

Sponsoring Rabbi's Handbook

GPS Geirus
Policies &
Standards

Network of Regional Rabbinic Courts
מערכת בתי דין לגיור באמריקה ובקנדה



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Introduction

The sponsoring rabbi plays a crucial role in guiding a conversion candidate through the conversion process leading up to the candidate becoming a full member of *Klal Yisrael*. The experiences of conversion candidates are greatly shaped by their relationships with their sponsoring rabbi. The sponsoring rabbi has a tremendous *zekhut* while, at the same time, he bears great responsibility in the initiation of a new member of *Klal Yisrael*.

Ideally, the conversion candidate should live in the sponsoring rabbi's community so that the sponsoring rabbi can be best positioned to facilitate and monitor the candidate's religious growth and integration into the Orthodox community. A sponsoring rabbi may be a synagogue rabbi, a campus rabbi or a local educator. The sponsoring rabbi guides a candidate through the entire process, overseeing the candidate's formal and informal educational experiences and monitoring the candidate's progress. He also coordinates with the *Beit Din* and communicates with the *Beit Din* regarding the candidate's growth in observance and readiness for conversion. He often represents the *Beit Din* to the candidate, and represents the candidate to the *Beit Din*.

Guidelines for the Professional Conduct of Sponsoring Rabbis

- **Sensitivity to Candidates**

This includes respect for and adherence to proper boundaries between the rabbi and the candidate; awareness of the vulnerability and scrutiny felt by many conversion candidates; respect for their life-changing commitment; appreciation of the life experiences of those who were raised as Jews; sensitivity to the emotional, psychological, personal, and economic stresses experienced by conversion candidates. It is vital that the sponsoring rabbi understand the inner and personal experiences of conversion candidates.

- **Professionalism**

This includes such things as efficient and timely communication, respect for timeliness and punctuality of appointments, and communication and cooperation between the *Beit Din* and sponsoring rabbi.

- **Transparency of Expectations**

This includes providing candidates, early in the process, information regarding the length of the conversion process; financial obligations; curriculum; demands on convert in terms of knowledge, economic and life-style expectations post-conversion.

Disclaimers

- 1. These sponsoring rabbi guidelines are formulated to provide direction and guidance for those interested in serving as a sponsoring rabbi for GPS candidates. However, the GPS participating rabbinical courts, the Rabbinical Council of America, and the Beth Din of America, including all their constituent bodies and officers, assume no responsibility for the conduct, actions or omissions of any sponsoring rabbi.**
- 2. The GPS participating rabbinical courts reserve the right to reject any individual from serving as a sponsoring rabbi at their discretion based on their internal standards and protocols.**

SPONSORING RABBI'S HANDBOOK

I. Initial Meeting(s)

✓ *Assessing a Candidate*

A sponsoring rabbi should have at least one initial meeting with a conversion candidate prior to agreeing to serve as sponsor. This allows the rabbi to assess the candidate's motives in converting, his or her background and history, and his or her level of familiarity with Jewish practices and beliefs. It also enables the sponsoring rabbi to see if there is a "good fit" between him and the candidate.

✓ *Suitability of a Candidate*

A sponsoring rabbi should only agree to sponsor a candidate if he feels comfortable that the candidate is suitable to begin the conversion process.

✓ *Communicating Demands of the Conversion Process*

Conversion candidates and converts report that they appreciate knowing up front as much as possible about the conversion process, including the financial and lifestyle demands that will be made of them. Surprises in these areas often provoke anxiety, frustration, and resentment. The earlier that conversion candidates know about the demands of the conversion process and subsequent life as a convert the better it is for them.

As Batei Din have different procedures, sponsoring rabbis should consult with their regional Beit Din as to what matters will be covered by the Beit Din and what matters will be covered by the sponsoring rabbi.

The following should be shared in a timely manner early in the process.

✓ *Curriculum*

The sponsoring rabbi should present in writing and review the expected course of study, both its content and the way it will be conducted. The sponsoring rabbi should have a developed curriculum which may be adapted according to the needs of individual candidates subject to the assessment of the sponsoring rabbi and the Beit Din.

Many curricula are available on the GPS website and through the regional Batei Din. The curriculum should include: *Halacha* (Prayer, Brachot and Birkat Hamazon, Shabbat, Holidays, Kashrut, Tahart HaMishpacha, Tefillin and Tzitzit, Synagogue and prayer (the *siddur*), *Bein Adam LeChaveiro*); Hebrew; Israel and Zionism, Jewish History, Basics of Jewish Philosophy, and understanding the sociology of the Jewish community.

✓ *Judging Progress*

The sponsoring rabbi should discuss with the candidate how progress will be judged and how it will be shared with the candidate.

