

Good morning and thank you for inviting us onto this committee and for asking us to speak today.

As was mentioned in my introduction, I am a convert of the now infamous Barry Freundel. I have written a great deal on the case and have given a number of interviews. If you followed the situation at all, you've probably heard my name.

I'm here today to discuss the experience of the convert. Long before the discovery of the mikvah cameras, I would have privately told many of you about the experience I had while converting, and I wouldn't have been all that positive about it, unsurprisingly. I invite those of you interested in the experience of the convert to read my blog post "The Converts Bill of Rights." The Freundel arrest set me free to say what had been not only on my mind, but on the minds of many other converts I've spoken to over the years. I am the administrator of a private Facebook group for Orthodox converts and the many stories shared there were partial inspiration for my piece.

In this Facebook group of almost 200 converts or those in the process, I asked them what I should talk to you about here today. One convert, Erin, another victim of Freundel, put it best: "The more painful and difficult you make the conversion process, the greater the chance that the convert will go off the derech later. After the convert is finished their process, you should treat them as you would treat a born Jew who has come to your community from elsewhere, or as you would treat any member of your congregation who lacked personal connections." Converts are often made to feel like third class citizens during the conversion process and second-class citizens after the mikvah. We are made to feel this way by shadchanim, community members, rabbis, and school administrators. When this happens, converts feel pushed and rejected from Jewish life, even if they have already finished the process. Another convert of the Manhattan Beith Din, Skylar, added "When candidates or converts go off the derech because of emotional or other abuses, rabbis and congregants cluck their tongues and say, "guess she wasn't serious." It's a self-fulfilling prophecy to drive away candidates and converts through both intentional and unintentional emotional abuse. It's important to realize most abuses are not intentional but the result of too little time, money, and energy." This might sound like hyperbole, that just a small number of converts go off the derech, in small ways and large, but that is, unfortunately in my experience, not the case. Erin pointed out that most don't send their sponsoring rabbi a registered letter to inform them of their change of heart. We need to work hard to make converts feel welcome, to help them get married, send their kids to school and integrate them into the Jewish community.

Another convert in my group anonymously said "I think the Orthodox community needs to realize that, regardless of how sincere and devoted someone is (whether a convert, a BT, or even an FFB), if they are made to feel that they have no place in the Orthodox community, or, at least, that they will really only find pain there (and, for example, not be able to find a marriage partner, and/or never be truly accepted), there is a good chance they will look for a more rewarding and fulfilling life *outside* the community. That is just human nature. It's very easy to

start to doubt what we have taken on when a person has enough experiences that don't line up with what they expect based on the theology.

In a lot of ways, I'm sad to say that I am a cautionary tale. In many ways over the course of my conversion, both before I met Barry Freundel and long after, I have been made to feel unwelcome and an outsider by enough individuals and groups to overshadow many wonderful people I've met along the way. It has made me feel disillusioned with the community I've joined, the community I'm raising my children in.

I am what happens when rabbis are cold and unavailable at the outset, when they refuse to work with a candidate because they can't be bothered. Before I worked with Freundel I approached several rabbis who either never bothered responding to me or who refused to work with me because conversions take too much time and energy, because they're too political. This didn't deter me from converting, it just deterred me from trusting rabbis during my process and afterwards.

I am what happens when a rabbi not only makes serious transgressions, but also when other rabbis don't check the power of one of their own. That refusal to check, one of sadly many instances over the last few years, has destroyed a lot of my trust and faith in the organized Modern Orthodox Jewish community.

I am what happens when a conversion is dragged out, when expectations are never made clear, when it is viewed to be more important to deter an individual than foster their knowledge of and spiritual connection to Judaism.

With all of that said, I am hopeful that this report will make it better for American conversion candidates going forward. Working with this incredible group of Jewish professionals and rabbis has reinstilled a lot of the faith I had in Jewish communal life at the outset of my conversion. Evelyn and I were chosen with those in the RCA knowing that we weren't going to be yes-women, that we weren't going to sit back and take a passive role in this process. We came to the table with our sleeves rolled up, and we were accepted at the table as equals. I have a great deal of respect for that.

I'm cautiously optimistic. The framework we've laid out here, which others on the committee will delve into in detail, is a great start, but it's up to many of you in this room today to make sure that the spirit of these recommendations is carried out. I hope that we are all up to the task.