



# THE LIBERAL JEWISH SYNAGOGUE

## Are you thinking of converting to Judaism?

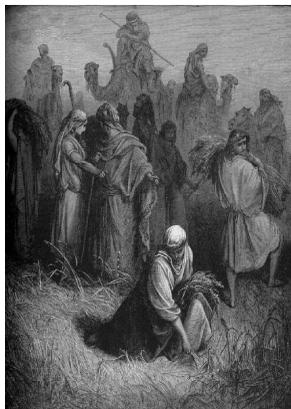


Illustration showing the biblical character Ruth who, in Jewish tradition, is seen as one of the first converts to Judaism.

**Welcome to The Liberal Jewish Synagogue in St John's Wood. If this is the first time you have attended a synagogue, and if you are thinking about converting to Judaism, this leaflet will help you to think about the next stages of that process.**

People choose to convert to Judaism for many different reasons. Perhaps there is Jewish ancestry in your family and becoming Jewish may represent an act of re-connection with the Jewish part of your heritage. Or, it could be that one of your parents is Jewish, but you haven't been raised in any specific tradition. Liberal Judaism regards children of one Jewish parent – either the mother or the father – as Jewish, provided they have had a Jewish upbringing and education culminating in Bar or Bat Mitzvah (at the age of 13) and/or Kabbalat Torah (Jewish Confirmation at the age of 15).

You may be coming to synagogue with your Jewish partner and thinking about creating a Jewish family together. You may already have experienced a number of Jewish ceremonies and services in a Jewish home or at a synagogue, such as a Friday night meal or Passover Seder, Bar or Bat Mitzvah or wedding.

Sometimes it is the case that an individual has studied Judaism and is attracted to its beliefs and philosophy, its way of life and culture and so

you may be here to try and find out more about Judaism and what it might mean to become Jewish.

For all these reasons and perhaps others, you have arrived at the synagogue and may be wondering what to do next.

### **Attending services**

Conversion to Judaism is organised through a synagogue with a sponsoring Rabbi, usually the Rabbi of the community where you are attending services and studying. And so it's important to feel at home with the services and atmosphere of that synagogue.

Attending a number of services on Friday evening and Shabbat morning before you make your decision to convert is very important. They will give you some idea of what it means to be part of a community, as well as the spirituality of the LJS. The liturgy of our prayer book conveys something of the beliefs and principles of Liberal Judaism and on Shabbat mornings you will also hear the reading of the Torah from the scroll. The sermons given by Rabbis and, on occasion, lay people can help the congregation understand how Liberal Judaism sees the world and what is expected of Liberal Jews.

### **Exploring Judaism Class**

For all those wishing to explore Judaism, the LJS offers a class called 'Exploring Judaism' which meets on Tuesday evenings during term times from 8:00-9:00pm. It is taught by the Rabbis of the LJS. The course runs for a year and its syllabus includes the festivals, life cycle, Jewish beliefs, Jewish history and opportunities for informal discussion. We welcome those who would like to learn more.

### **Hebrew**

Knowledge of Hebrew is an important part of becoming Jewish. It allows you to follow the service and to become familiar with the language of Jewish Scripture and tradition. Knowledge of Hebrew helps you to identify with the Jewish people, to be able to follow a service in

any synagogue, anywhere in the Jewish world and to understand some of the key concepts and beliefs of Judaism. We don't expect converts to be fluent - learning any language is a lifetime's work - but learning Hebrew will help in many ways to understand Jewish life and traditions. Classes in Hebrew are on Tuesdays from 7:00-8:00pm.

### **Meeting your 'sponsoring Rabbi'**

Even if you are uncertain about converting to Judaism, it may be helpful to meet with one of the Rabbis. Judaism accepts the truth and integrity of other religions and does not feel that it has a monopoly on truth. In that respect, Jews do not go out to seek converts, but we do welcome those who are curious and feel that their spiritual home might be in a Jewish community. Here at the LJS, we welcome those who would like to explore the possibilities of conversion, but our view is that conversion is an organic process and cannot be forced. We will help you find out what is right for you. Sometimes this takes time, and we invite you to explore at your own pace.

