Lost and Found:

Jewish Women Recovering Tradition, Remaking Themselves

by

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the turn towards stringently observant Orthodox Judaism among less observant Jewish women ages late forties to early seventies residing in a rapidly growing Sunbelt city. It seeks to answer three questions: what is the impulse that inspires such a fundamental life change; what is the process for making that change; and how does that change impact the sense of self, as individuals and within families and communities?

It is an ethnographic study that uses a qualitative, modified grounded theory methodology to gather and analyze data, allowing themes to arise from extensive field observation and intensive participant interviews. The data establish an underlying phenomenon of lost and found, a personal loss, compounded by a lessening or loss of religious grounding, which inspires a recovery of traditional religion and a remaking of identity.

Other key findings include a fluidity of religious identity and a propensity for change; the social nature of such identity and the significance of communal belonging in its progression; the impact of memory, history, generation, life course position and geographic location in inspiring and informing such a progression; a reframing of feminist assertions and gender roles within a traditional religious framework; an assertion of the existence of women's interior life and assumption of personal responsibility for its realization; and a reconciliation of the rhetoric of choice and individual autonomy within a traditional religious system.

In contrast to this study, previous scholarship focused on younger men and women, most in their twenties or thirties, the majority unmarried and without children. Prior studies took place several decades earlier in major metropolitan areas, most along the Eastern seaboard and in the Midwest, more densely populated, with larger, older, and more established Jewish communities.

This study elucidates a shift towards more traditional religion within American Judaism and within the broader context of American religion. It provides fertile ground for future study of age and stage of life, feminism and gender roles, individual autonomy, choice, communal responsibility, and religious change.

DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my parents Dorothy and Julius Koppelman who instilled in me the value of education and inspired my devotion to learning, to my husband Howard, whose unbounded love sustains me, and to our children and grandchildren who infuse our lives with boundless joy.

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My role as a student and my development as a scholar have been nurtured over the course of my lifetime by an exceptional group of teachers, professors, and rabbis who have imparted excitement for the quest for knowledge, encouraged me in its pursuit and instilled in me the confidence to approach each new endeavor. They asked good questions, prodded me to reframe them as my own and to hone the necessary skills to attempt to answer them. I am immeasurably grateful to each of them.

This dissertation is a culmination of their efforts, but it would not have been written without the careful stewardship and unstinting support of my committee chair, Joel Gereboff, Associate Professor of Jewish studies at ASU, and committee members, Sarah Bunin Benor, Professor of Contemporary Jewish studies at Hebrew Union College – Jewish Institute of Religion, and Leah Sarat, Assistant Professor in Religious Studies at ASU. Joel has been my teacher for more than 30 years, my advisor for almost as long, and he has guided me along every step of the way.

I could not have chosen a more knowledgeable nor committed chair, who has been engaged in shaping this project since its inception, and deserves no small thanks for its completion. Sarah has brought not only her own scholarship on women becoming Orthodox to my work but also valuable insights and suggestions. Leah added another key dimension to the process, drawing on her equally impressive work on the intersection of migration and religion, and prodding me to think about the more far reaching impact of this study. Again, my utmost gratitude to them.

This study would not have been possible without the women who spent countless hours sharing their experiences with me during the course of my fieldwork. They opened up their homes and their hearts, inviting me in and helping me to understand why and how they are remaking their lives. My thanks to each of them, and to the many others in the community who welcomed me and generously shared their knowledge and understanding.

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CHAPTER ONE: BEGINNING

Lost — and found. A return to observant Jewish practice and belief can be reduced to these two simple words, a loss of tradition and a search to find it. It is often precipitated by another loss, a loss that rends the heart with its randomness, that tears at it with its enormity and inspires an overwhelming yearning to repair it, which can lead back to the very source of wisdom and comfort that has been lost or forgotten. Rena describes how such anguish can inspire an awareness of the divine, how it can gently prod a circling back to what came before as a way of dealing with what has been lost now.

"Your heart has a covering on it," she explains, "and it has to be torn open a little bit for things to come in."

Such tearing is a part of the story of her own transformation from a secular, non-practicing Jew to an observant Orthodox woman, who now modestly covers her hair and her knees, and who left behind a successful career in corporate marketing to become a full-time wife and mother. Raised with little or no Jewish background or education, she is now a mother of five who keeps a kosher home, who stringently observes the Sabbath and the holidays, and who professes an abiding belief in God and His divine plan.

She sees her life as a series of divine interventions, those seemingly random coincidences that are, as she describes them, "God waving a flag at you," and which have guided her. But it is those breaking points, those holes in her heart, which started her on the path of religious observance and propelled her forward.

