

FINAL REPORT OF THE GPS REVIEW COMMITTEE
June 29, 2015

Attached is the final report of the GPS Review Committee. This report will be presented to the RCA Executive Committee at a meeting on June 29, 2015 and to the RCA membership at its annual convention on June 30, 2015.

This report contains the recommendations of the GPS Review Committee, following diligent research, analysis and consultation with all relevant parties. It is the responsibility of the RCA Executive Committee to review and, at its discretion, accept the recommendations and facilitate change in policy and practice. The authority to implement any of these recommendations rests with the RCA Executive Committee which will charge the RCA itself, as well as the GPS National Director, the GPS Committee, the various Batei Din, Sponsoring Rabbis, and *Dayyanim* to respond and implement changes. Some of these recommendations can be implemented in a relatively short period of time. Others will require further analysis, thought, and development of ideas, materials, and resources. It is the GPS Review Committee's recommendation that the RCA Executive Committee appoint a group of individuals to oversee the implementation of the recommendations outlined in this report. That group – which is to be disbanded once the various bodies charged to oversee the GPS network have been put in place – should be similar in composition to the GPS Review Committee, such that it will include men and women, participants in the conversion process, *Dayyanim*, mental health professionals, and rabbinic leaders.

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THE GPS REVIEW COMMITTEE: FORMATION, MEMBERS, DIRECTIVES, AND GOALS

Formation and Members

In January 2007, the Rabbinical Council of America (RCA) and its affiliated Beth Din of America launched the “North American Regional Network of Conversion Courts,” commonly referred to as the “GPS (Geirus Policies and Standards) Network.” The network is comprised of 12 Regional Conversion Courts, referred to also as Beth Din or *Bet Din* (s.) or *Batei Din* (pl.), administered by a national GPS office.

By 2013, more than 1,000 individuals had successfully converted through GPS-approved *Batei Din*. Over the course of the six years of the GPS Network’s functioning, the RCA office received periodic complaints from conversion candidates and sponsoring rabbis, which is not unexpected given the number of conversion candidates and the nature of the process, but was nonetheless disappointing. These matters were addressed by the Director of the National GPS System, the GPS Committee, and RCA leadership. In response to these complaints, the Executive Committee of the RCA mandated a review of the GPS system. Following the arrest of Rabbi Barry Freundel, the then *Av Bet Din* of the GPS-approved *Bet Din* in Washington, DC, many converts wrote in a variety of online fora, as well as in communications to the RCA, about issues they experienced in their conversion processes. It quickly became clear to the RCA that the review of the GPS needed to address the complexities of the conversion experiences of the converts and the scope of the GPS Review Committee’s mandate was expanded.

On October 29, 2014, the RCA announced the establishment of a committee to review the GPS Network. The Review Committee was comprised of men and women, participants in the conversion process, *Dayyanim*, mental health professionals, and rabbinic leaders. The members of the GPS Review Committee are:

- Mrs. Evelyn Fruchter, a convert to Judaism and an attorney specializing in litigation;
- Rabbi Shmuel Goldin (chair), Honorary President of the RCA and Rabbi of Ahavath Torah, Englewood, NJ;
- Mrs. Abby Lerner, educator and teacher of family purity laws;
- Rabbi Haskel Lookstein, Rabbi of Congregation Kehilath Jeshurun, New York, NY;
- Mrs. Bethany Mandel, a convert to Judaism, former staff member at Commentary Magazine, and freelance writer who recently authored a column entitled, “A Convert’s Bill of Rights”;
- Rabbi Yona Reiss, *Av Bet Din*, Chicago Rabbinical Council; *Dayyan*, Beth Din of America; and Chairman, GPS;
- Ms. Bracha Rutner, *Yoetzet Halachah* (advisor in Jewish family purity laws) for the Riverdale, NY and Washington, DC communities;
- Mrs. Shana Yocheved Schacter, CSW, a psychotherapist in private practice;
- Rabbi Yaakov Shulman, Rabbi of Congregation Talmud Torah, Brooklyn, NY, and *Dayyan*, GPS *Bet Din*, Brooklyn;
- Rabbi Adam Starr, Rabbi of Young Israel of Toco Hills, Atlanta, GA; *Dayyan*, GPS *Bet Din*, Atlanta;
- Rabbi Kalman Topp, Rabbi of Beth Jacob Congregation, Los Angeles, CA.

Rabbi Mark Dratch, RCA Executive Vice President, and Rabbi Reuven Tradburks, RCA Israel Representative, have provided input and professional support to the GPS Review Committee’s efforts.

Review Committee Directive

At the establishment of the GPS Review Committee in October, 2014, RCA President Leonard Matanky outlined the directives, assumptions, and charge of the committee.

While there were those who expressed opposition to the entire notion of a centralized system of conversion courts calling for a return to conversions done by local rabbis, the RCA affirms the value of its centralized system of Regional Courts for Conversion, the GPS system. In particular:

1. The RCA affirms the fundamental value of the GPS system, whose standards in *halachah* are in accordance with the most widely accepted views of our *Poskim*. A conversion completed through this system grants the convert the assurance that the conversion will be the most widely accepted both in North America and by the Chief Rabbinate of Israel.
2. The RCA affirms the *halachic* standards of the GPS system.
3. While the Freundel arrest is an unmitigated tragedy and gives urgency to this review, the GPS system includes many people who have worked appropriately including rabbis, administrators, teachers, and mentors. These people are not to be judged unfairly due to the criminal activity of one.
4. While affirming the strengths of the GPS, the GPS is acknowledged to have weaknesses, as does any system. Some of these are due to the nature of a centralized system and some are due to the delivery of the services.
5. The RCA is committed to improving the GPS system by both making it more efficient and by improving the experience of the convert.

