

Conversion in a Time of COVID-19

 rabbinicalassembly.org/story/conversion-time-covid-19



Please find information below from Rabbi Elliot Dorff, CJLS chair, Rabbi Pamela Barmash, CJLS co-chair, Rabbi Joshua Heller, chair of the Rites and Rituals Subcommittee, and Rabbi Lionel Moses, chair of the Joint Beit Din of the Conservative Movement, providing guidance for individuals and communities affected by Coronavirus. Note that this is not an official responsum of the CJLS.

Beit Din for conversion: The interview with the candidate for conversion may take place by video conference: the members of the Beit Din can all be in separate physical spaces, provided that they can all see the candidate and hear their testimony. However, the candidate for conversion must accept *kabbalat 'ol mitzvot* (the declaration before the Beit Din (Rabbi's Manual pp. J-14-17) before a Beit Din constituted in person. The Beit Din may be convened out of doors, and the participants should observe physical distancing and other precautions. Alternatively, if the Beit Din of rabbis who interviewed the candidate for conversion cannot meet in person with the candidate, the candidate's sponsoring rabbi, who may have been a member of the Beit Din, must convene a local Beit Din composed of her/himself and two laypeople to confirm that the candidate has accepted *kabbalat 'ol mitzvot*, and this local Beit Din would sign the certificate of conversion. The certificate of conversion must be signed with the members of the Beit Din wearing masks and gloves.

The reason why the Beit Din must meet in person for *kabbalat 'ol mitzvot* is based on Babylonian Talmud 47a-b and Y.D. 268, which state a number of requirements for the conversion: 1) the conversion must take place in public, not private, and the presence of the Beit Din in person acts as a public venue to the conversion; 2) the sages are characterized as "omdim alav" -- this means that they are standing physically by the

candidate for conversion. Since they ask the candidate questions, this means *kabbalat 'ol mitzvot*. Furthermore, conversion is a matter of status and, therefore, we must make sure that this is witnessed properly. For certain elements of conversion, such as tevilah and the interview with the candidate, we have suggested methods that make use of technology.

Circumcision/Hatafat Dam Brit: Circumcision for a biologically male candidate cannot be waived. If the candidate is uncircumcised, it may be possible to have a medical circumcision depending on local conditions. If not, the conversion must be delayed. If the candidate was previously circumcised, *hatafat dam brit* is still required and may be performed by a professional (mohel or properly trained Jewish physician), with both candidate and professional wearing masks and gloves, and a second witness standing at a distance.

Presence of the Bet Din at the Immersion: As long as a member of the Beit Din or a witness trusted by the Beit Din has seen the tevilah, the members of the Beit Din can be assured that the tevilah took place and that they may serve as witnesses for the tevilah. The Beit Din does not need to be physically present. (See Babylonian Talmud 45b; Tosafot on that page; Rabbi Moshe Feinstein Y.D. 1.47)

Tevilah (immersion in a mikvah) for conversion

Many Mikvaot are currently closed or open only for monthly immersion.

If a Mikvah is not available, the preferred alternative is to immerse in the ocean, a river that never dries up, or a lake that is fed by such a river. In a situation where privacy cannot be ensured, the immersee may wear a loose-fitting garment that preserves privacy but allows water to reach every part of the body (for example, a cloth robe or a non-white t-shirt and loose, non-spandex shorts). Others may accompany the immersee into the water and even hold on to the immersee when they are under the surface of the water if need be, as long as their hands are wet before they grab hold.

We have received questions about using a home bathtub. A home bathtub may never be used for conversion. Some have suggested that a bathtub or shower may replace immersion for niddah. These minority views rely on certain leniencies related to monthly

immersion and do not apply to the case of conversion.

We have also received questions about swimming pools or hot tubs. A typical pool or hot tub would be difficult or impossible to configure for kosher immersion. If you are considering the use of a swimming pool or hot tub, please contact the CJLS.

If none of the above is available, the conversion must be delayed.