✓ *Financial and Personal Challenges*

The sponsoring rabbi should discuss financial and lifestyle expectations regarding the conversion process, including:

- *Beit Din* fees, tutoring if required, transportation to the *Beit Din* if it is located at a distance, and *mikveh* fees.
- Financial challenges of living in the Orthodox community (kosher food, housing costs, education, etc.)
- Expectations as to where the convert should live during the conversion process and post-conversion.
- Impact of Orthodox observance on professional development.
- Challenges of *shidduchim* for converts and discussion of what can be expected regarding dating.

✓ *Sponsoring Rabbi-Conversion Candidate Relationship*

The sponsoring rabbi should have frank and open discussions about the challenges inherent in the rabbi-candidate relationship with conversion candidates at the beginning and throughout the conversion process in order to provide a context and understanding of the conversion process itself as well as the relationship dynamics inherent in it.

✓ *The Mikveh*

The nature of immersion in the *mikveh* should be explained to female candidates at the beginning of the conversion process in order to alleviate any anxiety, to correct any misinformation, and to reassure them of the *Beit Din*'s commitment to modesty and respect. (A female attendant who has been properly trained is present at every conversion of female candidates.)

✓ *Contact Information*

At the beginning of the process, the sponsoring rabbi should share information about the GPS network and contact information for Mrs. Abby Lerner, Director of Conversion Services: alerner@rabbis.org/ 516-661-1072. The sponsoring rabbi should also provide to the candidate a copy of the forthcoming (when available) Guidelines for the Conversion Candidate and make the candidate aware of the GPS website (www.judaismconversion.org) and other resources for education and support.

✓ *No Guarantee*

The sponsoring rabbi should make it clear that acceptance as a conversion candidate does not guarantee conversion.

✓ *Timeline and Benchmarks*

While it is impossible to provide a fixed timeline for the conversion process, it is important that conversion candidates have a realistic and reasonable sense of that process. For many, their lives are on hold – personally, spiritually, professionally, in creating a family, and, for some, issues of fertility weigh heavily. Beginning with their first meetings sponsoring rabbis should share with conversion candidates, as much as is reasonable and in coordination with the relevant *Beit Din*, a sense of the length of the conversion process and the process for communicating with the *Beit Din* and the scheduling of future meetings. They should set benchmarks by which they and conversion candidates can measure and judge progress. These benchmarks should be shared through frank discussions at the beginning of the conversion process, and should be reviewed from time to time during the process with each candidate.

✓ *Clarifying Roles*

Some converts report lack of clarity as to who is responsible for different aspects of their conversion process and that often leads to frustration and anxiety. From the beginning of the process, the sponsoring rabbi should clarify the roles and responsibilities of the sponsoring rabbi, *Beit Din*, teacher, and community including such things as the course and method of study, integration into the community, appointments, financial commitments, and support and counsel.

✓ *Sensitivities*

A sponsoring rabbi must appreciate and respect the backgrounds and experiences of conversion candidates. A sponsoring rabbi should be sensitive to the experiences of the many candidates who were raised in Jewish environments or who have undergone previous conversions.

Initial Meetings Checklist

- ☐ Curriculum
- ☐ Judging Process
- ☐ Financial and Personal Challenges
- ☐ Rabbi-Candidate Relationship
- ☐ *Mikveh*
- ☐ Contact Information
- ☐ Copy of Guidelines for the Conversion Candidate
- ☐ No Guarantee
- ☐ Timeline and Benchmarks
- ☐ Role Clarification
- ☐ Sensitivities

II. Tutoring

While it may be advantageous for the sponsoring rabbi to personally study with the candidate, it is not necessary and is not always feasible. If the sponsoring rabbi will not be the one personally teaching the candidate, the sponsoring rabbi should recommend an appropriate tutor for the candidate.

The tutor should be the same gender as the candidate. The candidate should realize that there are options as to who will be the tutor; both the sponsoring rabbi and the candidate must feel that the tutor is a “good fit.”

The rabbi should make the candidate aware that tutoring fees might be involved. The sponsoring rabbi should attempt to assist the candidate in working out an affordable arrangement for tutoring.

III. Integration into the Community

A sponsoring rabbi should ideally extend to candidate invitations for a Shabbat meal on a fairly regular basis – perhaps every four to six weeks – and create opportunities for the candidate to meet and get invited to other community members for meals. This enables the candidate to see how an Orthodox Jewish family functions. In addition, the meal affords an opportunity for discussion, informal learning and a sense of belonging on the part of the candidate.

A sponsoring rabbi should encourage the members of his community to invite the candidate for Shabbat meals so that he or she can better acclimate to the community.