In conversations with a cohort of women, the meme of "lost and found," of profound loss and a progressive turning to observance, is a recurring thread. Past research on *ba'alei teshuvah*[1] women, or BTs, a common acronym, evidence a similar motivation, but often with a

[1] *Ba'alei teshuvah* is a Hebrew term, translated as "masters of return," which refers to less observant Jewish men and women who then turn towards stringently Orthodox Judaism and seek to embrace its religious obligations.

less marked impact. Earlier studies by Lynn Davidman[2] and Debra Renee Kaufman[3] canvass a cohort of younger women, most in their 20s and 30s, most unmarried without children, and with more limited life experience and often less, or less lasting, trauma. My fieldwork in the years 2015-2017, some three decades later, among a group of mature women, ages mid forties to early seventies, who have already made certain choices as to marriage, family, and religious identity, and have embarked on a lifestyle predicated by those choices, is situated in a very different landscape. All are or have been married, all have children, and all have abiding relationships with extended families and friends that have been complicated by their newfound religiosity. Becoming stringently observant Orthodox requires substantive changes in what they wear, what they eat, how they socialize, and how they spend their time and money, as well as a host of demanding obligations required by punctilious Orthodox observance. Their stories, gathered using a grounded theory methodology that allows themes to emanate from the data, emerge during in-depth interviews, some that extended over more than one session. Questions were framed to elicit details that create a profile of each woman — socially, economically, culturally, educationally, professionally, religiously, spiritually — that becomes a series of snapshots evincing where she has come from, where she is now, and where she sees herself going.[4] Losses — the loss of a sibling, the premature death of a father, the shattering of a longtime relationship, the collapse of a business, the decline of professional status, a life-threatening illness, the resonances of the death and destruction of the *Shoah* — are often mentioned as almost an aside, as the stories gain traction and are propelled forward. They engender a dissatisfaction with former ways of being Jewish — almost all of the women in this study were raised in one of the more progressive streams of Judaism — and an apprehension of a loss of the spiritual grounding and moral bearing that more observant Orthodoxy provides.

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[2] Lynn Davidman, *Tradition in a Rootless World* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1991).

[3] Debra Renee Kaufman, *Rachel's Daughters* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1991).

[4] Jose van Dijck, *Mediated Memories in the Digital Age* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), xi-xii.

And yet, such losses are clearly painful, and enduring. They are breaking points, those experiences that rend the heart and arouse even a glimmering of awareness, and yearning, that can inspire a search for a return to tradition, as further gentle probing evinces.

This chapter elucidates the underlying theme of this study, the loss of Jewish traditional belief and practice and its recovery as a response to life experience that engenders devastation and despair. It argues that the loss of tradition, and the subsequent loss of the spiritual grounding that helps to assuage personal suffering, is a function of historical, cultural and religious forces that attenuated religious and communal structures and replaced them with lessened observance and diminished obligation. Such attenuation, and later reinvigoration, is informed by the trajectory of American Jewish history and individual and collective memory. Such a dynamic of turning away from and turning toward is signal in inspiring the BT phenomenon that seeks to recover tradition through a reconnection with the structure and stricture of the metanarrative of Jewish peoplehood, the Torah. This chapter also evinces the power of such connections to make "past present" as a bridge to the future creating an expanse of time and space.

The chapter provides a concise review of the literature, distinguishing this study from previous studies of BT women. It also briefly describes the scope of the study, its methodology and provides an outline of succeeding chapters.

Memory and Identity

We are sitting in Sarah's kitchen in her large, rambling home, where she and her husband have raised five children and are now raising a sixth, a niece, the daughter of Sarah's late brother. She tells of the young girl coming to live with them very matter-of-factly, as if taking in another child as their own and raising her is simply what people do. The niece is now in her early teens, expressing all the usual teenage rebelliousness, yet Sarah, who holds a doctorate in education and founded a successful Jewish day school, exudes calm and self-possession. I surmise that she has experienced her share of often-challenging adolescent behavior from her own children, so the latest round, perhaps, is nothing new.

Her brother's death is just a footnote in her story, as is the offhand mention of the death of a sister many years before, when Sarah was just a child. "My older sister died," she says plainly, explaining how her death precipitated the family's move from a large East coast city to a small, rural community. "They just wanted to go someplace else, so that's where they ended up," she says. It was a community of chicken farmers — Sarah laughingly confides that her high school graduation ring sports an image of the farmyard bird — and, as she recalls, coming to terms with the grievous loss of their eldest child and then moving away from extended family led to a lapsed religious practice, even in an area that had a substantial concentration of Jews, including a large Orthodox presence. "I think after my sister died, my parents were less interested in religion."

She has few if any memories of Passover Seders or other holiday celebrations. The family joined a Reform congregation, but rarely attended services, and Sarah and her two younger sisters and brother did not go to religious school. She offers few other details, but confides that the loss, so many years ago, remains raw.

"I'm still suffering."

Memory is a key element in constructing identity and plays an essential role in the construction of a new religious identity among the women in my study. It is a mental category that provides a structural framework to order experiences and behaviors and make sense of them. It engenders a productive process that both constructs and deconstructs memory, reconstituting identity both by the experiences remembered and by the experience of remembering. So traumatic memories,[5] such as Sarah's loss of a young sibling, can be repressed, or replayed in nightmares, or reworked in ways to cope with the devastation. Such reworking can yield a certain

[5] The American Psychological Association, http://www.apa.org/topics/trauma, defines trauma as "an emotional response to a terrible event like an accident, rape or natural disaster. Immediately after the event, shock and denial are typical. Longer-term reactions include unpredictable emotions, flashbacks, strained relationships, and even physical symptoms like headaches or nausea. While these feelings are normal, some people have difficulty moving on with their lives. Psychologists can help these individuals find constructive ways of managing their emotions."

mental toughness that protects against the emotional or psychological dissolution that trauma can cause. So while Sarah expresses her latent suffering, she has constructed a satisfying and fulfilling life.

