, specific dynamics producing that anomie need to be understood to explain why these Afrikaners (and in increasing numbers) - and why not Zulus, Xhosas, Greeks, Italians, Portuguese or any of the other ethnic group found in South Africa (who do not appear at all or in increasing numbers). Keeping this in mind, it could be argued that the data points to the nature of the post-apartheid environment. In South Africa, democracy and the internet brought freedom from authoritarian rule and freedom of religion, of expression and of information and opened up a myriad of equally valid worldviews in a diverse social environment. Many Afrikaner converts (as seen in Chapters 6 and 7) spoke of how the internet and Google opened up a world of information which freed them from former ties. Individualism coupled with these freedoms seems to be an explanation for the increased mobility of new spiritual converts, such as the religious Afrikaners and black converts in this study. It provided them with the platform to move away from previously restrictive communities to explore a number of new options. While certainly the point of individual freedom is relevant, it seemed to be only a facilitatory factor (Chapter 6), and still falls short of explaining the trends among Afrikaners, as again, it can apply to any group. Thirdly, as seen in Chapters 6 and 7, attitudes towards Jews appear to have softened according to some participants in this study. In a pluralistic environment, consisting of many minorities with equal rights, it is assumed that minorities, such as Jews, have more confidence to display who they are, strengthen their identities and make themselves more visible which could arouse curiosity towards them - presenting themselves as options to others. However, the converts all said they had not known anything about Jews and Judaism prior to converting and therefore this could explain why Judaism becomes more of an option to Afrikaners than previously. Again, this explanation applies to any group and does not enlighten one as to why - in the category

of spiritual converts - Afrikaners specifically move to another tightly bound, strictly observant, authoritarian religious group: Orthodox Jews. The question therefore still remains: why Afrikaners, and why Orthodox Judaism? Why not Conservative or Progressive Judaism?

The answer surely lies in the nature of the post-apartheid state and the place of Afrikaners in South Africa's post-apartheid society. The answer to my mind points to social exclusion, inclusion and the need for belonging. In other words for Afrikaners, it is a complex mix of identity shifts (dislocation), plus the benefits of a democratic, digitally connected environment, coupled with fragmentation of their identities in the globalised, post-apartheid or "new South Africa", resulting in a felt social exclusion, the need to belong and the escape from a condition of profound dislocation in a modern world. The search for community was not the goal but the search for community and the need for identity transformation became an additional feature of wanting to avoid social exclusion, achieve inclusion and belong again to a perceived morally sound and stable community (either in South Africa or Israel) that could offer security in what they see is a morally corrupt world from which they wish to find refuge.

The former white minority-majority, those from the group responsible for the exclusion of other races and ethnicities during apartheid, are now converting to another minority group, the Jews, whose religion can be seen as the antithesis to their religion of birth. Afrikaners come with a particular history responsible for apartheid and it appears that apartheid plays a role in their voluntary conversion to Judaism. Referring to white, ethnic Afrikaners, Davies (2009) who has an entire book dedicated to understanding Afrikaner identity in post-apartheid South Africa states "(f)rom a historical standpoint, the position of the Afrikaner community within South Africa and on the global stage has undergone major transformation" as a result of demise of apartheid and the decline of Afrikaner nationalism. She highlights the paradox in post-apartheid Afrikaner status by claiming that "the newly disempowered minority" have continued to "rise in economic influence" and the new political order while other Afrikaners have become marginalised. The group within this study appear to be those white Afrikaners who feel marginalised in the new dispensation. Many of those who feel marginalised form the *verloopte* (walked away) Afrikaners who remain "firmly outside of or even reject any formal grouping" of Afrikaner identity (Davies, 2009:2-3). How is this relevant to this study?

The dismantling of apartheid occurred because Afrikaner nationalism was morally deficient having brought about the discrimination and suffering of countless people in South Africa. Afrikaner nationalism had a close relationship with Afrikaner Christian theology (Calvinism), which was relied upon to justify the discriminatory actions of the apartheid state.

Thus, the collapse of apartheid and Afrikaner nationalism meant that the values of the Afrikaner church came into question. In Chapters 6 and 7, it was shown how from a theological viewpoint Calvinism first lost its salience, then the charismatic churches and messianism, and consequently and ultimately Christianity after the participants of this study had exhausted all their Christian options. The converts did not specifically speak of apartheid as the catalyst for their rejection of Christianity but rather the fragmentation in Afrikaner identity (or the decentring of identity as Hall would call it), the rejection and loss of their communities, how democratic values revealed the contradictions in the teachings of the Church, and how some democratic values were inconsistent with their understanding of the values in the Bible - specifically the Old Testament, which unlike the New Testament had weathered the transition. They also spoke of rejecting Afrikanerdom in post-apartheid South Africa and a desire to associate with any identity that cannot be questioned morally. Reading between the lines one can assume that they wanted to distance from and reject their identities as former oppressors and progress in a morally stable framework. Eric Hobsbawm (in Bauman, 2000:171) claims "(j)ust as community collapses, identity is invented" and that seems to be true here. In their distress over the loss of all values and structures that had been sound, they looked for religious comfort outside of Christianity. They discovered that Judaism explained their questions within the Old Testament and provided guidance in terms of going forward with their religious practices. It also linked to their upbringing before Afrikaners had strayed from the truth when they shifted their focus from the Old to the New Testament. Because they were familiar with the teachings of the Old Testament, they felt comfortable. The Old Testament was not only familiar, but it imposed rules for behaviour and discipline which they welcomed. In other words, this is where they felt they belonged - they were going back to the truth and their rightful heritage.

This process of finding themselves is not only evidence of a fractured identity, loss of values and community but also of the nature of modern society. It is also reflective of Bauman's understanding of modernity which he views as liquid in that the old "solids" are melted into new forms which become hard to contain because of their fluid nature, characteristic of liquids. Within this "liquefaction" emerges the need for community. The irony of liquid modernity is that it melts solids, such as communities, to make way for new ways of being, based on individualism. But individualism is also constraining and too obtuse, too lacking in direction, form and guidance. Thus, in effect liquefaction produces new solids to create a better order, stability and a refuge from the insecurity of individualism. Judaism is that replacement and even though Judaism is not new, it is a new "solid" in the life of Afrikaners. Thus, an emerging community of religiously dedicated people who were also searching found a solid place in an

ethnic community comprised of Orthodox Jews, who displayed values and practices consistent with theirs, and who were supported by communal structures and numerous resources. They realised that in order to survive in "liquid modernity" (or liquid post-apartheid South Africa) they needed to live in "solid truth" which they felt existed in the Orthodox Jewish community. They could not access it as Noahides or as Afrikaners, because as one said, "The Afrikaners got it wrong". Since the truth was given to Jews, in their view, they had to become Jewish to live in truth. In this way, they would be saved from their former misguided religious ways, from their past and from the world. Judaism, and becoming Jewish, through conversion offered them a new identity, name, legacy, land, history, language and ethnicity; it enabled them to cross the imagined boundaries of Afrikaners, Jews and specifically Orthodox Jews. So their conversions are not just spiritual as they are made out to be, but also ethnic.

