



Operating Principles

Adopted by the Board of Governors 12/6/02; revised 3/24/10; 1/26/11; 3/23/11; 5/5/15; 11/2/16

A. RATIONALES FOR THIS PROGRAM:

1. For all concerned:

- a) **Create** a mode of conversion for *k'lal yisrael*, through which converts can legitimately feel that they are being converted to Judaism, not just to one of its denominational expressions. This is important for all converts, but especially for those who do not know what form of Judaism they will ultimately practice.
- b) **Ease** the mutual acceptability of converts and thus eliminate a point of contention within the Jewish community.
- c) **Provide** an opportunity for rabbis within and outside of the various movements to work together on this important issue, thus strengthening Jewish unity.
- d) **Establish** standards for conversion throughout the community, both in ritual areas and regarding the seriousness with which congregations and their rabbis integrate converts into synagogue life.

2. For Conservative, Reform, Reconstructionist, and transdenominational rabbis:

Provide an option to assure that our converts will be deemed acceptable as widely as possible across the Jewish spectrum.

3. Clarifications

- a) The Sandra Caplan Community Bet Din (hereafter: SCCBD) does not in and of itself discourage the operation of any other Bet Din in the region or question its legitimacy or authority.
- b) Individual rabbis may legitimately decline to use the SCCBD, preferring instead to use their movement's Bet Din or one that they themselves convene.
- c) The SCCBD appreciates the policy of the American Jewish University (AJU) to permit and welcome our member rabbis to use the services of its *mikveh*. The SCCBD respects the university's governance of that *mikveh*.

B. STANDARDS FOR THE CONVERT

1. **Nondiscrimination Policy:** The SCCBD welcomes candidates for conversion to apply regardless of their race, color, ethnicity, national origin, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, age, height, weight, physical or mental ability, or marital status.
2. **Sponsoring Rabbi:** A candidate must have as mentor a Sponsoring Rabbi who is a member (*dayan*) of the SCCBD.
 - a) **Tasks:** The Sponsoring Rabbi must get to know the candidate and develop the candidate's Jewish knowledge and commitment.
 - 1) For appropriate Jewish education, most candidates will be referred to an "Introduction to Judaism" course. The Sponsoring Rabbi may choose to supplement the academic part of such a course. The Sponsoring Rabbi, in any case, is responsible to create supplementary Jewish experiences, including integration into a synagogue community.
 - 2) A Sponsoring Rabbi is expected to present to the Bet Din's panel only a conversion candidate who is *appropriately prepared*.
 - 3) When the Bet Din's panel meets with the candidate, the Sponsoring Rabbi will sit on that panel as a voting member.
 - 4) Following the completion of conversion, the Sponsoring Rabbi is responsible for creating a ceremony for welcoming the *ger* into the Jewish community. Typically this is held in the sanctuary of a synagogue.
 - b) **Selection:** During the first meeting of every Introduction to Judaism course recognized by the Bet Din, the instructor must make clear to all students that the conversion process requires them to have a Sponsoring Rabbi. If candidates do not have a Sponsoring Rabbi already, they should be encouraged to visit synagogues in their neighborhood and request the rabbi of their choice to serve as their Sponsoring Rabbi. If a person takes the Introduction to Judaism course without having made a decision to convert to Judaism and decides to do so at the end of the course, he or she must then choose a Sponsoring Rabbi and work with him or her for a minimum of two months prior to conversion. Conversely, candidates should be informed that choosing a Sponsoring Rabbi does not commit them to becoming Jewish.
 - c) **Compensation:** The Sponsoring Rabbi may receive compensation for *teaching* and/or for *tutoring* the candidate toward meeting our Bet Din's educational requirements. The Sponsoring Rabbi shall *not* accept compensation (including non-monetary gifts) for sponsorship—and must not state or imply that endorsement of the candidate is conditional upon the candidate's making any donations or payments other than for our administration fee and for the Mikveh fee.
3. **Education and Behavior.** The Bet Din has established intellectual and behavioral standards (see separate document titled *Preparatory Requirements: Education*