In Carrie's case, such loss and suffering led to forgetting.[6]

Carrie's story, in many ways, follows Sarah's, though in her case, the loss was of a parent, not a sibling. Her father died of a heart attack when he was forty-one, leaving a wife and three children. The young widow, just thirty-three at the time of her husband's premature death, moved in with her parents, and then in time remarried a widower with two children of his own. The family lived in a Jewish neighborhood in a large Midwest city and belonged to an old and established Reform congregation, where Carrie went to Sunday school as a youngster, continuing through high school. She has few memories of her Jewish education then in the late 1940s and 1950s, describing her experience as more "social" than religious.

An accomplished teacher with a long career in public education, Carrie has few, if any recollections of Sabbath or holiday celebrations from her childhood. She recalls her mother's second husband leading *Seder*, though one with little religious ritual. "It was just a dinner," she says, perhaps a deconstructed memory that serves to reconstitute her newly found religious identity.

She gestures towards the stately brass candlesticks on her dining room buffet in her comfortable home, noting her predilection for things that are old and have a history. They most likely came from England, she says. "They were there, they were on the dining room buffet [in her childhood home]. But they were never used," she says with a tinge of regret or remorse. Now, she lights candles every Friday evening in her home.

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[6] Gregory Cubitt, *History and Memory* (New York: Manchester University Press, 2007), 108-111. Cubitt unpacks autobiographical memory, touching on its construction and its role in informing identity, and exploring the role of traumatic memory in identity formation. Thus, his perspectives are exceedingly salient to this study and its supposition of religious tradition that has been lost and found.

She says she has little if any memory of those years just after her father died. “It was very traumatic,” she says, “I just lost that part of my memory.” The family dealt with the tragedy by simply going on, she says. “You just dust yourself off, you pick yourself up, and you go forward; you don’t go back. That was it.

“We never talked about it.”

Annie exudes a compelling intensity when she speaks. Her manner is confident and assertive, her words carefully chosen and her thoughts forcefully communicated. There is a preciseness that could be attributed to her affinity for both music and numbers; an aspiring classical pianist, now a stock market trader, her professional accomplishments seem to fit her personality. A divorced mother of two grown sons and a grandmother of three, she is now single, after a long-term romantic relationship ended a few years ago. Such personal losses, for a person who seems to weigh life with such exacting measure, have had a resounding impact.

Raised in a Reform home in another Midwest city with a large Jewish population, where Judaism was simply taken for granted, she professes to seeking a more satisfying Jewish connection in her later years, after marrying and having children. Working in a Jewish school and then a Jewish old age home seemed to feed that hunger; later, making Jewish friends, becoming part of a vibrant Reform congregation, celebrating holidays with family and friends became sources of immense pleasure. Studying to become an adult *bat mitzvah*, later joining the temple choir, provided a similar sense of fulfillment.

But the end of her marriage, and then of her later relationship, as well as another personal crisis, put her in a tailspin.

“Nothing was feeling good in my life,” she says. “I wasn’t sure who I was and what I was and where I wanted to go for the rest of my life.

“I needed something more, but I didn’t know what.”

As a child, Annie had minimal exposure to more traditional belief and practice. Her maternal grandmother lived with her family, and the conflict between her thoroughly modern

mother, who had little if any patience with the old-world Judaism of her parents, and her grandmother, who yearned for those connections, was pervasive. Her mother "ruled the roost," as Annie recalls, persuading her husband that the family should join a Reform congregation and then relegating her mother's more stringent observance to a corner of the kitchen or the privacy of her bedroom.

"So we had this conflict in our home," Annie recollects, "where my grandmother was keeping kosher in the kitchen that my mother was not keeping kosher in."

Her mother had been raised Orthodox, married a man who had been raised Orthodox as well, but she had decided that their two children should be raised in a more liberal stream of American Judaism.

Annie recalls her grandma going into her bedroom alone on Friday nights to light candles. "She had one of those lights that was like an (electric) *menorah,* and she'd flick on the light because my mother didn't want fire in the house. So on *Shabbos*, she would go into her bedroom and flick on the *Shabbos* thing and say her prayers and do her thing in the bedroom."

Memory is fluid, as Gregory Cubitt posits in his discussion of autobiographical memory, and, as this study finds, often both re-imagined or reconfigured by those who remember. It can, retrospectively, use the present to produce the past, he suggests, or use the past to make sense of the present.[7] Annie vividly recalls her grandmother's *Shabbos* observance now, through the lens of her own journey to recover the traditions of the past. Marianne Hirsch and Leo Spitzer, in their study of the return of Holocaust survivors to the European city of Czernovitz after the war, write compellingly of how they brought their own perceptions to the retelling of the survivors' stories. "We were searching for our understanding of the story," they write, suggesting that they

[7] Cubitt, *History and Memory*, 27.

were "read[ing] the past backward through our retrospective knowledge."[8] Such is how memory can work as a tool for constructing a coherent narrative and an integral sense of self.