It is claimed that "...any identification also entails a dissociation process. The core of this identification process is made up of ethnicity markers which establish and secure the "border" between the identity ascribed to individuals by the Jewish world and the identity they claim for themselves" (Gampiot, 2013:142). The dissociation process is a rejection of Afrikaner identity. The ethnicity markers to which Afrikaner converts so readily attach are: diet (*kashrut*), keeping the Sabbath, dress code, circumcision for men, following the strict practices of the Beth Din and living in a Jewish suburb, so that they can easily be identified as insiders, as Orthodox Jews. By dissociation and identity reconstruction they achieve ethnic belonging. To repeat from Chapter 2, Pierre-Jean Simon (1994:18) quoted in Gampiot (2013:128) describes an ethnic group as:

...web of relatively objective...traits, shared with a number of individuals and shaping them, in their own eyes and others', into a specific community, and at the same time, a common consciousness of belonging to this community. Ethnicity is what makes you a member of an ethnic community, both for yourself and the other members of your group (self-identity) and for the non-members (hetero-identity)

According to Bauman (2000), who is more skeptical of community, in order to feel belonging, membership is justified by fear and demonisation of the world outside of the community, while seeing community as safety, isolation, separation. This was clear in Afrikaner converts who disavowed Christianity and praised Judaism and the Orthodox Jewish community. Bauman (2000) also speaks about loss of individual freedom in the community as the trade for community yet this does not bother Afrikaners who feel they have gained much more than they have lost and who imagine their new communities to be the solution to their troubles.

So why Judaism? Because they had rejected the Christianity component of Judeo-Christianity, this brought them to the Judeo part. From their former faith foundations, there were linkages with Judaism with which they were familiar and they felt they were returning to their roots (i.e., going home to where they belong). Judaism was seen as the base from which they should never have strayed and to which they had to return. Why Orthodox Judaism? Because as seen in Chapter 7, through an authoritarian body (another replacement "solid") with clearly defined rules, conversion and becoming part of the Jewish people gave them security, structure, stability - the elements they could not obtain in Christianity. Conservative Judaism did not feature since they had no profile and were unknown to these converts. Progressive Judaism did not appeal to them. The lack of prescriptions, the modern adaptation of the religion felt too close to Christianity and it did not give them a clean break. They could continue with many non-Jewish practices in a Jewish life and therefore they could not distinguish between their former and new selves. It would not be sufficient for them. Furthermore, the Orthodox Jewish community was also racially consistent with their own identities - although this did not seem to be a conscious factor. However, it is worth noting that Islam, for example, was never raised as an option even though it also has common roots with Judaism.

To summarise, because Afrikaners find Judaism without having had any prior contact with Jews, they are largely ignorant of the cultural and communal frameworks that exist within the religion before their decision to convert. Their move seems to be as a result of a crisis in identity, what Davies (2009:1) refers to as a profound dislocation in post-apartheid Afrikaner identifications - which is the same term used by one convert, Riette. Because of their past, and because they were not within the privileged economic bracket of post-apartheid Afrikaners, these converts understand that they cannot rely on the state for their future so they actively carve spaces for themselves in new religious communities that are established, that share similar religious characteristics, and whose core composition - and values - have appeared to have withstood major social transformations and have at the same time strengthened its boundaries and identity. Their conversion is the final step in a protracted social process that helps them transcend their ethnic bonds by breaking away from their former primary groups. Through individuation, they become communitarians again. Conversion becomes the process through which they find new inclusion and exclusion - new belonging - and form a new identity. I argue that through conversion, these Afrikaners make new communities for themselves - even if at the outset they were not in search for communities.

8.3.2 Black spiritual converts

There were only three converts of color that participated in this study. The black participants fell purely into the spiritual category while the other person of colour straddled both categories. Because there is a sample of two, it is harder to explain black converts.

Black spiritual converts' paths to Judaism are similar to Afrikaners in that they realise there are inconsistencies in Christianity, there is an ejection and rejection from their former churches that leads to a journey of increasing religious and social isolation and greater reliance on self rather than any other group. In this space of not belonging, of deception in truth, they too experienced a crisis of identity, found Judaism and embarked on a transition. Like Afrikaners, they both attached to the Old Testament in coming to the decision that is where the truth resided because it was the base from which they had studied. Christianity had failed and this in turn led them to Judaism which is the same source without Christianity (New Testament). Again like Afrikaner converts, the inconsistencies in Christianity were seen to be parallel to inconsistencies in Reform Judaism, which they consequently rejected without investigation out of fear that they would end up in the same nebulous situation as before. With regards to dissociation, the one had to dissociate from African spirituality (e.g., clairvoyance and ancestor worship) and therefore from her family spiritually and culturally. This was initially hard for her. The other, who had not grown up with any African spiritual beliefs but rather Christian beliefs, had found it hard to dissociate from the idea of Jesus as salvation. As her parents were no longer alive, and her family unit had already disintegrated, there was less to dissociate from culturally. In terms of identification, in order to make the transition and justify the link between African identity and Judaism, she reinterpreted the Bible in racial terms that would give her a legitimate place in Judaism and challenge the racial bias of the community, who had seemingly overlooked the idea that the Torah could be race neutral or even racially inclusive. Furthermore, she chose the name of a character in the Torah who was - at least in the South African context - acknowledged as black and again this linked her into Judaism. In both cases, the Lost Tribe narrative to explain their return to Judaism did not surface. It did surface in an interview with one potential convert whose testimony was not included because at the time of the interview, he had not yet started conversion, and shortly after the interview, he left South Africa having not received a visa to remain in the country. His interview also pointed out parallels between African customs and Judaism (e.g., circumcision and certain dietary conditions) that in his mind had linked Africans to Judaism (such as that pointed by Tudor Parfitt, as discussed in Chapter 1).