Goals

The goals of this GPS Review are to:

1. Study the experiences of converts and their sensitivities and to make recommendations that will improve their experience while maintaining the *halachic* demands that conversion entails.
2. Make recommendations that will make the GPS more user-friendly and transparent for applicants, conversion candidates, and the community.
3. Recommend a safe grievance procedure.
4. Identify the successes and weaknesses of GPS.
5. Make recommendations to improve the organizational structure of the GPS Network in order to improve consistency amongst the different *Batei Din*.

REVIEW PROCESS

The GPS Review Committee’s mandate was to evaluate the entire system in order to identify best practices, understand the delivery of services from all perspectives, and make recommendations for establishing the “gold standard” of services that are professional, respectful, and spiritually engaging. The GPS Review Committee paid attention to both the issues and systems it found deficient, as well as on those areas it found to be appropriate and effective.

Appreciating that converts are the experts of their experiences and have much to offer in helping understand the experience of conversion, much of the Review Committee’s focus was on gathering information from them on how the GPS *Batei Din* can make their experience more comfortable and meaningful. Although the GPS Review Committee found, as a result of its research, that many aspects of the GPS process are working, the GPS Review Committee identified systemic and procedural issues that must be addressed.

The Surveys

In order to obtain a full and accurate picture of the experiences of conversion candidates, a professional survey was conducted by Avraham Y. HaCohen, a consultant to non-profits. Avraham Y. HaCohen has advised a diverse group of non-profit organizations and philanthropies in hundreds of existing projects and new initiatives in the fields of health, social welfare, education, and culture. His expertise is in the area of planning, evaluation, and implementation of management, operations, program, budget, and financing.

The GPS Review Committee had input on the survey questions and the survey was conducted by Avraham Y. HaCohen. The completed surveys were seen only by Avraham Y. HaCohen in order to ensure safety and anonymity of the respondents. The survey data presented to the RCA was presented anonymously, without any attributions to those who completed the surveys.

Two Surveys were conducted by Avraham Y. HaCohen:

1. A survey of converts, present conversion candidates, and candidates who chose not to complete their conversion with the GPS *Bet Din*.
2. A survey of Sponsoring Rabbis.

The rates of response were twice as high as the target norm for e-surveys, a range of 24.8 - 26%.

	<u>Population (potential respondents)</u>	<u>Sample (actual respondents)</u>
Conversion Participants	835	439 (52.6%)
Sponsoring Rabbis	216	107 (49.5%)

Survey of Converts and Conversion Candidates

The survey was sent to 835 people who had registered as conversion candidates with the RCA, including those who had completed their conversions, those in the process of converting, and those who chose not to complete their conversion with a GPS *Bet Din*. 439 completed the survey, including 307 who had completed their conversion, 105 who were in the process, and 27 who had decided to not complete with a GPS *Bet Din*. The experiences of people

who may have participated in the conversion process but who never registered with the RCA are not accounted for by the data presented below.

A 27 page summary of the survey results was submitted to the Review Committee along with a full report of the data.

The following is a selection of data from the summary report:

- 78% of conversion participants in the RCA-Beth Din of America network are women.
- The peak years for entering the conversion process are the ages 20-29, which represent 45% of the sample. In the decade thereafter, 30-39, the number drops to 27%. These two age groups encompass 70% of all conversion candidates. Only 12% of respondents entered the conversion process in the age range of 40-49.
- Participants were asked to indicate the factor(s) that prompted their interest in conversion. The most oft-cited factor (80% of respondents) was a “spiritual-intellectual search.”
- 45% of all respondents said they have “Jewish ancestry.” Although the survey did not ask them to define that term, they were asked whether they considered themselves Jewish while growing up, and 70% of that group answered in the affirmative.
- 94% of all respondents stated that their reason for selecting the RCA Beth Din to convert them to Judaism was the desire for a “recognized, Orthodox conversion.” A number of respondents noted their understanding that RCA conversions are recognized by the State of Israel. 20% of respondents noted that the RCA had been recommended to them as reliable.
- A little less than one-third of those entering the RCA conversion process had previously begun or completed a conversion with another organization. 48% of those were Conservative; 13% Reform; and another 7% indicated that their conversion was “non-Orthodox.” 32% of those who had begun or completed a conversion before entering the RCA conversion process (47 people) had previously begun or completed a conversion under Orthodox auspices.
- Although there may have been a certain level of uncertainty about aspects of the process, the majority of potential converts found their Sponsoring Rabbi to be accessible to guide them and that they were able to have an open and honest dialogue with him during the course of learning and preparation for conversion (“Completely” – 72%; “Somewhat” – 20%). A minority of respondents (8%) found themselves with a Sponsoring Rabbi whom they felt was unavailable to provide the necessary guidance and with whom they did not feel comfortable speaking openly.
- Participants were queried as to whether, if they experienced discomfort during the conversion process, they felt there was someone to whom they could comfortably turn to help them: 72% said yes; 28% said no.
- Three-quarters of respondents would say that their Sponsoring Rabbis did a good job “preparing them for the social, emotional, spiritual, financial and other challenges they might face as a convert to Judaism” (Very much so - 38%; Pretty well – 36%).
- The fact that fully 76% of participants expected to have a continuing relationship with their Sponsoring Rabbi following the conversion process matches up quite closely to the data cited above about the quality of the relationship between the parties, i.e. if the relationship was

marked by accessibility and open dialogue during the course of learning and preparation for conversion.

- When asked to characterize the administration and proceedings of the Regional Conversion Court, 75% of participants replied “Professional.” The other quarter of the respondents did not share that positive assessment and either said that it was “Somewhat lacking in professionalism” (16%) or “Unprofessional” (9%).
- Understanding that *Halachah* requires ritual immersion to be without clothes, did you feel this aspect of the conversion experience was handled sufficiently modestly?