IV. Ongoing Communication

It is important for the sponsoring rabbi to be in touch with the candidate on a regular basis, perhaps once a week. The rabbi should provide a candidate with his contact information and should respond in a timely fashion to inquiries posed by a candidate both by phone and by email.

The rabbi should monitor the conversion candidate’s progress and initiate contact with the conversion candidate from time to time. While encouraging continued growth and challenging the conversion candidate to greater commitment, the sponsoring rabbi should appropriately use his meetings with conversion candidates to express periodically his pride and respect for the candidates’ achievements and to acknowledge and validate the candidates’ achievements and frustrations.

V. Boundaries

While it is a privilege to assume the role of sponsoring rabbi, the nature of the relationship of a sponsoring rabbi with a conversion candidate is one that must be

entered into with more than the usual commitment to professionalism, dignity and caution.

The sponsoring rabbi must appreciate that the candidate may feel vulnerable. The candidate relies on the rabbi for information, validation and an education that can bring the candidate closer to his/her life goal of converting. The candidate feels that the success of his/her process is bound up in the rabbi's investment in him/her. The rabbi must always examine and reassess the relationship to ascertain that it is a healthy one – that the convert is not relying too heavily on him and that the rabbi does not feel unnecessarily empowered by the candidate's reliance upon him.

The relationship of students to campus rabbis is more informal than the relationship of synagogue rabbis with congregants or community members. It is, therefore, important for campus rabbis to be especially vigilant regarding boundaries with conversion candidates.

A sponsoring rabbi should review the Code of Conduct issued by the RCA.¹

Particular attention should be paid to matters regarding counseling.

- Although the rabbi may initiate contact with the candidate, he must be careful regarding too much contact. He must observe appropriate boundaries in terms of the content and the frequency of conversations.
- A candidate's independence and dignity must be respected. The candidate should not be asked too many questions regarding his/her whereabouts and his/her relationships.
- Questions that are considered inappropriate – dealing with issues of sexuality, or in the case of a female candidate, *tzeni'ut*, should not be broached by the rabbi himself. Concerns should be addressed to the *Beit Din*.
- It is important that a teacher or mentor of the same sex have conversations about and teach the laws of *taharat ha-mishpacha* and *tzeni'ut*. A sponsoring rabbi may discuss these issues with a candidate when the conversation is not initiated by the rabbi. At all times, these conversations should be limited and be guided by concerns for dignity and respect.
- The candidate may choose to *daven* in any Orthodox *shul* approved by the *Beit Din* and need not always *daven* in the *shul* of the sponsoring rabbi. In fact, it may be advantageous to the candidate to *daven* in different *shuls* in order to familiarize himself or herself with the local community and with different parts and expressions of the Orthodox community.
- A sponsoring rabbi should not elicit or accept services, such as babysitting and the like, from a conversion candidate, and shall not directly collect

¹ (http://rabbis.org/pdfs/Code_of_Conduct_3_13_2018.pdf)

tutoring fees from a conversion candidate. A sponsoring rabbi may, however, offer classes to conversion candidates as part of his synagogue responsibilities, and be paid for such instruction by the synagogue as part of his overall salary package. Inasmuch as the sponsoring rabbi's family is viewed as an extension of himself, caution is advised when a member of the rabbi's family tutors a conversion candidate for a fee. The sponsoring rabbi should consult with the Bet Din to discuss such an arrangement.

- The candidate should not be living in the home of the sponsoring rabbi as a guest or as a tenant. If the candidate chooses to live with an Orthodox family, he or she should not live at the home of the sponsoring rabbi.
- A sponsoring rabbi may choose to meet regularly with a candidate. Meetings should preferably take place in the *shul* office. They may take place at the rabbi's home, but only when the rabbi's wife is home. As per the requirements of the RCA Code of Conduct, the door to the office should have a window or the door should be open, and only when others are present in the building. This applies to tutoring situations as well. All of the above applies even if the candidate in question is a male.
- A sense of professionalism should characterize these meetings.
- Meetings with female candidates should not take place in a café, a restaurant, or the like. Meetings such as these appear to be social rather than professional and are subject to misinterpretation by the candidate and by others who might observe such meetings. A campus rabbi should assess the context and appropriateness of meeting a female candidate at a college campus café or cafeteria.
- The sponsoring rabbi must be familiar with the Guidelines for the Conversion Candidate. If the sponsoring rabbi has any concerns, he should address his questions to one of the following: The *Av Beit Din* of the *Beit Din* to which the candidate has applied; Rabbi Michoel Zylberman, Director of GPS Conversions; Rabbi Yona Reiss, Chair, GPS Committee; Mrs. Abby Lerner, National Director of Conversion Services

VI. Sensitivity to the Conversion Candidate

Sponsoring rabbis assume responsibilities that are both *halachic* and pastoral. They must guide a candidate not only in adopting a commitment to Jewish observance, but they must play an active role in helping a candidate manage and navigate the many personal, psychological and spiritual challenges he/she faces as he/she changes religious identity and social and family circles. Discussions about the following topics should be held with conversion candidates at the beginning and throughout the conversion process.