One point differed for black converts compared to the other spiritual and ethnic converts: race. Like many other converts, having not known much about Jews (apart from what

was discussed in the Torah), and not knowing about the social requirements of conversion, they had imagined their conversion to be a spiritual / religious transformation alone. There was no knowledge of an identity (specifically an imagined homogenous identity) attached to Jews. Yet, as seen, the race of black converts made it harder for them to be fully accepted into the racially defined ethnic community even though they had made the same ethnic transitions as all the other converts. While an ethnic transition had to be made by black converts in order to be accepted, race was always a reminder that they did not fully belong (Chapter 7). Only time, and having become recognised in the community reduced discriminatory actions towards them (e.g., being stopped at synagogue entrances). Race is more problematic for singles; those with families or those who convert into a marriage are more shielded. Converting as a marital couple or family unit into a racially homogenous ethnic group provides a little more "protection" for the converts as they are less threatening to the immediate future of the imagined homogenous character of the community. But it remains to see what happens in time when the children of converted black families reach marriageable age: will they also need to go to Israel or after having grown up as Jews within the Jewish community, will attitudes towards them have changed? Will attitudes towards them change as more black converts enter or will growing up in the community mean that they will be treated in a colour-blind manner? In a study of black converts in France (Gampiot, 2013), where the same racial experiences were encountered by converts, one described how growing up in the community had brought her immunity from racism. Could this happen in Johannesburg?

The testimonies suggest that while there is formal acceptance of black converts through the Beth Din, by virtue of their race there would always be reminders that social inclusion and belonging was marginal. A researcher of black converts to Judaism in France claims:

Undeniably, Black converts with their fellow Jews are marked by their relative distinctiveness in terms of skin colour. Several respondents have emphasised dual reactions: on the one hand, extremely hospitable attitudes....and on the other hand, reactions of rejection, betraying astonishment at, and doubt about their Jewish identity (Gampiot, 2013:130)

The above statement is consistent with the findings of Chapter 7 which show that while there is acceptance into the community, black converts experience a range of responses on the grounds of their race. Similarly, another black convert in the US states:

But as a Jew of color, as soon as I walk into a room full of Jews, the most important thing about me becomes the color of my skin, and there's no getting around it (Lyons, 2014:3).

In explaining black conversion to Orthodox Judaism, especially in light of some of the negative reactions they face in the community, it is harder to link their journeys to the post-apartheid environment, as too few were interviewed and they avoided political speak altogether, making their conversion seem to be purely a religious phenomenon in their view. At the same time, they did not express any disharmony with democratic values or any social exclusion in post-apartheid environment (apart from that in their religious circles), lack of consensus or insecurities in black identity. Unlike the Afrikaners who had eagerly and voluntarily rejected being Afrikaner, the two black converts did not feel the need to reject anything of their former identities (apart from having to distance from family life in order to be accepted). Historically, black people have moved from minority to majority status in post-apartheid South Africa so it is unclear why they should return to minority status, particularly to status attached to an identity associated with their former oppression. There is an absence of explanation of power and politics in both testimonies. But just like the reordering of power relations in South Africa has had an impact on Afrikaners and Afrikaner converts, it must surely have had an impact on black converts too. Further investigations are required here to understand the link between black identity in post-apartheid South Africa and conversion to Judaism. This can only be done as more black converts enter into the community. At the time of this study, it was still too early, as there were only two (units) that could be interviewed. The only explanation that can be offered for the data in this study is the reading of Bauman's (2006) liquid modernity. In both cases the lack of social direction individuals feel as old orders are replaced by new creates a condition of limiting individualism from which converts wish to escape. The French sociologist, Danièle Hervieu-Léger (2003 quoted in Gampiot 2013:122) argues that conversion may be seen as a characteristic of modern societies:

As a result of growing recognition of individual choice, and the corresponding decline of community control over personal options, religious identity can no longer be taken for granted as an ascribed feature, determined by a person's birth into any given religious community and unchallenged throughout this person's lifetime.

At the same time, Gampiot (2013) highlights that "racial and ethnic mixing has simultaneously become a phenomenon which transforms all modern societies" as it certainly has been the case throughout the history of South Africa. As in the case of Afrikaners, without the rigid boundaries of apartheid, movement between racial and ethnic groups is now possible.

8.4 Explaining ethnic converts

The phenomenon of ethnic converts is not new in the history of conversion to Orthodox Judaism in South Africa (or elsewhere). On the contrary, it has been the primary *raison d'être* for much of conversion in the country. The conversions of ethnic converts seem to be on the increase. A possible reason that converts themselves postulated was that external attitudes towards Jews had softened. Times since World War 2 and the aversion to Jews had changed and democracy was supposedly kinder to minorities than the apartheid state. In a pluralistic environment, consisting of many minorities with equal rights, it is assumed that those minorities have more confidence to display who they are, strengthen their identities and make themselves more visible which could arouse curiosity towards them which favoured those considering conversion. At the same time, internal attitudes towards conversion had softened, making conversion more of a possibility compared to before. One convert - who had converted more than 40 years prior - exclaimed to me before her interview, "You guys have it much easier now than when I did". She felt that attitudes towards conversion were far more hostile then than in the current day. More tolerance from the Beth Din (section 5.6) for conversion as a pragmatic response to intermarriage was evident in that they had reconstructed the programme to process people more efficiently and handle a greater intake of converts. It seemed to bear testimony to her claim.

Ethnic converts are different to the new spiritual converts in that they do not experience any identity crisis. They are not actively searching for new moral frameworks and are generally not overtly religious. Up until conversion, they are not really looking for belonging either. Prior to their relationship with a Jewish partner, they were secure in their identities and place in life. Furthermore, they did not comment on an underlying lack of belonging (beside one who felt she did not belong in her family). Only through their relationship with a Jewish partner did they become aware of a possible future exclusion if the relationship were to culminate in marriage (section 6.3). This feeling of exclusion was something they did not want for themselves or their children and they were attracted to Judaism by a need for inclusion. Since their inclusion was dependent on marriage, in which children would probably be born, they understood that inclusion would also be extended to their children. So, to achieve family unity and a coherent, unified identity for their family unit, plus a legitimate and recognised place in the Jewish community, ethnic converts went ahead with the process. Identity transformation was important and a means to an end and as we saw in Chapter 6, some ethnic converts were prepared to trade it for their inclusion. By doing so, they earned the right to belong in an ethnic community and call themselves Jewish.