If you think that you may wish to convert to Judaism, the Rabbi with whom you meet will become your 'sponsoring Rabbi'. At a first or second meeting, the Rabbi will fill out an initial interview form and will ask a few gentle questions about your background and why you might wish to convert to Judaism. We recognise that this might be the first time you have talked 'out loud' about converting to anyone other than your close friends and family and there are no right or wrong answers.

At this stage, you may already have started the class 'Exploring Judaism' or the Rabbi will invite you to attend and will explain that conversion requires regular attendance at classes and attendance at Shabbat and festival services. Those who are converting to Judaism are required to attend all major festival services in the synagogue: *Rosh Hashanah*, *Yom Kippur*, *Sukkot*, *Simchat Torah*, *Purim*, *Pesach*, *Shavuot* and *Tisha B'Av*. There are also other festivals that are celebrated in the home or more informally, such as *Chanukkah*, *Tu Bi'Sh'vat* (the New Year for Trees). The synagogue newsletter will give you the dates of

each one of the festivals and regular letters from the Rabbis as well as the classes, explain why it is important to attend services.

Once you have completed a few months in the class, your sponsoring Rabbi will ask you to submit a short statement of one typed page stating your reasons for wishing to convert to Judaism. This should only be done once you feel that conversion is the right pathway for you and will reflect your personal reasons for converting.

There should be regular meetings with your sponsoring Rabbi so that you feel supported in your spiritual journey. If you have a Jewish partner, it is important for him or her to attend all classes and services with you, so that this journey is undertaken together.

### **Completing the course**

Converting to Judaism takes a minimum of one year and usually longer. During that year, it is important to attend services regularly on Shabbat mornings and Friday evenings and to attend the classes in Hebrew and Exploring Judaism. Once the year is completed, it is really important to continue your learning, reading and attending services at festivals and on Shabbat.

Towards the end of the process, the sponsoring Rabbi will ask you to write two essays of not more than 2,000 words each. You will have covered the material for the essays in your year's course. There is no Hebrew test. You should discuss what is expected for these essays with your sponsoring Rabbi. The essays are submitted to the Beit Din at Liberal Judaism with whom you will have a final interview.

### **Brit Milah (Circumcision)**

The Rabbinic Conference Handbook of Liberal Judaism states: 'Circumcision is strongly recommended for male candidates...If exemption is sought, candidates are required to consult a doctor, preferably a member of the Association of Reform and Liberal Mohalim (the doctors who are qualified to perform circumcision), so

that the medical facts may be fully understood' (Liberal Judaism, Rabbinic Conference, Madrich).

The practice of circumcision in Judaism originates in the Hebrew Bible with the story of Abraham who circumcised himself when he was an old man and his son Isaac, when he was eight days old. Circumcision is regarded as a symbol of the covenant - the special relationship that exists between God and the Jewish people.

Contemplating circumcision as an adult is not easy. Although it is generally done under a local anaesthetic and does not require an overnight stay in a hospital, we would certainly encourage you to discuss the procedure with the mohel (the doctor who specialises and performs circumcisions) and, if appropriate, with the Rabbi. Ultimately, the ritual of circumcision is not to do with health or hygiene, but is a religious act that marks one's entry into the covenant that goes all the way back to Abraham.

### **The Beit Din**

The Beit Din is made up of three Rabbis who are members of the Rabbinic Conference of Liberal Judaism. The Beit Din will invite you to attend an interview on the recommendation of your sponsoring Rabbi. The Beit Din meets at the headquarters of Liberal Judaism: The Montagu Centre, 21 Maple Street, London W1T 4BE. You should attend with your partner or with a friend or family member who can support you. Your sponsoring Rabbi will also be with you, but will not be on the Beit Din to interview you.

One of the three Rabbis will have read your essays and all three Rabbis will engage you in conversation, asking you why you wish to convert to Judaism, inquiring a little about how you celebrate Shabbat or the festivals or about your spiritual journey or other matters.

You will then be asked to leave the room while the certificates are agreed and signed and then you will be invited back into the room with

your friend or partner and sponsoring Rabbi. The Chairman of the Beit Din will congratulate and welcome you and all present will recite the Shehecheyanu blessing:

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יי אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם,  
שֶׁהַחַיִּינוּ וְקִיַּמְנוּ וְהִגִּיעָנוּ לְזֶמֶן הַזֶּה.