- and Behavior*). It is what candidates know and do that is important, not the particular form in which they prepare for conversion. Normally, a candidate will satisfy the educational requirements by earning a Certificate of Completion from an Introduction to Judaism program offered by the American Jewish University, Judaism by Choice, or the Union for Reform Judaism. Yet the completion of such a course in and of itself does not guarantee conversion. In any case, the length of the instructional period, and the achievement of the intellectual and behavioral standards, must be adequate as judged by the Bet Din's panel.
4. **Milah.** For males, the SCCBD requires *brit milah* or, where circumcision has already been performed, *hatafat dam brit* to the satisfaction of SCCBD criteria. A Sponsoring Rabbi who is not trained in the medical and Jewish aspects of circumcision shall refer a male potential convert to someone who is so trained. Such a person can be trained and authorized by the appropriate authorities of the Conservative or Reform movements or by other training programs. A ritual circumcision must be attested by two witnesses, and *hatafat dam brit* by one witness. The *mohel* counts as one such witness. The appropriate blessings must be recited by the rabbi or *mohel* for full circumcisions, and it is recommended that those blessings be recited for *hatafat dam brit* as well. Where a *mohel's* certificate of the candidate's completion of either *brit milah* or *hatafat dam brit* is available, the Sponsoring Rabbi should show it to the other members of Bet Din's panel before they meet with the candidate.
 5. **Hatzharat Emunah** (Declaration of Jewish Commitment). The document as approved by the Bet Din's governing board will be read aloud by the candidate in the presence of the Bet Din's panel. It will then be signed by the candidate and witnessed by the panel.
 6. **Tevilah.** Immersion with witnesses in a kosher *mikveh* is required for the completion of all conversions under SCCBD auspices. Such immersion normally takes place only after the Bet Din's panel has otherwise approved the candidate's conversion and all parties have signed the Hatzharat Emunah.
 7. **Completion.** The Bet Din presents its documentation to the candidate only after all fees are paid in full, and only after the candidate has immersed in the *mikveh*, even if the latter occurs at a later date than the panel's meeting.

C. THE STRUCTURE AND FUNCTIONING OF THE BET DIN'S PANEL

1. **Qualifications:** Each member (*dayan*) must be a member in good standing of the Board of Rabbis of Southern California, as well as of a professional rabbinic organization that would qualify them for membership in that board.
2. **Personal Views and Practices:** Since the important thing is the process, not the processors, the SCCBD will accept any willing member of the rabbinic

organizations that are participating in the SCCBD, regardless of their own Jewish views and practices.

3. **Non-compensation:** Members shall not accept compensation (including non-monetary gifts) for serving on a panel. They must not state or imply to the candidate that their endorsement is conditional upon the candidate's making any donations or payments other than for our administration fee and for the Mikveh fee.
4. **Membership in the Bet Din:** A rabbi can become a member (*dayan*) by registering upon completion of an orientation/training session. That rabbi may thereafter sit on a SCCBD panel when it meets with a conversion candidate. Membership may be revoked at the governing board's discretion.
5. **Orientation/Training:** The colleagues sitting on the Bet Din's panel must be trained in their sacred task. The training should be conducted by those with significant experience in this area of the rabbinate. The training should include: explanations of SCCBD administrative procedures; frequency-of-service responsibility; SCCBD standards; some expressions of what it feels like for the convert; and a description of inappropriate questions to ask the convert. Training should also make rabbis aware of the following:
 - a. The ambivalence, fear, and expectations of candidates for conversion when they come before a Bet Din. Toward this end, some converts may discuss their experience with the rabbis during training.
 - b. The commonplace "fear of flunking."
 - c. Appropriate questions to ask, how to tailor them to the candidate's educational level and life experience, and whether or not to pursue a question further.
 - d. Factors to look for, including the peoplehood dimension, ritual observance, ideological convictions, and experience within the Jewish community.
 - e. Blessings or words to be included in the Bet Din's rituals.
 - f. Appropriate dress and decorum for rabbis and candidates.
 - g. The role of the Sponsoring Rabbi as a member of the Bet Din's panel, and as presenter and perhaps defender of the candidate.
 - h. Selection of a Bet Din panel leader when neither the Av/Em or S'gan Av/Em is present.
 - i. Requirements of a candidate for conversion (as stipulated in section B above).
 - j. The need for a proper ceremony of conversion and the conferral of an official certificate of conversion, with a copy filed with the staff of the Bet Din.
6. **Composition of the Panel:** The Bet Din will convene a panel of its members to meet with each convert. Such a panel normally consists of three rabbis: two trained members of the Bet Din who have signed up for that session, and the Sponsoring Rabbi.