Their conversion is therefore best explained within the realm of belonging. In Chapter 2, a definition of belonging is provided along with a description of the three elements that it comprises, namely social location, identity, and normative values. All elements were attended to by conversion. Religious background (non-Jewish), religious status (generally non-practising), gender (female) and age (marriageable / childbearing) were all relevant social locators that automatically excluded ethnic converts from 'naturally' belonging to the Orthodox Jewish community and the Orthodox-dominated broader Jewish community in any formal sense. The conversion programme overcame these obstacles by changing the religion of the convert. In so doing, she was allowed to marry her Jewish partner and bear Jewish children, as well as making her look and feel like a religiously observant Orthodox Jewish woman (in this sample, the converts had kept the basic requirements of their conversion after the fact - some to greater degrees than others). By doing so, identity was addressed, as women could provide narratives to themselves and others about who they are in relation to the boundaries of the community. They could say they were Orthodox within the community to differentiate from Progressive and the sector of the community to which they belonged would be immediately identified. Unlike Progressive converts (because of the dominance of Orthodoxy in the community), their acceptance and inclusion would be broadly guaranteed. The same or similar narratives would be provided to others outside of the community so that they would be identified as Jewish rather than non-Jewish. Thus, their identities would fall within the boundaries of the community. They would have permeated those imaginary boundaries between Jew and non-Jew and have achieved dissociation from their former selves as non-Jews. With regard to normative values, Orthodoxy was the specific normative framework which was selected. On the one hand it was incidental, as it was the affiliation of their partner, and they wanted to remain within the framework that he associated with (demonstrating patriarchy at work). Again this would bring family cohesion and unity in identity, but this time with the extended family. Also, it was felt that although the convert abandoned her religious background, it was not necessary for her partner to do so - rather his was to be preserved as it was more important (recall Chapter 6). This also showed that conditionality worked to support the patriarchal elements of the culture. On the other hand, the choice of Orthodoxy for all converts in this sample⁹⁹ was a deliberate and calculated attempt to avoid exclusion based on the divisions in the community between Orthodox and Progressive. Choosing Orthodoxy meant them and their children would never fall into that questionable terrain, or liminal space, between Jew and non-Jew. Despite the Beth Din's threats to secure conformity to a high

⁹⁹ Remember not all converts accept Orthodoxy - they do also go the Progressive route. Others decide not to convert at all.

level of religious practice, their belonging would be guaranteed by virtue of the specific affiliation they had selected in their conversion. This affiliation would be valid around the world, not just in South Africa.

However, once achieved, some felt they would never really belong. Yet there was broad acceptance of converts in the community and the fear of exclusion they held before conversion was laid to rest. The only differentiation that occurred within the community was the treatment between Jews-by-birth and converts in decisions around how to live their lives, and differentiation on the grounds of race. Both these issues demonstrated that inclusion existed within a socially stratified grid of acceptability - a hierarchy of belonging based on birth, conversion and then race (Chapters 6 and 7).

Belonging - and within that - identity were the drivers of conversion. Conversion is a process of identity transformation in order to gain an ethnic belonging (ethnicity). Ethnicity is important here as it gives meaning "under the broader principles of cultural self-definition" (Castells, 2010:63). Castells (2010) claims that ethnicity is the source of meaning for identity. Yuval-Davis, argues that identity is what differentiates "me" / "us" from "them", "many others" and "transversal others" (2010:275-278). In other words, boundaries are maintained so that self-definition and identification may occur. On that basis too, belonging is achieved.

8.5 Social inclusion and exclusion and politics of belonging

The nature of modernity, as described by Bauman (2000), Castells (2010) and Hall (1996), underlies the explanation of conversion to Orthodox Judaism, in Johannesburg, South Africa. While Durkheim has value in explaining the impact of social transitions, his theory on social change is limited in explaining how social factors and societal transitions affect individuals in wanting to convert today. It also does not explain ethnic converts' decisions. In order to find a more contextually and time relevant answer, the nature of modern society needs to be kept in mind. What is different about now and then is the stage of modernity - the stage which is no less applicable to South Africa in the globalised world - more so in post-apartheid democratic times. At the time, Durkheim spoke of a transition from traditional society to modern, industrial, urban society. Today we are in that period of late modernity characterised by technology in a globally networked largely urbanised world. The effects of modernity produces impacts on communities and individuals alike. The impact on communities has been that first modernity appeared to have eroded communities, but on the contrary, with the paradox of globalised modernity and retreating statism, communities are responding by carving niches for themselves in society and by justifying their existence by providing 'refuge' to

others. In this study, the politics of belonging operated to establish the Jewish community as an ethical community (Bauman, 2001:72) or a defensive identity (community) (Castells, 2010:63) in response to the contradictions of a transitioning society, the combination of local identity politics and global conditions of a network society. Yuval-Davis (2006:203) states:

Belonging, therefore, is not just about social location and construction of individual and collective identities and attachments but also the ways these are valued and judged.

The Beth Din values and judges a particular ethnic character for the community while trying to at the same time adjust practically to a new environment in which it envisages a place for itself and to a changing set of attitudes within the community. There are tensions in doing so: on the one hand they are trying to meet the religious requirements and ethical commitments to which they have dedicated their lives; on the other hand, they are trying to respond to the realities and difficulties in navigating through a highly racialised and still somewhat historically fragmented society. Juggling the two sets of demands unwittingly raise a number of tensions between community rabbis, converts and the Beth Din. Judgements are also made by converts in their quests for belonging, regardless of their path to conversion. This requires the active and continuous identification to the group which provides meaning both to converts and the group (community). Converts get co-opted into the politics of belonging because in securing a place for themselves among Jewry in South Africa, and particularly Orthodox Jewry, they participate in (re)constructing the boundaries around the Orthodox community - as well as the domination of Orthodox as the representatives of Jewry in South Africa. This applies to all three groups of converts. Achieving belonging and participating in the politics of belonging means that social exclusion is avoided and inclusion is achieved, enhanced, supported, strengthened - both for community, community members and converts (as new members of the community) in post-apartheid South Africa.

A final note on modernity: by suggesting that it is the underlying current of these conversions is not to say that everyone is affected by modernity and globalisation in the same way. Ethnic converts did not display a decentering of identity - and this does not mean that the explanation above collapses. Jenkins (2006:12) highlights an important point made by Giddens (1991) about modernity and identity:

Self-identity is a distinctively modern project within which individuals can reflexively construct a personal narrative for themselves which allows them to understand themselves as in control of their lives and future.

This point about identity in modernity is relevant to ethnic converts and they do not need to feel a breakdown in the moral order of South Africa to convert. What modernity adds

to the discussion is that whatever leads converts to feel social exclusion (even if a possible exclusion in the future), it affects their identity in various ways and contributes to their need for belonging, and a search to gain inclusion.

8.6 Conversion as a process of community definition

The globalised network society / late modernity raises many fears and uncertainties for communities as an unknown future starts to unfold. This is especially true for those of minority groups who may feel their identity is under threat. Because some communities are vigilantly guarded as form of protection against the outside world, to enter a religion attached to a tight-knit community, will entail some form of guarantee that the individuals will be of benefit, will not be a wasted investment of time and money, and will join in supporting the boundaries between 'us' and 'them'. Community leaders also want to ensure a good fit between new entrants and its members so that balance and harmony is maintained - again for the outcome of bringing about imagined unified identity (although it is pluralised) and longevity of the community and its structures. Therefore, when it comes to conversion, individuals need to undergo identity reconstruction in order to be accepted and have to accept the rules of the club (section 4.8) to meet the objectives of the community.

