

Michal Kravel-Tovi, *When the State Winks. The Performance of Jewish Conversion in Israel*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), pp. 315.

by Avihu Shoshana

One of social science's leading – and most complex – tasks is to question the habitual, expose the phenomenologically obvious, and isolate the events, life dynamics," and "essential" positions which have come to seem natural. This last is crucial because the transformation of an object, subjectivity, event, or mentality into what is "natural" dramatically enables the kind of control that establishes – and maintains – the most stable of personal and social orders. Carrying out their mission requires of social scientists extraordinary intellectual acumen and research ability. In her thoroughly documented, mesmerizingly well-researched *When the State Winks: The Performance of Jewish Conversion in Israel*, anthropologist Michal Kravel-Tovi invites the reader to a dazzling intellectual tour.

When the State Winks is a book to be read, taught, its hidden knowledge disseminated in all areas of our personal, academic, and public life. This is a masterpiece to recommend to all those concerned about research into political states and the related concepts of governmentality and biopolitics. The sharp deconstruction of the *bulldozer* concept of "the state" asks for a special mention in this connection; see the book's p. 38. Among key issues delved into are public policy, bureaucracy, religious conversion, construction of subjectivity, the study of complex everyday interactions, and the study of dramaturgy. Moreover, this book, integrating intellectual endeavor and poetic creation in an exceptional manner, also offers spectacular quality writing about ethnography that every student and researcher of anthropology – as well as all other disciplines related to ethnography – should be exposed to.

The book sets out to trace governmental and subjective dynamics pertaining to the domain of religious conversion to Judaism (*giur*) in Israel. (On the textual sources for the traditional Jewish understanding of conversion, including the special term for a convert to Judaism- (*ger*) in Hebrew- etymologically traceable to the word for "sojourner" – see pp. 22-5.) Macro-institutional and micro-everyday analysis is performed by studying social interactions and the phenomenology of religious conversion accessible through biographical interviews. In the author's own words, the study examines the state as an

“assemblage of agents, mechanisms, institutions, ideologies, and discourses under which auspices conversion policy takes place” (p. 38).

Examining the state sub specie these groupings of distinct kinds of human constructs takes on significance in light of the view of conversion to Judaism as a “national mission” and a “national problem” which creates “national anxiety” and “bureaucratic confusion” in the State of Israel conceived of as the “Jewish State;” the setup operates in the absence of religion-state separation. The national mission has been especially troublesome for the State of Israel in the wake of the massive influx of immigrants from the Former Soviet Union since the late 1980s, including a high percentage of those labeled “non-Jewish immigrants.” The coinage “non-Jewish immigrants,” as Kravel-Tovi makes clear throughout her book, spells out confusion for classificatory schemes, undermines the logic of bureaucracy, and necessitates massive overhaul in defining state-bureaucratic boundaries.

Against this background, it should not seem surprising that the State of Israel has institutionalized and expanded its involvement in Jewish religious conversion, particularly since the mass waves of immigration of the late 1980s. In this way, conversion becomes a public-political project having many sites, manifestations, dynamics, complexity, branches and ramifications, involvement in politics of belonging, and recognition and inclusion – as well as exclusion. Kravel-Tovi’s ethnographic work captures these exceptionally well, thus occupying a place of its own among other important studies of religious conversion in Israel,¹ of bureaucracy,² and of the state.³

To achieve a multi-faceted understanding of the processes intertwined in Jewish religious conversion in Israel today, Kravel-Tovi delves into different areas: anthropology of the state, governmentality and biopolitics, religious conversion, dramaturgy, and subjectivity, as well as research work in pedagogy, bureaucracy, and ritualism, resorting to a variety of research tools. Her study undertakes an

¹ Don Seeman, *One People, One Blood: Ethiopian-Israelis and the Return to Judaism*, (New Brunswick NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2010).

² Akhil Gupta, *Red Tape: Bureaucracy, Structural Violence, and Poverty in India*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012); Don Handelman, *Nationalism and the Israeli State: Bureaucratic Logic in Public Events*, (Oxford: Berg, 2004); Michael Herzfeld, *The Social Production of Indifference: Exploring the Symbolic Roots of Western Bureaucracy*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993).

³ Michael Taussig, *The Magic of the State*, (New York: Routledge, 1997).

ethnographic journey: two conversion institutes; ethnography of the pedagogical arena in conversion schools where candidates prepare for the process; ethnography in rabbinic courts where dramaturgic interactions unfold to probe “sincerity,” performance, and getting passing evaluation as a Jew by state and religious conversion agents; ethnography in ritual baths where conversion candidates are required to undergo immersion (*tvilah*); ethnography at conferences on religious conversion; in-depth interviews and analysis of life stories of converts at the end of the conversion process (“narratives of conversion”); in-depth interviews with state agents, including rabbinic judges, conversion teachers, and bureaucrats; and a documentary analysis to access the vibrant public discourse about conversion in Israel today as reflected in government documents, media articles, interviews with religious leaders, and scholarly publications.