Annie's recollection of generational conflict and a diminution or marginalization of observant Jewish practice mirrors those of many American Jewish families, as my study has found. It mirrored those families whose grandparents had come to this country as immigrants in the early part of the twentieth century who struggled to gain a toehold, and who were consumed with providing for their families and getting ahead. Often, abiding Jewish belief and practice, a fundamental element of their identity, became viewed as an impediment, and gradually fell by the wayside as they sought to acculturate and progress. Sabbath observance, with its obligation to desist from working, was often the first ritual to be lessened or lost. Leah, another study participant, whose parents strived to keep a Jewish home and observe the Sabbath and holidays, recalls her mother driving to synagogue, dropping off the kids, then heading downtown to help at her father's store. When questioned about their Saturday morning ritual, her father cut off further discussion with incredulity. "What do you mean take off and go to *shul* with you?" he said. "I've got a business to run. I've got to go to work."

Jewish observance just "flew out the window," is how Rena recalls her family's lapsed religious practice. Her grandparents were Orthodox, but her parents were raised with little Jewish education or experience, she recalls. Her paternal grandfather's family had emigrated from Poland to the England in the 1940s, and the family had lived through the trauma of the bombing of London during World War II. They later emigrated to Australia, then to Los Angeles.

"They were all trying to find themselves," she says, "just survive really, just survive economically, to put food on the table." Her father lost his father at a young age, and gradually just walked away from Jewish life.

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[8] Marianne Hirsch and Leo Spitzer, *Ghosts of Home: The Afterlife of Czernowitz in Jewish History* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2011), 193.

Her mother's family left New York when opportunities for advancement were hindered by anti-Semitism. Her grandfather, denied entry into medical school because of Jewish quotas, became a pharmacist, and, as Rena recalls, continued to find employment limited by discrimination. After a series of jobs, he decided to move the family, including his youngest daughter, Rena's mother, West. Such discrimination against Jews was prevalent in the United States in the early to mid-years of the 20th century, limiting educational and professional opportunities, as Rena describes, and engendering a lessening of Orthodoxy's religious stringency and a winnowing of its followers. Anti-Semitism heightened the attraction of the new, less distinctive, and demanding, ways of being Jewish, as actualized first in the Reform and later the Conservative and Reconstructionist streams of Judaism or the lapsed practice of Rena's family.[9]

"(My grandfather) finally just said, 'the hell with it,' and he left New York and he drove his family to California and changed his name [from a more obviously Jewish one to one that was less so] and started a new life." Judaism was left behind, and once her parents met and married, they resolved to bring up their children with a broad exposure to universal values, eschewing Judaism's separateness or difference — "teach the world," is how Rena describes their outlook — and providing their children little, if any, Jewish grounding.

Aileen, a successful small business owner nearing retirement age, was raised in an observant Reform home in a suburb of a large Eastern city. The emphasis on getting ahead and on being materially successful inform her memories of her early life, but with a concomitant emphasis on family togetherness and communal cohesiveness that ultimately pushed Aileen away even as she seeks in later life to recover such closeness. Her paternal grandparents, born in America, were non-observant. Her maternal grandparents, who were Eastern European

[9] Anti-Semitism and its gradual attenuation — though not disappearance — in the succeeding decades, echo through the stories of the women in this study, as they wrestle with what has been lost in religious practice and belief and what has been found. Though it is not a major focus of this study, it surfaces regularly, and is more fully discussed in Chapter Six, Being, which explores the impact of historical, social, cultural and religious context on religious transformation, including anti-Semitism.

immigrants, had gradually let observance lapse, as the exigencies of making a living took precedence. “They followed the route so many who came in the early 1900s followed which is: ‘If you don’t work on Saturday, you don’t work at all,’” she says.

Her parents’ move in the 1950s to a suburban enclave with very few Jews led to their involvement in helping to found a Reform congregation there. They were the first Jewish family to settle in the community and bumped up against anti-Semitism as part of a group that eventually went to court to be allowed to build a synagogue in the township. The congregation, and the growing number of Jewish families, was their refuge. “It was the complete and total center of our lives to the exclusion of almost everything else,” Aileen remembers. It was, of course, one of the only places where they, as Jews, were welcome.

Such closeness — where her parents’ friends were affectionately called “aunt” and “uncle” and their children “were closer than our own cousins” — over time became suffocating. Aileen gradually sought to escape its hold, first at an elite Midwestern university, later, after marrying and moving West, where she experienced a conflicted relationship with Jewish communal life characterized by a series of disappointments and another retreat from organized Jewish life.

The near loss of her husband from a massive heart attack, and her own battle against life-threatening cancer, have precipitated her turning back towards community and a search to recover the more observant Jewish life her grandparents had let go.

Lara’s family history and her anguish for those lost in the *Shoah* impel her religious search. Her pain is palpable as she tells of her maternal grandparents fleeing the Nazis and leaving their parents behind. Those lost exist now only as faint memories, and the weight of their truncated lives is heavy. Lara sees herself as their surrogate, the one responsible for bearing the tradition.

"I don't ever remember not knowing, ever not feeling it," she says poignantly. Her natural father's parents, too, were victims of the Nazis, though they survived the *Shoah* in a Soviet gulag, ultimately arriving in America from a German Displaced Persons camp with her father, then just an eight-year-old boy. And Lara has some vague recollections of her paternal grandmother reading her Bible stories, of their keeping a kosher home.