As a sociological concept, conversion was approached as: 1) a social construction to overcome imaginary boundaries between members ('us') and non-members ('them') of a community; 2) embedded in community dynamics where power and community agendas are critical; and 3) influenced by the social environment (post-apartheid South Africa) and its specific race-class-ethnicity dynamics in which it occurs. At the conclusion of this study, a fourth element may be added - namely that modernity (and underlying forces of globalisation) has an effect on communities and individuals which affect reasons for and impacts of conversion. The findings of this study show that for individuals, conversion may be said to a process of identity transformation to achieve belonging in an ethnically defined community that provides socially-contextual relevance for the individual and validates his/her place in the world. For communities, conversion is one¹⁰⁰ of the processes of (re)constructing and maintaining boundaries around the ethnic group so as to allow the ethnic group to either differentiate itself, maintain its differentiation or assert its differentiation to its own members and the world and thereby secure its unique place in the multicultural, globalised landscape. It also co-opts the

¹⁰⁰ The findings by no means claim that this is the only process of boundary maintenance, but rather one of many that is likely to arise in different circumstances, at different times, or even occur concurrently.

convert into doing the same for him/herself. By allowing conversion to become agents in the politics of belonging, it also makes the 'felt' experience of belonging real for converts. The experiences of social exclusion and inclusion assists in coming to the above conclusion about the meaning of conversion.

While rabbis apply value judgements to the motives for conversion (marriage or spiritual reasons), this study also shows that, regardless of the motivation, conversion is in effect an 'ethnic conversion'. On these grounds, there should be no differentiation by rabbis or the Beth Din between ethnic and spiritual converts by classifying them as having ulterior motives or not, since it is shown that converts have to transition to the same ethnic features of the group, they have to maintain these ethnic boundaries and they serve the same ethnic-defining purposes for the group. By removing / minimising these value judgements that work against ethnic converts, many unintended negative consequences can be avoided.

Ultimately what the findings show is that conversion to Orthodox Judaism demonstrates a move from conversion as spiritual and individual religious process to an ethnically relevant social process. Furthermore, it demonstrates stratification at work.

8.7 Limitations

There are a number of limitations in the study that need to be acknowledged. Firstly, this study is based on converts who remained in the community and their presence indicates a level of compliance and conformity to the community. It would be useful to understand the perspective of those who had either left or those who had remained and were inactive. Secondly, a class analysis was not part of the objectives of the study, but having more information about the class of Afrikaner, black and ethnic converts would have provided a different perspective to the study. Some class variables, such as the level of education and type of work did surface, but beyond that, it was hard to establish the class bracket of the convert. This is a pity because social exclusion and inclusion points to stratification in society and having a better sense of the class variables would add to the notion of stratification through conversion within the community and outside - although this would have been a different study. Nonetheless, the study did provide an overview of stratification of converts in the community: according to motivation, race and religious practice (place them in the core or periphery). Finally, as already mentioned, race although important to meanings of belonging and social exclusion and inclusion, especially in a South African context, was a variable that could not be explored in any greater depth. The limitation was, at the time of the study, too few black converts to include in the study.

8.8 Voice

In South Africa, this is the first study to have provided voice to converts about a conditional process in which they participate - a contradictory process that requires their agency but also requires their compliance. The contradiction of the two positions is much for anyone to absorb. By allowing converts expression in their own words, by soaking up their subjectivity, the dissertation is stronger than any quantitative study which might have surveyed converts' opinions of the experiences of conversion. It gives converts the opportunity to reflect, talk and make sense of their experience outside of a power framework that at times may be perceived as threatening and other times embracing. It also gives them the freedom to express their hopes, dreams of acceptability, and desires of being good enough alongside their anxieties, fear and anger without intimidation. By giving voice, this dissertation therefore adds to their agency. It breaks the hierarchy between Beth Din, rabbis and converts and positions them as discursive agents in a triangle within the process of achieving belonging. Indirectly it also places them into a discursive space with other converts as they forge a place for themselves in the community. It is a pity that converts who had left their Judaism behind would not participate in the study and, in my view, it is completely understandable that they had refused. Speaking in narratives also is speaking about making of identity (Jenkins, 2006; Hall, 1996; Yuval-Davis, 2010) and this gives converts the chance to confirm for themselves and others - the imagined world through the researcher - their acquired identities and to take ownership of those identities. The study allowed converts to give the meaning they want to give to their identities.

There is also opportunity in voice to improve the social process in which individuals are engaged. The value of converts' voices to the community is that they speak for themselves rather than have rabbis speak on their behalf. Interestingly, much of what rabbis and converts say are the same, providing a triangulation of results. This is valuable for the Beth Din which is a body that makes considered decisions around issues they encounter, since the elements in the process that are working and/or not working are confirmed and can be responded to. It brings the humanity that many felt was lacking back into the process.

A final point on voice, one could legitimately ask: Whose voice does this dissertation embody? Since I, the researcher and author of this dissertation, am not only that but also a past participant and direct observer of the conversion process, as well as a distant member of the community, it could justifiably be asked to what extent the findings of the dissertation are my own preconceived ideas of the experiences of conversion. In Chapter 3, I raised the

idea of the positional space of the researcher, which is to be confessed and mused upon in order to understand and contextualise the body of this research within the spectrum of relationships in which the researcher does research. That confessional space is here.

It cannot be denied that the very idea of this dissertation in the first place came as a result of two of my roles in life: sociologist and Orthodox Jewish convert. Being the researcher and researched (by virtue of my past participation in conversion) outside of an auto-ethnography raises a number of challenges. This study profoundly provoked my emotions and identities at every stage of the process. At times it gnawed relentlessly at my fragile sense of being Jewish and bolstered my determined and more resilient sense of being non-Jewish; it strengthened my resistance to being Jewish in a narrowly prescribed way and pushed me to reclaim my own individuality and autonomy (and in that respect this study is my voice); it brought me closer to and further from my composite¹⁰¹, situational based identity derived from many ethnicities, nationalities, and citizenships - none of which have exclusivity over me; it kept me tightly bonded to something I desperately wanted to let go: the pain associated to what I had done, and through it, the pain it had caused others. Dealing with the topic meant facing my own anger, disappointment, shock and guilt. Although six years had passed since my conversion at the time of interviews, I cried and mourned after many encounters with converts. I found it hard to remain composed as converts trustingly poured their hearts out and wept their own tears of joy or pain; other times it required all my strength to contain my bitterness as they laughed in jubilation and satisfaction. There were occasions that the raw conflicting emotions it raised caused regrettable strain between my partner and me. Sometimes I could not write. The only way I could face the topic was to write in their voices. The narratives that other converts so generously offered helped me make sense of my own conversion, and gave me agency in dealing with my own emotions on the topic privately. In the public domain, this dissertation is the voice of converts; it is their words; but privately it is as much my voice as it is theirs.