Responses:

- Yes 85%
- Only somewhat 9%
- Not really 3%
- Not at all 3%

- Again, given that *Halachah* requires ritual immersion to be without clothing and, although shielded from view, with three rabbis in close proximity, which of the following best describes your recollection of the experience?

Responses:

- The moment was filled with holiness and excitement that left little room for anything else. 57%
- It was a sanctified moment, but I definitely felt some discomfort. 29%
- It was awkward and uncomfortable, but I accepted that as a price I had to pay. 12%
- I felt resentful but did not express it. 2%
- I felt resentful and expressed it at the time. 1 person

- The survey also asked “To what degree did you experience any of the following feelings in your discussions with the Conversion Court?” and received the following responses:

Answer Options	A great deal	Some	A little	Not at all	Do not recall
Welcome	53%	24%	13%	9%	1%
Empathy	39%	26%	16%	16%	3%
Encouragement	41%	26%	16%	16%	1%
Support	37%	27%	21%	14%	1%
Respect	58%	20%	12%	9%	1%
Being judged critically	22%	22%	20%	34%	2%
Powerlessness	27%	16%	19%	36%	3%

Vulnerability	28%	21%	20%	28%	3%
Unreasonable demands	10%	9%	18%	58%	5%

There are, in these responses, sometimes upwards of 100 people out of 400 surveyed, and sometimes more, who carry with them a view that the *Bet Din* is “lacking in professionalism” and have experienced feelings such as “being judged critically,” “powerlessness,” and “unreasonable demands.” The GPS system needs to address these concerns.

Focus Groups

In the survey of conversions participations, an offer to participate in focus groups was made. 175 people expressed an interest in these groups. In order to assist the GPS Review Committee in its analysis, five focus groups were conducted. Each group had about ten participants. Three groups were conducted in New York, one in Washington, and one in Montreal. Each group had 2 facilitators, a male and a female. The facilitators were:

- Mrs. Valerie Caminsky, Montreal, Canada;
- Rabbi Mark Dratch, Executive Vice President, RCA;
- Mrs. Abby Lerner, educator and teacher of family purity laws;
- Ms. Bracha Rutner, *Yoetzet Halakhah* (advisor in family purity laws) for the Riverdale, New York and Washington, DC communities;
- Mrs. Shana Yocheved Schacter, CSW, a psychotherapist in private practice;
- Rabbi Neal Turk, *Yoshev Rosh* Conversion Bet Din of Bergen County, New Jersey;
- Rabbi Michael Whitman, Rabbi of Adath Israel Poale Zedek; *Yoshev Rosh* of Conversion Bet Din, Montreal, Canada.

Sponsoring Rabbi Survey

The survey was sent to 216 rabbis who had served as sponsoring rabbis. 107 responded to the survey, representing 49.5%.

A 17 page survey report was submitted to the Review Committee along with a full report of the data.

The following are some excerpts of this report, in the words of the survey professional:

- More than one-third of those who serve as Sponsoring Rabbis in the RCA’s Conversion Network are not actually members of the RCA.
- Conversion candidates in the New York City Beth Din are spread among a larger pool of Sponsoring Rabbis. In that region, almost half of the rabbis have guided no more than one or two candidates. In all the other regions, the weight shifts to a smaller group of rabbis who have managed at least 5-10 conversion cases or more.
- Source material to guide the candidate’s learning has been an issue. 38% of the Sponsoring Rabbi respondents report they did not have a curriculum designed for that purpose.
- A strong plurality of Sponsoring Rabbis is of the opinion that there should be some manner of formal follow-up with converts after a GPS conversion.
- More than 90% of Sponsoring Rabbis see assistance in the convert’s integration into the community as one of the responsibilities of their role. Yet, with regard to their own follow-up after the conversion, there was a clear “disconnect” between the perception of the rabbis and that reported by the converts themselves.

- While a majority of respondents chose positive attributes to describe the *Dayyanim's* demeanor in meeting with conversion candidates, none of those characterizations exceeded 74%.
- There is a strong norm of rabbis' satisfaction with the performance of the New York City *Beit Din*. In stark contrast is the assessment of the Other Regional *Batei Din*, in which fully one-third of Sponsoring Rabbis express dissatisfaction with their functioning.
- Though mandated by "GPS Protocols," only 41% of Sponsoring Rabbis submitted a report on the convert's progress one year after conversion.
- In cases where a Sponsoring Rabbi may have felt frustration with the *Beit Din* during the conversion process of one of his candidates, the most frequently mentioned causes were administrative issues, unclear meeting outcomes, and excessive demands of the candidate.
- 18% of Sponsoring Rabbis say they have had at least one candidate whom they felt should have been approved for conversion but the *Beit Din* did not accept. 81% of those rabbis refused to accept the ruling as final and, instead, referred the candidate to a non-GPS *Beit Din*.
- Although there is some level of interest in the idea of a national ombudsman to handle disagreements between Sponsoring Rabbis and the *Batei Din*, most rabbis were not enthusiastic about the concept as a solution to the issues they had raised.
- When queried as to the nature of assistance they may have received from the National GPS Office, only half of the sample chose to respond. And among those who did reply, 31% indicated they had no connection with the National GPS Office, only with the Regional *Bet Din*.

Survey of RCA Rabbis

In addition to the two surveys conducted by Avraham Y. HaCohen, a much briefer survey was conducted by the RCA of its members. 173 rabbis responded and reported that:

73% have been involved in some way in working with or assisting candidates in the process of conversion.

51.1% use GPS *Batei Din* exclusively; 34.6% use both GPS and non-GPS *Batei Din*.