- Appropriate relationships with families of origin, including maintaining healthy and respectful relationships with parents, etc. while at the same time observing appropriate religious boundaries.

- Sensitivity shown, as appropriate, to matters of ethnic origin as it may impact a convert's future integration into the Jewish community.
- The challenges a convert is presently facing and may face with regard to future Jewish family members, as well as with the Jewish community.

VII. The Sponsoring Rabbi and the *Beit Din*

The sponsoring rabbi works in partnership with the *Beit Din* and should feel comfortable sharing assessments and concerns with the members of the *Beit Din*.

The sponsoring rabbi should have regular and timely communication with the candidate and the *Beit Din*. He should be invited, as a general rule, to attend all meetings of the candidate with the *Beit Din*. While the *Beit Din* has the responsibility to determine the ultimate disposition of each case, the opinions and recommendations of the sponsoring rabbi, who knows the conversion candidate best, should be a serious and meaningful factor in making that determination.

The sponsoring rabbi should be an active participant in helping formulate the *Beit Din's* expectations. The sponsoring rabbi should ensure that at the conclusion of each meeting with the *Beit Din*, or following the *Beit Din's* deliberation, the *Beit Din* shares with the conversion candidate its assessment of the candidate's progress and its expectations for next steps. This assessment should also be sent to the candidates and sponsoring rabbis in writing. The assessment and instructions concerning next steps should be as clear and detailed as possible.

VIII. The Mikveh and the Day of Conversion

In addition to the *Beit Din*, the sponsoring rabbi must outline for the candidate the procedures that will take place on the day of the immersion in the *mikveh*.

Together with the *Beit Din*, the sponsoring rabbi must assure that the procedures protect the dignity and modesty of converts while they are in the *mikveh*, including the required use of robes or other coverings for female candidates and the proper positioning of the *Beit Din*.

The moment of conversion is halachically and spiritually transformative, meaningful, and sensitive for a convert; it is a moment of deep emotion and meaning.

- The sponsoring rabbi should be careful that his conduct and speech are consistent with the meaning and importance of this moment for the conversion candidate.
- In addition to the *Beit Din*, the sponsoring rabbi should fully prepare the conversion candidate in advance for both the *kabbalat ha-mitzvot* and for the immersion process. This preparation should include: Explaining the nature and significance of the questions that will be asked of the candidate; helping

the candidate to be familiar with and comfortable with what will happen at the *mikveh*; and reassuring the candidate that the modesty of the immersion is a priority and responsibility of the *Beit Din*.

- The sponsoring rabbi should, in cooperation with the *Beit Din*, make sure that the questions that constitute the *kabbalat ha-mitzvot* as per *Yoreh De'ah* 268 be phrased in a way that is spiritually meaningful and uplifting.
- He should respect the possible anxiety that the conversion candidate may be experiencing at the time and should be encouraging and supportive, including expressing warm statements of welcome as a Jew into the Jewish community, and expressing feelings of pride for the candidate.

IX. Support for the Sponsoring Rabbi

Sponsoring rabbis are not alone. The *Batei Din* as well as the GPS committee and the RCA and BDA staff, are available for consultation and dialogue. Sometimes a sponsoring rabbi may benefit from consultation with a mental health professional. The RCA and GPS staffs are available to make referrals on a confidential basis.

PARTICIPATING BATEI DIN

Atlanta

Administrator: Rabbi Karmi Ingber
rabbiingber@gmail.com

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Beth Din Zedek of Chicago Rabbinical Council
Administrator: Rabbi Alan Abramson
773-465-3900
abramson@crcweb.org

Cincinnati

Beth Din of Cincinnati
Rabbi Ezra Goldschmiedt
347-443-8613
rabbi@shaareitorahcincy.org

Cleveland

Administrator: Rabbi Binyamin Blau
216-381-4757
rabbiblau@greenroadsynagogue.com

Los Angeles

Rabbinical Council of California
Rabbinic Administrator: Rabbi Avrohom Union
213-389-3382 x 13
Email: runion@rccvaad.org
www.rccvaad.org/beth-conversion.html

Miami

South Florida *Beit Din* for Conversion
Rabbi Efrem Goldberg
561-394-0394
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Montreal

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New York City

Manhattan Beth Din for Conversions
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