In developing this dissertation, I used a number of strategies to differentiate converts voices from mine. The qualitative methodology (social constructionism) and design of questionnaire (open-ended, flexible and semi-structured) were deliberate selections to enable the voice of converts rather than my own. Furthermore, I exercised vigilance and control over what elements of the narratives to highlight - to select what emerged as dominant trends in the texts. I selected rich quotations for their interest but also for transparency and to show

¹⁰¹ I am a Jewish-Orthodox convert of traditional orientation, a woman from secular Greek and Cypriot families, born and raised in South Africa; mother of one non-Jewish child and mother of two Jewish children, living in an Arab emirate, Dubai.

the reader the source of the work. The conceptual definitions and selection of theory was written after the analysis so that they could reflect what the data was showing. The tone in my writing was moderated by having others, such as my supervisor and astute writers, reflect on the contents, and to reflect back to me what I was communicating. These strategies gave me assurance that I had done my best to capture converts' voices and present those voices as the dissertation.

8.9 Discussion

In democratic, multicultural societies, such as South Africa, the notion of social inclusion is underpinned by the principle of egalitarian citizenship. Typically, egalitarian citizenship is directed at creating an environment in which all individuals and their communities may come to feel that they belong irrespective of their race, religion, gender, ethnicity, sexuality and disability. In other words, it is aimed at ensuring the inclusivity of minority groups irrespective of their difference to the majority. The outcome, it is hoped, is a utopian socially inclusive society in which unity and harmony exists between all groups of which it is composed. In practice, the central patterning of majority-minority relations towards the goal of inclusivity in multicultural societies has for a long time been that minorities must orientate themselves around the way the majority believes it should to be included. Belonging, in practical terms, is belonging in reference to a presently dominant world of the majority. It assumes that an objective societal norm (defined by the majority) exists and if one wishes to have the rights and privileges of the majority, then one needs to adapt to or adopt those societal norms. Many minority communities and individuals may have done so at the expense of their own cultures, heritage and language; other minority communities have rejected this idea making them a literal foreigner in their habitual environments receiving instead either misunderstanding, rejection, ridicule and/or hatred which sometimes turns violent. The negative perceptions of the other are intensified by migration and globalisation which results in increasing social diversity, bringing a plethora of new citizens also with multiple citizenships, indicating fragmentation of dominance, dilution of national culture, multiple loyalties, and increasing levels of distrust and suspicion between groups. This othering in societies is happening at a time of intensified public insecurity in the face of global terror, growing religious fundamentalism and threats to freedom of expression. While liberal constitutions guarantee the adoption, maintenance and expression of minority identities as fundamental rights, it does not necessarily mean that the existence of multiple identities are supportive of each other, especially if they are marked by divisions of race, ethnicity and religion and are embedded in a history of oppression along those same axes. Choosing to become a minority, therefore, may turn out to

be a very difficult road for those who travel it. Choosing minority group status through religious conversion is especially difficult and less supported because of the stigma often attached to religious groups as fundamentalist, radical, extremists, and/or terrorists. The issue of conversion is less controversial if it is in the direction of the majority group (i.e., process of assimilation).

Against this backdrop, South Africa's peculiar circumstances add further complexity to inclusion within minority-majority relations of plural environments. Multiculturalism of democratic South Africa emerges from a colonial and apartheid history of oppression and South Africa faces some of the same challenges as mentioned above in overcoming exclusions in a rapidly transitioning context in which minorities are equally included and religions are free to exist and express themselves. Multiculturalism is envisaged to have an important role in society in overcoming the injustices of the past. However, the formal breakdown of racial and ethnic group boundaries, the democratic redefinition and reconstitution of pluralism, the increasing globalisation of this formerly isolated nation, as well as a lack of key service delivery in the areas of basic needs, repeated outbursts of xenophobia, racism and racial politics, corruption, the declining power of the ruling party (which claims total credit for liberation from apartheid), and threats to press freedom, have undermined the sense of inclusion and belonging in South Africa, the meaning and quest for truth in a transitioning modern society.

In this complex context, such as South Africa, it is challenging enough for individuals to have to grapple with their inclusion in society. In order to fully grasp the research questions of this study therefore, this dissertation sought a conceptual framework that embraces the eclectic social nature and the turbulent political environment of post-apartheid South Africa from the 2000s onwards. The conceptual framework into which this thesis fits is alternative to the mainstream sociological theories that dominated conversions studies from the 1950s to 1970s but consistent with the turn made in many 21st century conversion studies towards understanding conversion in the times of pluralism. The conceptual framework, strictly speaking, is not that of conversion studies and therefore does not follow any social-psychological model that traces the stages of conversion. Rather, it is that of the politics of belonging in a world where the 'power of identity' is on the ascendance and where people imagine communities for themselves - those communities that they search for, create or join in order to find a place of acceptance and security.

The central issue of this dissertation is why some people, often those who have very few claims to social exclusion (such as ethnic converts), start actively seeking citizenship and belonging in an ethnic minority group, particularly one that is defined by its religious content. It must be remembered that many religions are ethnically bound and so depending on which

religion one adopts, conversion may also be a migration from one people to another, and from one culture to another. This is the case with becoming Jewish which requires conversion to Judaism - a religion. As seen in this dissertation, it requires assimilation into a new cultural terrain in order to attain inclusion. It also indicates that in cases, converts are searching for more than a spiritual transformation and/or religious gains. It is as much about belonging, inclusion and exclusion as it is about ideological shift in worldview. This study provides evidence of the above. Therefore, conversion models focusing on the spiritual transformation of converts alone fall short of describing and explaining the phenomenon. As Giordan (2009:6) says, conversion "is a process in which religion is certainly a part, but only one part, of many factors leading to a change from one identity to another".

This study also shows that the notion of inclusion and belonging in the context of conversion, however, is not that simplistic. It may be tempting and easy to think of the convert as having to move away from one group (from which either one has been ejected or from which one has rejected) to another in which one has achieved belonging. There are two important points here. Firstly, not all conversion results in complete exclusion from all else meaning that there can be a free flow of influences from coexistent identities, and continued participation in multiple cultures and groups. As Berzano and Martoglio (2009) explain, it may be the assumption of a new lifestyle and therefore it can be a 'free-flow' exchange of identity influences. Thirdly, for the same reasons, because religious conversion requires new group membership and affiliation in various and simultaneous social and cultural contexts, it can also raise tensions at the meeting points between various identities such as nationality, ethnicity, religion and race. This clash of identities is also clearly demonstrated in a number of studies of conversion to Islam in post-secular societies of Europe (Jensen, 2008; Özyürek, 2015; Van Nieuwkerk, 2004; Vroon, 2014; Zebiri, 2008) which have arisen because of the increasing number of converts to Islam in Western Europe. These studies show how national belonging is conflated with race and ethnicity and how the inclusion into a new ethno-religious group is seen as contradictory to the national identity, for example being Dutch or English means that you are Christian and white and being Muslim means being an immigrant or Arab and of darker complexion. Importantly now, these findings are confirmed in an African context where conversion intersects with race and citizenship too in the context of Jewish conversion.