*Baruch attah Adonai, Eloheynu melech ha-olam  
she-hecheyanu, v'kiyye'manu, v'higgianu la'z'man ha-zeh.*

Blessed are You, Eternal God, Sovereign of the universe:  
You have kept us alive, sustained us, and  
enabled us to reach this season.

## **Mikveh**

The mikveh is a pool of water which is collected naturally and is used by converts to mark the transformational moment of becoming Jewish in the eyes of the community. At the LJS we encourage converts to go to the mikveh because it is often a moving and meaningful rite of passage that gives expression to the changes that the candidate has experienced and represents the beginning of their new life as a Jew.

The mikveh is a private experience that takes place at mikveh of the Sternberg Centre for Judaism, 80 East End Road, London N3 2SY. You should book an appointment at the mikveh with the MRJ Beit Din on 020 8349 5700 and check the date and time with your sponsoring Rabbi who will accompany you and explain the procedure.

No jewellery or make-up should be worn to the mikveh. Women should not go to the mikveh when they are menstruating.

A preparatory meditation is recited before entering the mikveh. You should immerse your body completely, ensuring that the top of your head is covered with water. When emerging from the water, you recite the first blessing:

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יי אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, אֲשֶׁר קִדְּשָׁנוּ בְּמִצְוֹתָיו,  
וְצִוָּנוּ עַל הַתְּבִילָה

*Barukh attah Adonai, Eloheynu melech ha-olam  
asher kid'shanu b'mitzvotav v'tzivvanu al ha-tevilah.*

Blessed are You, Eternal God, Sovereign of the universe, who has sanctified us by Your commandments and enjoined us to perform the mitzvah of immersion.

You immerse a second time, emerge from the water and recite the Shehecheyanu blessing (see above, under Beit Din).

Finally you immerse a third time. After getting dry and rejoining the sponsoring Rabbi and any other friends or family present, a short prayer of welcome is recited.

### **Admission Ceremony**

The final step of conversion is an Admission Ceremony of welcome into the community. This usually takes place on a Friday evening during the service at the LJS. You will have chosen a Hebrew name - this can be done in consultation with your sponsoring Rabbi - and will be called up to the bimah (the raised platform from where the service is led) to recite a prayer in front of the Ark. The synagogue presents our new members with a Siddur or Machzor and a bookplate marking the occasion.

### **Membership**

When each of these steps have been taken, you will be invited to join the synagogue as a full member of the Jewish community. The synagogue office will give you more details about membership. Once admitted, no distinction is made between members who have gone through the conversion process and others.

## **Don't hesitate to ask**

Please do ask any of the LJS Rabbis about anything that worries you or about any aspect of the process of conversion.

## **Suggested brief reading list**

- *Choosing a Jewish Life* by Anita Diamant (Collins, 1991)
- *Liberal Judaism: A Judaism for the Twenty-First Century* by Pete Tobias (Stephen Austin and Sons, 2007)
- *The Jewish People: Their History and Religion* by David J. Goldberg and John D. Rayner (Penguin, 1989)
- Liberal Judaism Values and Practices Leaflets - available from the LJS. [www.liberaljudaism.org](http://www.liberaljudaism.org)

## **Would you like to know more?**

Please contact the Rabbi Alexandra Wright on [a.wright@ljs.org](mailto:a.wright@ljs.org) or Rabbi Rachel Benjamin on [r.benjamin@ljs.org](mailto:r.benjamin@ljs.org).

Or, to make an appointment with the LJS Rabbis, please call Joanne Beaumont on 020 7432 1283 or e-mail [rabbispa@ljs.org](mailto:rabbispa@ljs.org).

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*"When a proselyte comes to be converted, one receives them with an open hand so as to bring them under the wings of the Divine Presence."*

*(Leviticus Rabbah 2:9)*

*Judaism for Today and Tomorrow*

### **A constituent of Liberal Judaism**

The LJS is a company limited by guarantee (Company No. 9113305) and a registered charity in England and Wales (Charity No. 1159292)

Registered office: 28 St John's Wood Road, London, NW8 7HA