This abundant grounding in theory and documented instances has led Kravel-Tovi to the essential inductive metaphor that compellingly captures the dynamics of her research: *winking* as the figure for the relations characteristic of the conversion proceedings in Israel. Apt metaphors, especially those inductively derived, are more than a rhetorical tool to produce movement from one sphere of meaning to another; they also construct a specific personal reflexivity – which develops into a subjectivity – by “taking on the role of the other,” as symbolic interactionism suggests.⁴ The wink metaphor contributes in a unique way to the study of a number of crucial concerns today. It advances the study of the state, particularly in the complex sense – or in the sense intimated by the rift in spelling between the capital S and the small case s, as Kravel-Tovi’s suggests; see her pp. 38-39 for more on this. Going beyond this, it also furthers the study of everyday interactions and manifestations of latent power. The metaphor resonates – or winks – with James Scott’s *seeing* concept,⁵ which the title of his book, *Seeing Like a State*, invokes. Scott emphasizes the panoptic power (à la Foucault) of state practices, which makes reality calculable and society legible. Kravel-Tovi’s softer metaphor gestures toward the flexibility and the nuanced gradations that accompany the power relations between the state and its subjects. (On the connections and the disjuncture between winking and seeing, see the book’s epilogue, *Winking Like a State*, particularly pp. 245-6.)

⁴ Avihu Shoshana, “Metaphors, Self and Reeducation,” *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 29/2 (2016): 164-185.

⁵ James Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998).

Kravel-Tovi's study reveals a fragile interdependence between the two principal participants in the conversion process: the state conversion agents and the conversion candidates. The relationship hinges on a complex interplay of cooperation, weakness, and power of each of the sides. Both conduct exchanges and extend consideration to the other in order to achieve the objective of conversion. Converts to Judaism are granted the identity of "Jew"; in a country with no separation between religion and state, this identity is critical to managing everyday life: births, marriages, burials, and material benefits, as well as the important psychological-social resource of a sense of belonging. The conversion of "non-Jewish immigrants" not only assists the state in restoring the order of bureaucracy, thus eliminating classificatory chaos, but also helps cope with the "demographic threat" – the fear of losing the Jewish majority due to Arab population growth. The wink metaphor casts the project of conversion as an effort dictated by dramaturgic principles.

The thick winking metaphor – thick in Gertzian terms – empowers the main argument of Kravel-Tovi's research: the conversion proceedings is a national, biopolitical, and bureaucratic manipulation of belonging. The project's very existence is conditioned by the mutual dramaturgic performance of conversion agents and converts. The fact that most of the converts are women from the Former Soviet Union distinguishes the biopolitical dimension, in Foucaultian terms⁶ making the female body and fertility significant in connection with management of populations. In Israel, this is central to the maintenance of the Jewish character of the Israeli State.

The three sections dealing with dramaturgy in the conversion schools and courts as the candidates prepare for "real," "sincere," and "authentic" performance are a breathtaking ethnographic masterpiece. These sections offer a rare behind the scenes view, à la Erving Goffman, of what Kravel-Tovi rightly calls the "rite of passing." The text follows a journey of metamorphosis, from the awkwardness of the introductory conversion lessons, through practice bearing upon attire and embodiment, scripting of the biography, enacting the performance in the presence of rabbinic judges, the immersion ceremony, and finally hearing the transformative words "you are now a Jew" (p. 197). Kravel-Tovi's scholarly and poetic skill is spectacular here as she captures and conveys the excitement crowned with joy when a candidate's transformation is ultimately achieved.

⁶ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, translated by Robert Hurley, (New York: Pantheon, 1976).

Between the prologue, followed by a theoretical introduction, and the epilogue, the book is made up of six parts. The introductory chapter painstakingly interweaves the theoretical underpinnings of the study, identifying its three areas of discussion: religious conversion and the conversion to Judaism in particular; biopolitics and anthropology of the state; and dramaturgy and the study of passing.

The second chapter, “The Conversion Mission,” consists of two sections, presenting the historical-socio-political background which makes conversion a national mission under conditions labeled as a “crisis” and “state of emergency” (p. 66). This mission transpires against the backdrop of several paradoxes attaching to the notion of “non-Jewish immigrants” and the biopolitics of belonging.