This study questions how converts achieve inclusion for themselves in their new communities. But the research questions also delve into understanding the meaning of exclusions in this context. Some conversions, such as that of the new spiritual converts in this study, become active expressions of voluntary detachment and their conversion may be a deliberate attempt to distance themselves from something else. Those conversions may be similar to

other conversions which are expressions of avoidance, refuge, or opposition (Viswanathan, 1998; Pace, 2009). Although Orthodox Judaism demands it, others (such as ethnic converts) may not separate from anything. As a result, as mentioned earlier, some might end up straddling multiple worlds and citizenships. These different scenarios arise given the motivations for conversion, the nature of the religion, its requirements for conversion, and the group into which an individual converts. There are different convert types therefore, and different conversion scenarios which may exist across religions and within religions. To see the religious convert as a uniform person who moves easily and seamlessly into another religion is erroneous. It does not recognise how the different motives behind religion may result in different experiences and situations for the converts (even within the same religion) – and therefore that it will affect their receiving communities / groups differently. It also assumes religion to be independent of culture and ethnicity and devoid of power relationships.

It is necessary to consider the issue from the perspective of converts, and to explore the reasons for conversion and whether they are linked to experiences of social inclusion and exclusion. It is important to speak to converts as they are the ones that come to embody the tensions and conflicts of cultures and identities, perhaps more so than those born into the minority group. As shown in this study, their insights have revealed synergies on the one hand and tensions on the other hand that one would not ordinarily recognise. While, ultimately, the state is concerned with national interests and incorporating minorities into the broader socio-political landscape, conversion to a minority group comes down to a dynamic process between individuals and their communities as it falls outside of state's preoccupation. The process of inclusion is a socially constructed process between individuals, their communities and the new community gatekeepers and authorities. The perspective of converts has been enlightening to research as it highlights converts as active and passive agents in the process. The study found that push and pull factors draw an individual to a minority religious group and that the convert exercises agency (in the form of compliance or refusal to comply) over his/her conditions in achieving what he/she wants to achieve. Religious conversion, such as Jewish conversion, provides an opportunity to view whether this new inclusion contradicts other identities (e.g., ethnicity and race). It also opens avenues to explore whether the same occurs for other minority religions, in contexts where race and ethnicity are important identity markers, for example, in a place like South Africa.

Taking a perspective of this kind (inclusion) provides an alternative lens on religious conversion which raises some interesting issues. Firstly, it highlights the nature of citizenship of the minority group concerned and questions to what extent the community of the new group acts like a state in naturalising and assimilating new members, thereby facilitating their

social inclusion and a new sense of belonging. It also draws attention to the minority group in question and its relationship to the broader state. Secondly, religious conversion to a minority group challenges the notion of others as foreigners or outsiders. If recognisable members of a majority, and/or 'indigenous' people become part of the other (minority group), then it must be considered to what extent that minority group may still be perceived of as the other. It is interesting to examine the impact that conversion has on the convert and the community and how they both achieve inclusion and negotiate their exclusions. It should also be considered what contribution conversion makes to the experiences of social inclusion of the minority group in its broader context. The argument is that not only does religious conversion challenge notions of the other, but it also contributes to the social reconstruction of the other in the broader landscape of social inclusion. Conversion is an ongoing and socially constructed process that makes and remakes identities.

Finally, converts are looking for inclusion in a religious group or community but they are looking for it in an unusual place – in the margins of society. Therefore, the benefits of their new social inclusion need to be understood, as well as the benefits of their social exclusions. For some, exclusion may be painful and for others it may be beneficial. Inclusion is something that needs to be better understood for Jewish converts. The Jewish community in South Africa, through their community structures, may portray themselves as homogenous, but in reality it is far from that. Politically, there are great differences among sectors of the population with regard to their stances to apartheid and the state of Israel and these political viewpoints tend to cohere with geography and religious affiliation. Religiously there is also a great divide between Progressive and Orthodox although the population is so small that it is not unusual to find Orthodox, Progressive and secular all in one family. Coupled with the above mentioned issues within the Jewish population in South Africa, converts need to cope with multiple identities, in a pluralist and globalising environment with contradictory and confusing messages on identity and religion. On the topic of identity in a globalised world, Castells (2004:9) argues that the "[p]lurality of identities is a source of stress and contradiction in both self-representation and social action". In voluntary conversion, the assumption is that converts willingly accept a new identity and continue to engage it. But this is too simplistic a view of conversion and converts and it tends to assume that conversion is based solely on the desire for religion. As illustrated above the motive may not always be so and so the emphasis on religion may be short-lived. Therefore, the strategies that converts use and their experiences of negotiating their multiple citizenships are insightful in understanding how new entrants are received and come to be accepted, whether they have contradictory or exclusionary

identities and how they are managed. This dissertation helps understand what social inclusion and exclusion means to converts.

For ethnic converts, conversion is primarily about securing a single religious identity which they hold of value and on that basis gaining inclusion into an environment that they have been exposed to and are loosely and informally connected to. Their conversion is therefore also about avoiding exclusion for themselves and their children. Conversion can be viewed as a process of acquiring citizenship in a new community (Kriel, 2012). However, after conversion and receiving full recognition, the participation of converts in their communities differs. These differences can be noted according to the denomination in which the conversion occurs, but also within the denomination in which conversion occurs. For example, within Orthodoxy, some women transform completely, adopting religious lifestyles and religious networks and become integrally involved in their new communities, at the same time discarding their former connections. These women are usually celebrated within their Jewish communities and generally referred to as righteous converts. Over a period of time following their conversion, other converts return to their former lifestyles distancing themselves from the religious way of life while retaining the titles and privileges for themselves and their children. These converts are generally considered to have betrayed and misled the religious authorities and their communities who supported them through their conversion. They are regarded as insincere and instrumentalist and classified by those who invested in their conversions as unsuccessful converts. There is a third group of converts here who remain somewhat involved in their new communities, balancing a more moderate approach to religion with their former ways of being. These converts tend to remain on the margins of their new communities. Some converts, while prepared to accept the religious fundamentals of Judaism, want to be Jewish without the religion, while others are happy to accept both. From the religious authorities' perspectives, they cannot be separate and tensions result between converts and the authorities, and some part of the communities. However, all are converts who generally retain ties with their families and, in those cases, are likely to straddle both their former and new universes - to varying extents - for some time after their conversion. What these different participation schemas illustrate is that conversion to Judaism is not just about religion (Judaism), but it is also about identity and ethnicity (being Jewish) and maintaining at least some existing group ties while gaining entry into another group that one was not born into.