Her parents divorced when she was five or six, and Lara has vivid memories of spending Friday nights with her mother's parents in their tidy apartment. She recalls the traditional Friday night dinner of poached trout and boiled potatoes, of the treats her grandfather brought home from the bakery where he worked. But the only religious ritual she recalls of the weekly sleepovers is reciting the *Sh'ma* with her grandmother before going to bed. It was Friday night, she says, but not *Shabbat.*

Her grandfather had put religion aside after surviving the Nazis' attempt to exterminate the Jews and coming to safety in America. Her grandmother insisted on joining a *shul* and sought to maintain ties with those from the old country. There was a *mezuzah* on the door and a *hanukkiah* in the living room, but not much else, as she tells it.

"She was the one who held on," says Lara. "I guess looking back, I could say I admired that she held on to at least pieces, because so many people gave it all up."

So, Lara tries to hold on to those memories, those pieces, and begins to add on more as she seeks to re-imagine a picture of those lives lost and a new life for herself as an observant Jew.

Turning Away, Turning Towards

The fractured background of the women in my study is emblematic of this fundamental turning away from tradition and turning towards becoming Americans. It evinces a gradual attenuation of the compelling religious and communal ties that had sustained Jewish communities of old, which had shored them up when faced with life's losses, and their replacement with lessened observance and a diminished sense of obligation, as well as lessened religious grounding. There were choices to be made, as Kara, another study participant, describes. There

were costs and benefits, between the strict observance of her grandparents and the more liberal approach of her Reform parents, and a toggling between respecting tradition and being part of this world. Anthropologist Jack Kugelmass writes of the struggle of first generation American Jews to find a place "between two worlds."[10] Sylvia Barack Fishman, who also studies the sociological development of American-Jews, describes the process as "negotiating both sides of the hyphen."[11] The gradual moderation of punctilious religious practice and heightened reliance on cultural manifestations of Jewish identity transformed Jewish memory for some from a text-based imperative to follow sacred laws into a sentimental remembrance of things past. It became less a transmitted tradition based on strict observance and more a nostalgic, domesticated Judaism that revolved around the scent of chicken soup simmering on the stove, of family gathered around the holiday table, of small talk over glasses of hot tea, of conversations punctuated with familiar Yiddish expressions, of shared memories of what has been lost but was now so nostalgically remembered.

Jenna Weissman Joselit[12] conjures such "kitchen Judaism," the very real lived religion for many immigrant families, suspended between a nostalgic remembrance of the communal life they left behind and the wondrous freedom of America. The kitchen table itself often became the site of conflict, where families wrestled with the very real choices to be made. Joselit aptly captures the fractiousness of life on the Lower East Side of New York in the early 20th century, as Jews struggled to find new ways to preserve their distinct identity — and pass it on to their children — while taking advantage of the new opportunities for economic and social advancement America afforded. Hasia Diner, conjuring images of the Lower East Side in New York City, places memory in situ, describing how the neighborhood became a memory marker, sentimentalized as a place

[10] Jack Kugelmass, *Between Two Worlds: Ethnographic Essays on American Jewry* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1988).

[11] Sylvia Barack Fishman, *Jewish Life and American Culture* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2000), 179-200.

[12] Jenna Weissman Joselit, *The Wonders of America: Reinventing Jewish Culture 1880-1950* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1994).

of family cohesiveness and communal connectedness. It has been evoked in countless novels and films as a place "where warmth, religious ritual, home, love and noisy streets made life … seamless with meaning."[13] Yet, Joselit, in her earlier work exploring class differences among Jewish immigrants, makes a critical distinction between the attitudes of her lesser well-off brethren on the Lower East Side, and those more well-to-do Jews who resided Uptown, who were far less nostalgic for the old country and entranced with romancing of the new, and more committed to finding new modes for expressing Jewish distinctiveness.[14] Diner, too, notes that over time the romantic evocation of the Lower East Side has deepened into a search for authenticity, where American Jews, confronted with a vast array of choices as to affiliation, ritual, and practice, seek to renew and revitalize their identity as Jews in a changing world, recovering their separateness,[15] and, as the data in this study show, renewing their capacity for reconciling personal loss through such "authentic" practice.

The movement to return draws on memory as its source, yet nostalgic remembrance of the past seems to be of lesser importance in the religious transformation within the cohort of this study than a search for *authentic* Judaism. Only two study participants recall a past steeped in a romanticized notion of "kitchen Judaism," while others had few if any memories of similar experiences growing up, nor did the re-imagining of those experiences seem to inform their turn toward observant practice. In fact, such memories may have played a role in inspiring their search to recover a more traditional practice as they rejected the more cultural Judaism — and seemingly less authentic Jewish practice — of their parents and even some grandparents, who had already left behind some elements of Jewish practice.

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[13] Hasia R. Diner, *Lower East Side Memories: A Jewish Place in America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

[14] Jenna Weissman Joselit, *New York's Jewish Jews: The Orthodox Community in the Interwar Years* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990).

[15] Diner, *Lower East Side Memories*.