Of those that do not use GPS *Batei Din* exclusively,

54.2% refer to another standing *Beit Din*

18.6% create their own ad hoc *Beit Din*

30.5% report using a combination of the above

RECOMMENDATIONS: OVERVIEW

These following recommendations build on those initially developed as part of the establishment of the GPS Network.

At the time of the establishment of the GPS system, attention was paid primarily to the development of *Batei Din* that would function according to standardized *halachic* procedures. Primary concerns included the essential requirement of conversion candidates' full observance of Jewish law at the time of the conversion, as well as with their expectation and commitment to continue to live as observant Jews. The emphasis in establishing this system was to maintain a high quality of the conversions in order to assure that they would be widely recognized. .

The emphasis of the RCA in establishing these *Batei Din* was thus primarily on the *halachic* practices of the *Batei Din* and not on the experiences of the converts. It was assumed at the time that the experiences of converts, their training, their spiritual and religious development, their emotional process and comfort would be tended to by their Sponsoring Rabbis who had much experience in these areas.

The collection of data from the surveys, from input of those involved in conversion preparation as teachers and sponsoring rabbis, as well as from the collective experience of the Review Committee members, have made apparent, however, that the RCA must not limit its attention to *halachic* details, but to the many areas and aspects of the complexity of the total conversion experience for conversion candidates including emotional, spiritual, social issues, power dynamics, and other factors. While many converts felt satisfied with the process of conversion, a significant minority felt vulnerable, unduly stressed, and sometimes even resentful of the process. These recommendations expand the attention that must be given to the quality of the experiences of converts.

In general, the Review Committee identified the following areas that require attention.

- Professionalism
This includes such things as efficient and timely communication; respect for timeliness and punctuality of appointments and appreciation of the financial and professional consequences of meetings on converts; communication and cooperation between the *Bet Din* and sponsoring rabbi.
- Transparency of Expectations
This includes upfront 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.
- Sensitivity to Candidates
This includes 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.
- RCA/GPS Website
This includes the need to enhance the website by updating it to include detailed information as to what to expect in the process, including what to learn, how to find a sponsoring rabbi and a list of what can be expected of him, meetings—how many and how often, a general time line, description of *tevilah*, *milah*, what the meetings with the *Bet Din* will be like, booklists, resource lists of websites for learning and for conversion support, description of fees. Each local *Bet Din*

should have a full website with all the standard info as well as specific local info including the names of all the *Dayyanim*.

- Establishing a process to receive concerns and complaints and a mechanism to address them.
- Sponsoring Rabbis
There is need for more direction and training for Sponsoring Rabbis in the education of conversion candidates and in understanding the emotional process for the convert.
- *Dayyanim*
There is need to review the selection, training, and continuing education of *Dayyanim*.
- National GPS Oversight
The position of GPS Director must become a full time position in order to provide him with sufficient time and resources to better ensure that all protocols and policies of GPS are followed by the individual *Batei Din* and Sponsoring Rabbis.
- Support for converts, during and after the process.

RECOMMENDATIONS: DETAILS

It is the GPS Review Committee's view that clarification and modification of the GPS Network's existing operation and responsibilities was needed. The following recommendations are intended as high-level recommendations that will be implemented and further developed by the RCA, including the GPS Director, the GPS Committee, and the GPS Advisory Committee.

1. Governance and Oversight Structure

- a. The roles and responsibilities of the RCA, the Beth Din of America, our *Poskim*, the *Batei Din*, the GPS Committee (which consists of *Dayyanim* and *Menahalim*), and a new GPS Advisory Committee should be clear and public.
 - i. The general outline of these roles should be as follows:
 1. The RCA shall assume ultimate oversight through its Executive Committee for the effective functioning of the GPS.
 2. The Beth Din of America, as the Beth Din affiliated with the RCA, shall supervise the *Batei Din* of the GPS.
 3. The GPS Committee, consisting of *Dayyanim* and *Menahalim* (*Bet Din* administrators) shall:
 - a. Hold regular meetings to review policies, assure compliance, and share best practices.
 - b. Address questions of *Halachah* and, when necessary, defer to the *poskim* of the GPS.
 - c. Together with the GPS Director, prepare an annual report.
 4. A GPS Advisory Committee composed of rabbis and laypeople, including women and converts, should be established and meet with the chair of the GPS at least four times a year in order to review and evaluate the ongoing activities of the Sponsoring Rabbis and *Batei Din*, as well as get regular input from other stakeholders in the conversion process and the community more generally. It may make recommendations to the GPS Committee and the Executive Committee of the RCA. The GPS Advisory Committee is empowered to conduct or have conducted an annual review of the GPS Director's performance.
 - ii. While the GPS Committee, consisting of *Dayyanim* and *Menahalim*, will address policies and best practices, the ultimate oversight of the entire GPS system lies with the Executive Committee of the RCA. Toward that end, an annual report of the GPS should be prepared by the GPS Director with input from the GPS Committee and submitted to the Executive Committee of the RCA.
 - iii. One of the most critical findings that emerges from the research, review, and analysis of the GPS Review Committee is that the GPS cannot be run effectively without a full time GPS Director. The GPS Review Committee is of the opinion that the position of the GPS Director must be expanded into a full-time one. The director, in addition to his administrative duties, must work primarily to ensure that all protocols and policies of GPS are followed by the individual *Batei Din* and Sponsoring Rabbis. In addition to his regular administrative duties, the GPS Director should:
 1. See that the standard of excellence is maintained by all arms of the GPS system. He should have the responsibility and authority to audit the entire GPS system, including the files and records of individual *Batei Din*, and maintain contact with the various groups involved in the conversion process.