Afrikaners find Judaism without any prior contact with Jews and are largely ignorant of the cultural and communal frameworks that exist within the religion before their decision to convert. Rather, their move seems to be as a result of a crisis in identity, what Davies (2009:1) refers to as a profound dislocation in post-apartheid Afrikaner identifications. Their

conversion is the final step in a lengthy social-religious process that helps them transcend their ethnic bonds and individuate by breaking away from their primary groups, replacing them with others. Conversion becomes the process through which they find new inclusion and exclusion – new belonging - and form a new identity. I argue that through conversion, these Afrikaners make new communities for themselves. Castells (2010:6) says “[i]dentity is people’s source of meaning and experience” and it would certainly appear at the outset that the identity of Afrikaners in post-apartheid South Africa is fundamental to their conversion to Judaism. Davies (2009) who writes on the Afrikaner’s quest for belonging in post-apartheid South Africa argues that survival is a key theme in Afrikaner history and identity. An important point she raises is that Afrikaner identity is fractured and that the strategies for their survival and their experiences of such differs according to class. While Afrikaner capitalists do not need to worry about themselves in post-apartheid South Africa from an economic and political perspective, white Afrikaners outside of this fold are faced with the challenge of being self-sufficient. The theme of survival is one that appears to be active in the conversion of Afrikaners to Judaism. Conversion seems to simplify their lives, they cope well with it and use it to their benefit. Indeed, through conversion they establish themselves in new communities and exclusion from their former lives brings a new inclusion and freedom, release and relief and a new citizenship where they can start again. The movement of Afrikaners towards Judaism and into the Jewish community brings to mind Castells notion of “resistance identity” (Castells, 2010:8-9) which are “usually constructed by using the materials inherited from history (god, nation, ethnicity, locality)” (Castells, 2010:xxvi). More specifically, he describes resistance identity as “generated by those actors who are in positions/conditions devalued and/or stigmatized by the logic of domination, thus building trenches of resistance and survival on the basis of principles different from, or opposed to, those permeating the institutions of society” (Castells, 2010:8). He continues that this kind of identity-building “leads to the formation of communes or communities” which represents “the exclusion of the excluders by the excluded” (Castells, 2010:9). It is the “building of defensive identity in terms of the dominant institutions/ideologies, reversing the value judgment while reinforcing the boundary.” Although Castells (2010:9) uses the term resistance identity as a response to “unbearable oppression...on the basis of identities that were, apparently, clearly defined by history, geography, or biology”, Afrikaners are not responding to unbearable oppression but rather a sense of alienation as a result of a changing social, political environment which profoundly challenges the history of their former identities. Their new identity as Jews is part of a resistance to the fragmentation of the environment in which they feel lost, and this identity helps them to become defensive and enter into new boundaries which they in turn can defend.

For black converts choosing minority status from a majority position is intriguing. Black ethnic converts are easier to explain since they enter through marriage. However, the spiritual converts are more complex to understand. Their conversions raise questions of inclusion and exclusion relating to race and ethnicity.

Overall, religious conversion seems to amplify the social dynamics underpinning social inclusion and exclusion. This dissertation provides a strong argument that religious conversion is more than an ideological switch of worldview confined to the individual and his/her mental state and social networks. In my view, conversion needs to be conceptualised differently to social-psychological theories which are useful to understanding the process and experiences of conversion from a small group perspective. Because religious conversion requires new group membership and affiliation, it raises the dynamics of power and highlights difficulties at the intersection of religion, nationality, ethnicity and indeed race. It foregrounds the nature of the minority group's citizenship and the impact that the adoption of a new worldview has for the convert and the community involved. As it says much about the relation between those communities and the state, we need to think of conversion as a social process of coping with or consolidating multiple ethnicities and citizenships. It is about the politics of belonging.

8.10 Conclusion

This study looked at the how Jewish converts, in their quests for belonging, achieve acceptance at a communal level within the Orthodox community. The study charts their journey, process and experiences as they strive to make meaningful life adjustments in achieving a new sense belonging. This study finds that conversion is one mechanism of achieving belonging and that in a small, religiously defined ethnic community, there are clearly demarcated and strict conditions for belonging that are more conservative than the broader environment. This study also finds that post-apartheid dynamics influences converts' ideas of belonging, their search for belonging and the community's responses to conversion and the formation of identity of converts. Conversion comes to strengthen the family structure, ethnic borders and identity of the Orthodox Jewish community. The objective of this study was never to understand social exclusion or inclusion itself, but through experiences of such, to understand the meaning of conversion for converts. By including rabbis in the sample, what emerged was not only the meaning for converts but also the meaning (and value) of conversion for communities. Because Orthodox Jewish conversions involve not just individuals, but communities and their authority figures (power structures) too, a unique approach was adopted to understand conversion, and specifically conversion to Orthodox Judaism. What this study confirms

is that conversion is highly complex social phenomenon that absorbs and expresses the complexities of the social environment in which it occurs and that its expressions are unique to each set of converts. One cannot generalise conversion for ethnic converts, spiritual converts, new spiritual converts - or those who have some linkage through family into the Jewish community. To generalise under one framework would be to deny a whole realm of experiences, and multiple lived realities, to those who do not fit that framework. It would deny them their voice and agency in creating a future for themselves and it would be a profound limitation/failing of this study. Furthermore, this study shows that in a highly racialised environment such as South Africa, the lingering dynamics of a divided past, which created insecurities, tensions and conflicts over citizenship, raises the memories and fears of historical exclusions and the fragility of belonging over time. Conversion becomes the expression of fear and the attempts to manage those fears in practical and legitimate ways. Coming to belong in this multicultural and transitory world is fraught with dilemmas as one faces a multiplicity of truths and an abundance of choices yet also the social and political constraints on the possibilities for new citizenships which are often contradictory and competing. However, finding a home to belong does not necessarily mean that one automatically does belong - neither does it mean that this sense of belonging is a *fait accompli*. The sense of belonging needs to be fluid and responsive to the environmental ebbs and flows. As seen in this study, it requires active and ongoing nurturance. The quotation presented at the opening of this dissertation, captures belonging as "always in-between; and in-between home". In my view, belonging could not be better understood.

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