7. **Diversity of the Panel:** Because each individual member (*dayan*) represents the SCCBD as a whole, we do not require that a given panel must consist of members from different rabbinic associations (other than the Board of Rabbis). However, such concrete evidence of our diversity is of course desirable.
8. **Leadership of the Panel:** The panel's leader should *not* be the Sponsoring Rabbi. Rather, it should be the Av/Em or S'gan Av/Em, or, if neither is present, the panel members shall appoint a leader during their preliminary conference.
9. **Place and Time:** The Bet Din's panel may convene at any mutually agreeable location. Such a location should suit the gravitas of the occasion. For the practical reason of proximity to the *mikveh*, the preferred location is the AJU.
If circumstances warrant, a panel may convene at a place and time different from those of the immersion. The Sponsoring Rabbi is encouraged, but not required, to be present at the immersion.
10. **Initial Presentation:** The Sponsoring Rabbi should formally present the candidate to the other members of the Bet Din's panel.
11. **Certificates** confirming the candidate's immersion, and, ultimately, his or her conversion will be given to the convert; and a copy of each certificate for each convert will be kept by the Bet Din office. (A male candidate should show the panel an attestation of circumcision or *hatafat dam brit*, but that document need not be included in the Bet Din's permanent record.) The governing board and staff have developed certificates for these purposes.

D. THE STRUCTURE AND FUNCTIONING OF SCCBD GOVERNANCE

1. The SCCBD is governed by a board that normally meets quarterly to review and direct the Bet Din's operation and policies. The board consists of the following:
 - a. The three directors of the Introduction to Judaism programs at the AJU, URJ, and Judaism by Choice.
 - b. The presidents of the Pacific Southwest Region of the Rabbinical Assembly, the Pacific Association of Reform Rabbis, the Southern California Region of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical Association, the Academy for Jewish Religion California Clergy and Alumni Association—or their designees.
 - c. A representative of the Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies at the American Jewish University, of Hebrew Union College–Jewish Institute of Religion, and of the Academy for Jewish Religion, California.
 - d. Three rabbis each from the Conservative and Reform movements; one from the Reconstructionist movement; and one transdenominational rabbi—each as appointed cooperatively by the representatives on our board from the appropriate rabbinic association and from the relevant seminary.

- e. The executive vice-president of the Board of Rabbis of Southern California—or a designee.

Other member positions may also be added at the board's discretion. In the event of a vacancy, the position shall be filled by via consultation between the remaining (trans)denominational representatives on the board, as applicable.

2. **Leadership:** All leaders serve at the governing board's discretion. The board elects the following officers: a chairperson (or co-chairs), a secretary, a treasurer, and a comptroller. The treasurer tracks the receipt, care, and disbursement of funds, making timely reports to the governing board with regard to recent and projected finances. The comptroller signs checks to pay expenses, such as reimbursement of governing board members and of staff for expenses legitimately incurred.

The board also appoints from its ranks an Av or Em Bet Din and a S'gan Av or Em Bet Din. Their respective primary rabbinic affiliations shall not be with the same rabbinic association (other than the Board of Rabbis). The latter two officers shall participate in a panel at least once every three months, and they shall be available for consultation by sponsoring rabbis and staff in difficult cases, especially for policy or procedural issues that might affect the acceptability of converts in the eyes of the larger Jewish community.

The board shall create engage an executive director and other employees as needed for the efficient functioning of the organization. The board shall appoint from its ranks a supervisor for its administrative staff.

3. **Continuing Education:** The governing board shall establish regular workshops for the continuing education of SCCBD members (*dayanim*).

E. THE CONVERSION EXPERIENCE

1. The experience should not feel *pro forma* to either the candidates or the rabbis involved.
2. While the vast majority of candidates who are presented to the Bet Din's panels should be accepted as Jews, a given panel may decide not to accept a particular candidate. Possible grounds for rejection may include the candidate's maintenance of non-Jewish beliefs, or the candidate's not knowing enough about Judaism to make an informed choice about conversion. The Bet Din's panel retains the freedom and the responsibility to make such judgments by its best lights. A candidate who is rejected can expect to be told what terms must be met before returning to the Bet Din for another session.
3. The rites of conversion should culminate in a meaningful, even if short, ceremony of welcoming that should be planned in advance by both the Sponsoring Rabbi and convert. The ceremony may take place in the synagogue of the Sponsoring Rabbi.