- a. Maintain regular contact, including phone calls, with Sponsoring Rabbis to ensure they understand their role and to help them in that role.
 - b. Maintain regular contact, including phone calls, with *Bet Din* administrators and *Dayyanim* to review progress and activities.
 - c. Make on-site visits to *Batei Din* to observe activities.
 - d. Initiate contact with conversion candidates from time to time.
 - e. Regularly review the active reports and files of the *Batei Din*.
2. Establish and review curricula and materials.
 3. Evaluate the mechanisms by which *dayyanim* and Sponsoring Rabbis assess the readiness of a candidate for conversion to ensure that any such evaluation is conducted in a sensitive and appropriate manner.
 4. Work with the GPS Advisory Committee of rabbis, laypeople, and converts to review the activities of the *Batei Din* and Sponsoring Rabbis.
 5. Upgrade and maintain a central database of both conversion candidates and completed conversions to allow retrieval of information and data for internal review.
 6. Submit to the RCA Executive Committee an annual written report of the activities of the GPS Network. Toward that end, the GPS Director will also provide in advance of all regular RCA Executive Committee meetings a summary of the activities of the GPS Director and any relevant issues that have arisen or been addressed within GPS Network since the last regular meeting.
- b. The relationship between the Sponsoring Rabbi and the *Bet Din* should be clarified, respecting the overlapping and individual responsibilities of each.
 - c. The Geirus Policies and Standards that govern the Network of Regional *Batei Din* for Conversion should be reviewed and revised as appropriate.
 - d. The inclusion of a *Bet Din* in the GPS network recognition must be predicated upon the *Bet Din's* conformance with the standards of conduct, including professionalism, adopted by the RCA.

2. Administration of *Batei Din*

- a. Each *Bet Din* should review its administrative structure and, where necessary, make improvements that will enable it to function in a more professional and efficient manner.
 - i. Although the Manhattan *Bet Din* has been functioning well despite its limited resources, the Review Committee recommends that particular attention be paid to expanding the position of *menahel* and to providing enhanced administrative support.
 - ii. Conversion candidates have the right to expect timely responses to their phone calls and emails, prompt scheduling of appointments, and that conversion documents be received promptly. The *Batei Din* should review their administrative structures and effect changes in order to be able to maximize their efficiency. In larger *Batei Din* these functions are often most efficiently performed by administrative staff and need not be the responsibility of the *menahel*.

3. Protocols for *Dayyanim*

A code of proper procedures should be developed so as to make clear the expectations and procedures to be followed by *Dayyanim*. These should include:

- a. A *Dayyan* may not meet with a candidate alone, whether in private or in public, unless approved by the *Menahel* of the *Bet Din* and provided that the meeting take place during normal office hours in an office setting with other personnel in the office. If the candidate is female, the door must be open as well. The same rules apply to the *Menahel*, except that any such meeting by the *Menahel* must be approved by the *Av/Rosh Bet Din*, or if the *Menahel* is the *Av/Rosh Bet Din*, by the *Av Beth Din* of the *Beth Din* of America.
- b. A *Dayyan* may not meet with a minor unless a parent or guardian is present.

- c. If it is determined by a review board of the GPS Committee that a *Dayyan* is not in compliance with any of the requirements of being a *Dayyan* for the GPS, or for any other compelling reason that it deems proper, the GPS Committee has the right at any time to dismiss an individual from serving as a *Dayyan*.
 - d. In the event that a *Dayyan* or a Sponsoring Rabbi feels that the *Av/Rosh Bet Din* is not issuing rulings in accordance with the protocols of the GPS or that the *Av/Rosh Bet Din* or *Menahel* of the *Bet Din* is otherwise not engaging in appropriate behavior, and the matter cannot be ameliorated through internal communication with the *Av/Rosh Bet Din* and/or the *Menahel* of the *Bet Din*, the *Dayyan* or rabbi shall bring this matter to the attention of the Director of the GPS, who shall ensure that the concerns are communicated to the GPS Committee, and who shall also promptly report on both the complaint, and the ultimate resolution thereof, to the Executive Committee of the RCA.

4. Establishment of more regional *Batei Din*.

- a. The large geographic areas covered by some of the regional *Batei Din* present logistical challenges. When a candidate lives a great distance from the *Bet Din*, the meetings with the *Bet Din* necessitate great demands on a person's time and finances, often requiring significant time away from work and significant travel expenses. These demands can be taxing financially, emotionally, personally, and professionally. While this problem cannot be obviated in every case, the GPS Review Committee recommends exploring the feasibility of establishing more recognized regional *Batei Din* or perhaps travel by existing *Dayyanim* to such communities to better serve conversion candidates who do not live in close geographical proximity to already functioning *Batei Din*.
- b. Additionally, extra sensitivity must be paid when arranging appointments for those traveling great distances (i.e., sufficient advance time to arrange schedules and make reasonable travel arrangements) and extra care should be taken not to cancel or delay such appointments once the candidate has made travel arrangements.
- c. Anyone serving any function in a *Bet Din* must be appropriately trained and guided to ensure meeting the desired standards of both *Halachah* and sensitivity. In particular, guidance and training should cover the administrative, procedural, sensitivity, and professional standards for their functioning. The GPS Advisory Committee should be involved in the development of this training.

5. Appointment and Training of Sponsoring Rabbis and *Dayyanim*

- a. Appointment of Sponsoring Rabbis and *Dayyanim*
 - i. The requirements for serving as a Sponsoring Rabbi should be clear and public.
 - ii. The means to review and remove a Sponsoring Rabbi should be clear and public.
 - iii. The requirements for serving as and appointing a *Dayyan* should be clear and public.
 - iv. The means to review and remove a *Dayyan* should be clear and public.
- b. Education of *Dayyanim*
 - i. The GPS should develop an education program for *Dayyanim* and Sponsoring Rabbis designed to share with them the experiences of the conversion process from the perspectives of conversion candidates. Most importantly, this will include hearing directly from converts about their experiences, which include, for some, feelings of vulnerability, being distrusted, and uncertainty.
 - ii. No *Dayyan* or Sponsoring Rabbi should serve until he has had the opportunity to learn about these inner experiences of conversion candidates.
 - iii. Ongoing education of Sponsoring Rabbis and *Dayyanim* should be held to educate and sensitize them further to the emotional and personal experiences of converts who come to them.
 - iv. Sponsoring Rabbis and *Dayyanim* should have regular opportunities to share challenges and problems, as well as to share best practices with each other.