A turning away from nostalgic remembrance of the past and turning towards a recovery of more traditional practice has been detected among third generation American Jews, who, now more fully acculturated, with greater opportunities for educational and professional accomplishment, and heightened potential for social and economic progression, are seeking to learn more about the Judaism their parents or grandparents left behind. Sociologist Marcus Lee Hansen observed this phenomenon in the early decades of the 20th century in his study of American immigration. Hansen developed what came to be known as the third generation return theory, which detects the decline of religious and cultural practices among first generation immigrants due to economic and social exigencies, a continued lessening of such practices among the succeeding generation as they sought to acculturate, and a renewed desire to recover what was lost or discarded by the third generation.[16] My study reinforces Hansen's third generation theory, as it examines a segment of these third generation Jews in the early decades of the 21st century who are seeking out the stringency of observant Orthodoxy as BTs.[17]

Leah grew up in the Southwest with a large extended family and warm memories of spending holidays with them. Yet her descriptions of Passover *Seders* or *Rosh Hashanah* meals and her memories of cooking in the kitchen with her mother are also colored by her lament that her mother, who had received little, if any Jewish education, did not have a deeper understanding

[16] Marcus Lee Hansen, *The Problem of the Third Generation Immigrant* (Rock Island: Augustana Historical Society Publications, 1938).

[17] Will Herberg, *Protestant, Catholic, Jew: An Essay in American Religious Sociology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1955). Herberg, in his groundbreaking examination of the American religious landscape in the mid-twentieth century, drew on Hansen's theory as he described the three stages in the development of American religious identity among its three largest denominations: Protestant, Catholic and Jew. The first stage occurred from the 1880s until World War I, the second, the interwar years, and the third in the post World War II period, when he predicted a "return to religion." This generational understanding of changing religious identity, impacted by immigration and acculturation, has been embraced by more recent scholars of contemporary Judaism, such as Steven Cohen and Arnold Eisen. who examine the correlation between family and religious practice. Others, such as historian Jonathan Sarna, hesitate to lay an historical template over the phenomenon, eschewing such a "generational" construction. Still, the BT phenomenon manifests a segment of a generation of acculturated American Jews who seek to recover the traditions that were put aside by those who preceded them in their quest for assimilation and acceptance. Janet Aviad, in her early study of BTs in the late 1960s, *Return to Judaism: Religious Renewal in Israel* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), describes the turn back towards what was lost or forgotten. The data in this study in the early decades of the twenty-first century further reinforces the third generation phenomenon beyond the historical parameters of Herberg's study.

of the meaning of the holidays or the rituals associated with them. “She literally flew by the seat of her pants,” is how Leah describes her mother, with little nostalgia, but more sympathy, as a woman who committed to making a traditional home when she married, but learned the basics of such ritual and practice literally on the job. Kara shares similar idyllic memories of growing up in the same community within the embrace of a large extended family. Yet on further probing, she speaks of an underlying tension between those who kept kosher and those who did not, and between those who hewed to more punctilious observance and those who did not. There is less of Svetlana Boym’s nostalgia — a longing for home[18] — than expected in the stories of the study’s participants, and less of a search for those ghosts of the past — who impelled Hirsch and Spitzer’s return to the city from which Hirsch’s parents, Holocaust survivors, had fled. The phenomenon of recovery of the past for the women in this study is more fully located in a serious search for authenticity and for recovering the strictures of observant “Torah true”[19] life and living within them.

The founding of the Reform movement at the end of the nineteenth century, and the subsequent beginnings of the Conservative and Reconstructionist movements in the early and mid-twentieth century, respectively, engendered alternate denominational frameworks that comported more easily with modern day cultural and religious sensibilities.[20] A loosening of Sabbath proscriptions on work, a more open, egalitarian approach to prayer, a redefinition, or outright rejection, of *kashrut*, attracted a growing cadre of Jews who sought to maintain their religious identity, and assure that of their children, while participating meaningfully in the non-Jewish world. The result for some was a lessening of observance, and a weakening of the ties to

[18] Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), 41.

[19] “Torah true” is a phrase commonly used by stringently observant Jews to connote a lifestyle that hews punctiliously to the laws of the Torah, the five books of Moses given by God to Moses on Mt. Sinai.

[20] All but two of the subjects in this study were raised within the Reform and Conservative movements. One woman, a Jew by choice, was raised as a Christian; and one woman was raised in a “traditional” home that today would be defined as modern Orthodox.

Torah and the obligation to abide by its laws, while providing a meaningful way to identify Jewishly within the larger secular world in which they lived.

Yet, as the women in my study — most of whom came of age within a more progressive Jewish ambit in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s — matured and confronted those experiences that tear at the heart, they found themselves lacking the moorings of a substantive transmitted tradition that could serve to ground them and help them deal with life and its losses. Nostalgic memories of Joselit's "kitchen Judaism" provided neither strength nor solace; nor, as the women in my study share, did their less traditional and less substantive Jewish education provide answers to the big questions their experiences inspired. Seven of the ten study participants grew up in Reform homes; two in what they described as traditional homes, one affiliated with an Orthodox congregation, another with a Conservative one. One study participant is a twice-converted Jew by choice, opting for an Orthodox conversion several years after having a Reform one. Seven of the ten imply that they received little, if any substantial Jewish education, in part because of gender, even when attending after school religious school programs, being involved in youth groups, or traveling to Israel on high school programs.