An enlightening moment from backstage is directly conveyed when a rabbinic judge is quoted as musing in this way about the conversion mission: “Usually, people invite me to speak about conversion. Several weeks ago, I was invited to speak about fertility. At first, I had no idea what to talk about. But later, I thought to myself, ‘Oh well, what’s the difference really? In both cases we are devoted to making as many Jews as possible” (p. 78).

The chapter deliberates on how “conversion becomes a moral debt of the State.” (p. 90). Its second section, titled “State Workers,” elaborates on the role of religious Zionism in the state-run conversion process in Israel. The religious movement activates the link between religion and nationalism, and the religious, secular, and traditional elements of the modern Israeli State, leading up to the burning question, “Who are we?” (p. 93) and then on to the question that founds the existence of the State of Israel: “Who is a Jew?”

The book’s second part, “The Conversion Performance,” develops the dramaturgical ethnographies – dubbed “dramaturgical discipline,” (p. 129) – which underpin the conversion project in Israel. The opening section of this, “Legible Sign,” identifies cues taught in conversion prep classes to facilitate credibility in a rabbinic court. Conversion prep lessons include simulation, training, rehearsals, and role play focused on dress code, modest demeanor, and appropriate ways to hold daily ritual objects such as a prayer book. Requisite rhetoric is coached: students learn to avoid tentative answers, such as “*mishtadlim*” (“trying”) or “to the best of my ability:” “that’s not good” (p. 146).

Instead, confidence should be the hallmark of responses about religious practice. Correct self-presentation is critical. Teachers recommend that converts secure the support of possible attestors: maintaining contact with a *gabbai* (“sexton, a person who assists in running the synagogue services,” p. 139) will ensure that a host family vouches for one’s observance of the Sabbath. References and witnesses of one’s involvement in ritual and tradition can help by writing letters of recommendation.

The following section, “Dramaturgical Entanglements,” proceeds to the sessions held in rabbinic courts. Rabbinic judges are allotted thirty to sixty minutes to decide whether a candidate is credible and thus deserving of being accepted as a convert to Judaism. The “thin encounter” (p. 162) demonstrates the judges’ awareness of their limitations and uncertainties, their suspicions, and their quest for knowledge so as to decipher legible dramaturgical signs. (“Tell me, how can I know if someone is ready for conversion in one hour?” p. 165.) Decision making about a candidate’s sincerity in Jewish observance relies largely on the same clues that are used by teachers in conversion classes (“Tell me how you do *Havdalah*” [ceremony of separation between the end of the Sabbath and the beginning of the new week], p. 171.) The chapter highlights a number of cases in which rabbinic judges were not impressed by the candidate’s performance (see pp. 181-92).

The third section, “Biographical Scripts,” considers yet another element of a successful performance: the autobiographical letters that candidates for conversion must write and that rabbinic judges read aloud to the court (“You are the letter”). We read how conversion candidates learn to “script their stories” (p. 205) and even rehearse them as part of the winking relations that characterize the Jewish conversion project. The study traces “good stories” which are the “more coherent and ‘passable’ schemes” (p. 205). Prospective converts learn techniques to prevent their narratives from becoming “too pompous” or “overly exaggerated.” Good stories are ones that contain a “Jewish past”: “Stress the fact that your father is Jewish”; “Say that you attended a Jewish Agency day camp”; “Mention your job in the army; that will impress them” (p. 212). Above all, good stories “had to portray conversion as a formative moment in their biographies, a process of becoming something new” (p. 213).

In summing up an overview, *When the State Winks* is a book mesmerizing in its intellectual scope as well as its documentary thoroughness. It is a creative work with surprises to stir a researcher’s imagination, thus enabling a new

understanding not only of religious conversion, but especially of the everyday relations between the state and those undergoing the processes it requires in order for an individual to become a state subject. In Foucault's language,⁷ these are technologies of governance and technologies of the self. The winking invoked in the title involves dramaturgy which both sides – the state and the people – willingly take part in. This is built up of fragile relationships based on suspicion and trust, annoyance and compassion, disciplined visibility and turning a blind eye, and national and personal interests which both sides acknowledge and which come to the fore in Kravel-Tovi's revelations from behind the scenes. Yet the primary sense of the process is in response to the human search for existential and state-bureaucratic escape routes. *When the State Winks* is a re-reading of all that we know about the political state, religious conversion, bureaucracy, Judaism, national identity, and subjectivity.

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⁷ Michel Foucault, "Technologies of the Self," in *Technologies of the Self. A seminar with Michel Foucault*, eds. Luther H. Martin, Huck Gutman, Patrick H. Hutton, (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1988), 16-49.