- c. Training of Sponsoring Rabbis
 - i. Sponsoring Rabbis should be trained, and a manual/sourcebook should be developed, detailing how a Sponsoring Rabbi works with a conversion candidate. This should be introduced in rabbinical schools, and continuing educational programs should be offered to rabbis in the field.
 - ii. More Sponsoring Rabbis should be developed. The reasons that some rabbis are reluctant to serve as Sponsoring Rabbis should be identified and addressed.
 - iii. A listserv should be established for Sponsoring Rabbis on which they can share challenges and successes and seek support from their colleagues.
- d. Community
 - i. Through sermons, classes and articles, rabbis should sensitize their communities to the *mitzvah of ahavat ha-ger* and the prohibition of *ona'at ha-ger*. Issues of respect, privacy, and sensitivity should be raised in communal discussions. These messages should help them understand the need to welcome converts and conversion candidates into the community and into their homes. Communities should establish ways to make candidates feel comfortable and welcome.

6. Sponsoring Rabbis: Roles and Responsibilities

- a. The experiences of conversion candidates are greatly shaped by their relationship with their sponsoring rabbi. The Sponsoring Rabbi bears great responsibility in the maintenance and development of these relationships. While our surveys indicate much satisfaction on the part of conversion candidates with their Sponsoring Rabbis, the Review Committee recommends that more help be provided to Sponsoring Rabbis in order to help them serve with even greater sensitivity and effectiveness.
 - i. The Sponsoring Rabbi should have regular and timely communication with the candidate and the *Bet Din*.
 - ii. The Sponsoring Rabbi should be invited to attend all meetings of the candidate with the *Bet Din*.
 - iii. In addition to the signatures of the *Dayyanim*, there should be a line for the signature of the Sponsoring Rabbi as per the current GPS Protocols.
 - iv. Resources should be made available by the national GPS office to aid the Sponsoring Rabbi in the training of conversion candidates. These resources should include curriculum, understanding personal and pastoral issues that candidates face, making the community welcoming and supportive, and enhancing the spiritual experience of conversion candidates throughout the process.
- b. While the *Bet Din* has the responsibility to determine the ultimate disposition of each case, the opinions and recommendations of the Sponsoring Rabbi, because he knows the conversion candidate best, should be a serious and meaningful factor in making that determination.
- c. Procedures should be developed to facilitate communication and cooperation with a candidate's community rabbi when that rabbi is not the candidate's Sponsoring Rabbi.

7. Support for Conversion Candidates

- a. Sponsoring Rabbis and *Dayyanim* 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.
 - i. **Relationships with Non-Jewish/Non-Observant Family Members:** Appropriate relationships with families of origin, including maintaining healthy and respectful relationships with parents, etc. while at the same time observing appropriate religious boundaries.

- ii. **Ethnic Background:** Sensitivity should be shown, as appropriate, to matters of ethnic origin as it may impact a convert's future integration into the Jewish community.
 - iii. **Community and Integration:** The challenges a convert is presently facing and may face with regard to future Jewish family members, as well as with the Jewish community.
 - iv. **Relationship Status While in the Conversion Process:** For converts already in a dating or marital relationship with a *halachic* Jew, the challenges that a conversion candidate and his or her partner may face during the process (including appropriate boundaries throughout the process) should be discussed with sensitivity and respect.
- b. Converts report that they appreciate knowing, as much as possible, the financial and lifestyle demands that will be made of them. Surprises in this area 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. Converts should be informed and supported about issues that may arise regarding:
- i. Financial expectations regarding the conversion process, including Bet Din fees, tutoring if required, transportation, and *mikveh* fees.
 - ii. Financial challenges of living in the Orthodox community (kosher food, housing costs, education, etc.)
 - iii. Expectations as to where the convert should live during the conversion process and post-conversion.
 - iv. Impact of Orthodox observance on professional development.
 - v. Challenges of *shidduchim* for converts and discussion of what can be expected regarding dating.
 - vi. Need for access to conversion documents.
- c. Conversion candidates should understand:
- i. The steps of the conversion process from beginning to end.
 - ii. Some converts report lack of clarity as to who is responsible for different aspects of their conversion process that often led to frustration and anxiety. From the beginning of the process, the Sponsoring Rabbi and the *Bet Din* should clarify the roles and responsibilities of the Sponsoring Rabbi, *Bet 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.
 - iii. Converts should be clearly apprised that initial intake into the system does not guarantee eventual conversion.
- d. **Timeline:** 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. This was the most commonly reported cause of frustration and anxiety for conversion candidates in our surveys and focus groups. The GPS Review Committee recommends:
1. That beginning with their first meetings Sponsoring Rabbis and *Batei Din* share with conversion candidates, as much as is reasonable, a sense of the length of the conversion process and the process for continuing conversation with the Beth Din and the scheduling of future meetings.
 2. That they set benchmarks by which they and conversion candidates can measure and judge progress.
 3. That these benchmarks are shared through frank discussions at the beginning of the conversion process, and that these benchmarks also be reviewed from time to time during the process with each candidate.
 4. That at the conclusion of each meeting with the *Bet Din*, or following the *Bet Din's* deliberation, the *Bet 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, and kept in the *Bet Din's* files to be reviewed by all of the *Dayyanim* prior to the next *Bet Din* meeting. The assessment and instructions concerning next steps should be as clear and detailed as possible.