Leah, now in her late sixties, was discouraged from pursuing more serious Jewish study as a young girl in the 1950s at the religious school in her family's Conservative congregation. "I remember sitting in class, and when it came to anything, Torah study, or Hebrew, when it wasn't current events or just basic Judaism, the teacher saying, 'Oh, girls, you don't have to pay attention. This doesn't pertain to you.'" Leah says that the attitude towards girls diminished their role and the importance of Jewish learning for them and alleviated the responsibility for learning more. "At that time, we just said 'okay,' and all the girls started visiting and not paying attention."

Later in life, Leah actively pursued Jewish study on her own, though she still regrets missing out as a young girl.

"I wish they had never said that. I lost out on so much."

Diminished importance of Jewish learning for girls was further heightened by the less substantive education that after school religious programs in Reform and Conservative congregations could offer.[21] This, too, contributed to lessened Jewish knowledge and a weakened connection to the strictures of traditional practice and belief. Lara still smarts with embarrassment and anger at her ignorance when first learning about *Tisha B'Av,* a traditional day of mourning observed among more observant Jews, during a high school summer program in Israel. The program was sponsored by a now defunct Zionist organization and attracted young people from across the Jewish denominational spectrum. "It was a very mixed group of kids," recalls Lara, "from totally secular to modern Orthodox. My roommate was one of the modern Orthodox girls." Lara was raised in a "mostly secular house" in a predominantly Jewish community in a suburb of a large Eastern city. The family belonged to a Reform congregation, with a newly designed contemporary sanctuary, where Lara became a *bat mitzvah*. In Israel on *Tisha B'Av,* her modern Orthodox roommate and other Orthodox teens fasted; Lara, who did not know about the holiday and its practices, was abashed by her ignorance. "I had no idea what *Tisha B'Av* was," she says, her pain still apparent. "I was mortified. Embarrassed."

Returning home, she confronted one of her temple's rabbis asking, "Why don't we learn this?" Her rabbi responded that the need for observing the fast day had passed. "We have Israel, we have Jerusalem, we have the Wall. We don't need *Tisha B'Av*."

Lara was not appeased. "In my sixteen-year-old head I called it BS," she recalls. "I said, 'that's not right.'

"There was just something so wrong in that answer, so I had to start looking. I was sixteen then, now I'm forty-eight."

And Lara is still looking.

[21] Day schools providing both secular and religious education began to proliferate in the Orthodox movement in the mid-1950s, as yet another response to assimilation and acculturation in the larger American populace. Students who attend such schools receive far more intensive Jewish education than those who attend Reform or Conservative after-school programs that meet two or three days a week, such as the one Leah attended.

Annie, as a young wife and mother, joined a Reform congregation in the city where she lived with her former husband. They became members, she recalls, because she had friends who belonged there, and neither she nor her former husband, who was raised Reform, would have considered joining a Conservative or Orthodox congregation at that time. They enrolled their two young sons in the temple's kindergarten. After a couple of years, Annie began to look for more Jewish substance. "I didn't feel that there was enough going on there Jewishly," she says. She went to see the rabbi to discuss her feelings. "I said, 'you know, there's something missing here,'" she recollects, "'and I would really like more.'" She recalls that the rabbi responded plainly that the congregation sought to meet the needs of its congregants. "'I direct my congregation toward the peripheral Jew,'" she remembers him saying. "'If you want more, than you need to go someplace else and find more.'"

Soon after, the family left the congregation, and joined another growing Reform congregation with a heightened spiritual focus.

The search "for something more," for the women in my study, was precipitated by a sense that something was missing from their lives, and that that something, often only sensed but not clearly identified, was worth looking for. Its beginnings often grew out of painful personal loss, its gradual progression out of a growing consciousness of a lack of religious or spiritual grounding and a loss of connection to traditional Judaism as its source. Individual loss — a death, a life-threatening illness, a business failure, or a divorce — was compounded by a communal loss, a diminished tie to the Jewish past and the depth of its text and tradition that exists beyond time and space. Such expansiveness, such a sacred canopy, as sociologist Peter Berger describes it,[22] evokes not only divine protection, but also a bond across generations that strengthens all those who live within its span.

[22] Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (New York: Anchor Books, 1990).

Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, in his signal work on history and memory, speaks to the role of Jewish memory, as canonized in the Jewish metanarrative of the Torah, in forging those eternal connections that sustain Jewish peoplehood.[23] It is the role of such collective memory and the power of its cohesive narrative that binds one Jew to another, each generation, one to the other. So Yerushalmi writes of the compelling belief that each Jew, past, present and future, stood at Sinai to receive the covenant from God, and that each Jew, past, present and future, is responsible for its realization and its transmission. So, the obligation to remember, and concomitantly, the imperative not to forget.