- e. The sharing of experiences, successes, and frustrations with other candidates, as well as with those who have completed the process, is very valuable and should be facilitated. Sponsoring Rabbis should link candidates one-to-one with others who have converted as well as to other resources for support.
- f. The GPS Review Committee would encourage Sponsoring Rabbis to facilitate relationships between female conversion candidates' and female teachers, mentors, or scholars to assist them in the conversion process in the hope that such relationships will assist the conversion candidate to face the many challenges faced by observant Jewish women.
- g. The GPS Review Committee requests that the *poskim* clarify and outline explicitly the proper practice of *tevilat nashim* in order to protect the modesty and dignity of converts to the highest degree mandated and possible according to *halachah*. Specifically, we ask them to outline procedures that protect the dignity and modesty of converts while they are in the *mikveh*, including the required use of robes or other coverings and the proper positioning of the *Bet Din*.
- h. Reports of anxiety and uncertainty prior to the immersion were common. The nature of immersion in the *mikveh* should be explained to female candidates at the beginning of the conversion process in order to obviate such anxiety, to correct any misinformation, and to reassure them of the *Bet Din's* commitment to modesty and respect. A female attendant who has been properly trained must be present at every conversion of female candidates.
- i. The Power Dynamic
By the very nature of its responsibilities, the *Bet Din* must evaluate and pass judgment on the qualifications and readiness of candidates for conversion. This power dynamic, as reported by converts, engenders feelings of vulnerability and anxiety as well as a perception that their integrity is being scrutinized. In order to address the consequences of this dynamic, as well as to ensure a more respectful process, the GPS Review Committee recommends:
 - i. That Sponsoring Rabbis and *Dayyanim* have frank and open discussions about these dynamics 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.
 - ii. Sponsoring Rabbis and *Dayyanim* receive mandatory continuing education in order to help them to better understand the experiences, perspectives and perceptions of the conversion process from the point of view of converts, including the power dynamic inherent in the process.
 - iii. That *Dayyanim* and Sponsoring Rabbis refrain from delving more than necessary into the convert's past personal life and from asking questions that are intimate in nature. In the rare instance that issues of a personal nature must be explored, it is recommended that such conversations not be conducted in a public manner in the *Bet Din* but, rather, in a discreet setting and conducted by a member of the same sex as the candidate.
 - iv. There should always be respect for the modesty of all candidates, both in interviews and at the time of *mikveh* and circumcision. Only a certified *Mohel* should do *hatafat dam*.
 - v. That *Dayyanim* and Sponsoring Rabbis appreciate and respect the backgrounds and experiences of conversion candidates and should tailor questions to respect the background and experiences of each candidate. For example, *Dayyanim* and Sponsoring Rabbis should be sensitive to the experiences of the many candidates who were raised in Jewish environments or who have undergone previous conversions. Questions posed to such candidates should be tailored to their experiences. For example, those with no experience or history of engaging in a religion other than Judaism should not be asked about rejecting Christmas.
 - vi. That during sessions of the *Bet Din*, conversion candidates should be asked questions that enable them to show their knowledge and that affirm their growth and development.

- vii. That while encouraging continued growth and challenging the conversion candidate to greater commitment, the *Bet Din* should appropriately use its periodic meetings with conversion candidates to express its pride and respect for the candidates' achievements and to acknowledge and validate the candidates' achievements and frustrations.
- j. *Bet Din* sessions must be held in a professional manner. Proper protocols and a Code of Conduct should be developed by the Chair of the GPS.
- k. **Exit Interviews:** One way to monitor the experiences of conversion candidates and to better inform the *Dayyanim* and Sponsoring Rabbis of potential issues or problems that need to be addressed within the GPS Network is through exit interviews following the completion of conversion. The GPS Review Committee recommends the development of written questionnaires to be completed by converts twice, one after one month and one after six months of completing their conversions, which will be administered by and returned to the National GPS Office. The questionnaire should focus on many of the issues raised in this report. In addition, focus groups of converts should be held from time to time in order to provide more personal and detailed feedback.

8. The Day of Conversion

The moment of conversion should be spiritually and *halachically* transformative, meaningful, and sensitive for a convert. When conducted properly, it can be a moment of deep emotion and meaning. The GPS Review Committee recommends the following in order to respect and elevate this experience for the conversion candidate:

- a. That the Sponsoring Rabbi and *Dayyanim* be careful that their conduct and speech is consistent with the meaning and importance of this moment for the conversion candidate.
- b. That the Sponsoring Rabbi and *Dayyanim* fully prepare the conversion candidate in advance for all aspects of the meeting, including the *Kabbalat Hamitzvot* and the immersion process. This preparation should include:
 - i. Explaining the nature and significance of the questions that will be asked of the candidate.
 - ii. Helping the candidate to be familiar with and comfortable with what will happen at the *mikveh*, and explain the *halachic* basis for the immersion process as it will be conducted.
 - iii. Reassuring the candidate that the modesty of the immersion is a priority and responsibility of the *Bet Din*. For female conversion candidates, this should include explaining to the candidate that a woman will be available and present for the immersion to help maintain her comfort and modesty.
- c. That the questions constituting the *Kabbalat Hamitzvot* as per *Yoreh Deah* 268 be phrased in a way that is spiritually meaningful and uplifting.
- d. That the *Dayyanim* respect the possible anxiety that the conversion candidate may be experiencing at the time. The *Dayyanim* 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.

9. Educational Resources for Conversion Candidates

Many survey respondents expressed that the addition of information about Jewish education and education resources the GPS website would be helpful, and that there was a need for greater clarity about the scope and

level of knowledge required to complete the conversion process through a GPS *Bet Din*. Additionally, a number of concerns were raised that – in the absence of a standardized curriculum – the conversion process and the decision to convert a particular candidate could – at times – appear arbitrary. While the religious and educational background and needs of the candidate differ, a standardized curriculum is an important tool by which to measure progress and by which to set expectations.

To facilitate the learning process for conversion candidates and in an effort to – as clearly as possible – set forth a set of goals that will facilitate a candidate’s successful completion of the conversion process, the GPS Review Committee recommends that:

- a. A written standardized curriculum should be developed by the central GPS Director, in consultation with regional *Batei Din* and GPS Committee, and shared with candidates, although the curriculum will be adapted to the individual experiences of each candidate.
- b. Lists of appropriate educational online resources should be provided to each candidate with links available on the GPS website.
- c. Online material such as articles and videos should be developed that are available to candidates to use as a tool for study and review.
- d. A realistic annotated bibliography should be maintained and available for candidates.
- e. As appropriate, videos of sample *Bet Din* meetings and “day of the *mikveh*” should be produced and made available to conversion candidates.

10. Support/Grievance Process

One of the GPS Review Committee’s utmost concerns has been to establish a set of recommendations that, upon implementation, provides safe and effective mechanisms for conversion candidates to express concerns and file grievances, and to insure that those grievances are adequately investigated, adjudicated, or otherwise addressed. The GPS Review Committee urges the RCA and the GPS Committee to put into place the following recommendations and work closely with the GPS Advisory Committee to develop a full grievance procedure that will be published on the GPS website:

- a. Local advisors, independent of the conversion system, including male(s) and female(s) and successful convert(s), shall be appointed in order to help conversion candidates by providing them with advice and perspective, and by helping them navigate the conversion process.
- b. A system must be set up for conversion candidates to voice concerns and grievances, and to register complaints to individuals other than those directly involved in their conversions. This should be done on the local and national levels. Teachers, sponsoring rabbis, candidates, and other *dayyanim* should also be encouraged to lodge any grievances about the GPS network or individuals involved through this system.
- c. A system must be developed to evaluate grievances and to effect necessary and appropriate changes. A system must be put into place that will address grievances, such as incidents that rise to the level of impropriety or violations of adopted codes of conduct, through the local *Batei Din* and, if necessary, with the National GPS Office and the RCA. Where such grievances call for a change in national policy, such grievances should be brought to the attention of the GPS Committee.

- d. This grievance process, and the names and contact information of individuals involved, must be made available to conversion candidates at the beginning of the conversion process and be accessible on the GPS website.

It is the view of the GPS Review Committee that the RCA and its affiliates cannot tolerate any abuse, mistreatment, or misconduct by participants in the GPS Network. Where a grievance may rise to the level gross misconduct, which includes but is not limited to complaints of a sexual, financial, or other abusive behavior – the complaint must be referred to a review body to be developed by the RCA, the GPS Committee, and the GPS Advisory Committee similar in structure and function to the *Vaad Ha'Tzedek*. It is important that grievances of this nature be investigated at arms-length by neutral parties (not just RCA members) and that investigating bodies be empowered to relieve a rabbi or *dayyan* of his responsibilities related to the GPS Network.

11. Choosing a *Bet Din*

A conversion candidate need not utilize the GPS *Bet Din* closest to his or her residence, but may select from among all the GPS *Bet Din* with approval of the GPS Director. A candidate's proximity to the selected *Bet Din* should not play a role in the *dayyanim's* evaluation of a person's candidacy, provided that the candidate is able to afford the extra time and expense imposed by the decision.

Appendix I- Questions to Poskim

1. The GPS Review Committee requests that the *poskim* clarify and outline explicitly the proper practice of *tevilat nashim* in order to protect the modesty and dignity of converts to the highest degree mandated and possible according to *halachah*. Specifically, we ask them to outline procedures that protect the dignity and modesty of converts while they are in the *mikveh*, including the required use of robes or other coverings and the proper positioning of the *Bet Din*.
2. While it is understood that each *Bet Din* has the independent responsibility and authority to evaluate and determine the fitness of each conversion candidate, the GPS Review Committee requests that the *poskim* outline, as specifically as possible, a set of minimum expectations that are required to convert through the GPS Network.
3. The GPS Review Committee requests that the *poskim* consider what *piskei Halachah* a *Bet Din* must follow in order to be a member of the GPS network, and what areas are left to the individual *batei din* to exercise their independence and discretion.
4. The GPS Review Committee requests that the *poskim* set forth the expectations and the role of a *halachically* Jewish partner of a conversion candidate, if there is one, during the conversion process. Specifically, the GPS Review Committee requests that the *dayyanim* clarify whether the *halachically* Jewish partner of a conversion candidate must demonstrate a commitment to abide by particular *halachot* after the partner has completed his or her conversion.

Appendix II- Practice of Israeli *Batei Din* re: Official *Kabbalat ha-Mitzvot*

The timing and location of the *kabbalat ha-mitzvot* as implemented by Israeli *Batei Din* differs from the practice in the United States. Israeli *Batei Din* administer the detailed *kabbalat ha-mitzvot* separately from the immersion, not while the candidate is disrobed in the *mikveh* as is the common practice in our *Batei Din*. Many respondents reported that they find *kabbalat ha-mitzvot*, when conducted outside the *mikveh* while the candidate is still fully dressed, to be personally meaningful and stated that that doing so obviates feelings of vulnerability that may be felt if administered while the candidate is standing in the *mikveh*. At the immersion, an abbreviated *kabbalat ha-mitzvot* is repeated.

The GPS Review Committee recommends that the practice of the Israeli *Batei Din* be adopted by GPS *Batei Din* – if it is found by the *dayyanim* of the RCA to be *halachically* permissible – in order to minimize the amount of time the *dayyanim* are in the *mikveh* room with the candidate.