"Nothing has replaced the coherence and meaning with which a powerful messianic faith once imbued Jewish past and future," he writes.[24] So it is that that the search for something more leads ultimately to a return to the text, the consummate Jewish story, where, as Yerushalmi writes, "past (is) made present."[25]

Lara, who carries with her the weight of those who came before, admits to an unsettled longing to recover what has been lost. She speaks hauntingly of those who preceded her, of the rupture of her sense of self with their untimely and murderous death. "I remember seeing pictures of my great grandparents on my grandma's dressing table. I remember her telling me that these are her parents, and they are gone." She senses their absence, seeks their abiding presence.

"It is nice to look at a picture, to look in a mirror, and see yourself."

So Lara searches for meaningful ways to animate that past, and to insure its continuance through her children. She is committed to educating them Jewishly, to creating a Jewish home.

And to reconnect with the age-old Jewish story, and make it real not only for herself, but for those who will follow.

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[23] Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory* (New York: Schocken Books, 1989).

[24] Yerushalmi, *Zakhor*, 95.

[25] Yerushalmi, *Zakhor*, 94.

Such connections over time have powerful resonance for those seeking to recover their Jewish past. While the beginnings of their spiritual search, and their gradual becoming and aspiration to being, hews closely to taking on the strictures of Jewish ritual and practice and a deepening understanding of spiritual presence in their lives, it also is driven by an obligation not only to recover or remember for themselves, but for their children. Each of the women in my study expressed a fervent desire to raise Jewish children who were Jewishly knowledgeable and comfortable and who would follow their parents and embrace a Torah true life.

As sociologists Steven Cohen and Arnold Eisen suggest in their study of contemporary Jewish life, memory works as a bridge between past, present and future.

Memories are not solely "remembrances of things past," as Marcel Proust[26] suggested in his classic rumination on memory, but "tokens of present commitments and signals for the future they hoped to build."[27]

Remember, Recover and Renew

This study plumbs the desire to recover the past and renew it with meaning and resonance for the future. It examines the impulse to turn back to the Jewish national story — or "the schematic narrative template," as Joseph Wertz calls such stories[28]— and recover the structure and stricture of divine obligation it demands. Those who turn, or return, to heightened Jewish practice and belief are called *ba'alei teshuvah*, masters of return, taking on enhanced obligations that require substantive changes in their lives.[29] They express little or no remorse for

[26] Marcel Proust, *Remembrance of Things Past* (New York: Vintage, 1982). The seven part novel on memory, *A La Recherché du Temps Perdu*, which was written in French in France between 1913-1927, is an autobiographical memoir that focuses on memory.

[27] Steven M. Cohen and Arnold M. Eisen, *The Jew Within: Self, Family and Community in America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), 14.

[28] James V. Wertsch, *The Voices of Collective Remembering* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 60-61.

[29] The term *ba'alei teshuvah*, eschewed by many of those involved in facilitating a turn towards traditional Orthodoxy (because of its inference of lesser status of the non- or less observant), has an essential duality. The Hebrew word *teshuvah*, meaning turn or return, is used among observant Jews to

past choices, no need for expiation, for themselves or their forebears who put aside such stringent belief and practice. Rather there is a sympathetic understanding and acceptance of past choices made, a poignant regret coupled with a heightened commitment to recover what has been lost.

This study examines a cohort of BTs, mature women, ages mid forties to early seventies, living in a major Southwest metropolitan area, who have already made significant lifestyle choices in terms of marriage, family, and Jewish identity and are now drawn to more stringent Jewish observance. Identifying previously with Judaism's more progressive streams, Reform and Conservative, which sought to comport religious obligation with American liberalism, the women are now moving towards Orthodoxy and its punctilious ritual and practice rooted in age-old tradition. This study seeks to explain this phenomenon by answering three questions: what is the impulse that inspires such a fundamental life change; what is the process for making such a change; and how does this change impact the sense of self, individually, familially, and communally?

This study builds on prior studies of BT women, the most substantive by Kaufman and Davidman — while also drawing on more recent work by Sarah Bunin Benor, Roberta Sands and Lilah Devra Shapiro — to further deepen understanding of the phenomenon.

Kaufman's and Davidman's studies of BT women were both published in 1991, with research spanning at least a decade before. Sociolinguist Benor's more recent study looks at

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describe *teshuvah*, the process of making atonement. This is practiced most fervently during the Days of Awe, the ten day period of reflection between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, when Jews reflect on past actions, ask forgiveness for those that are wrong, and resolve to do better. They "make *teshuvah*," resolving to "turn away from" past actions and "turn towards" those more worthy. Thus, it is both a turning away from the mistakes of the past and a turning toward right action. Additionally, the term *ba'alei,* masters, also can imply not only commitment to the laws of divine obligation but their mastery. Again, the term is problematic for some, as it evokes attainment rather than aspiration, a notion that many see as intrinsic to Judaism. This concept of aspiration or growth is explored further in Chapter Two, Becoming and Chapter Six, Being.

both men and women, but with a more narrow focus on the development of language and other cultural practices in the process of becoming observant Orthodox.[30] Roberta Sands explores the social integration of BTs, new to observant Orthodoxy, into communities of those who are FFB, or *frum,* stringently Orthodox, from birth. Her subjects are both men and women, ages thirty-one to fifty-eight, living in three urban areas in the United States.[31] Shapiro also looks at younger men and women seeking to illuminate the relationship between Jewish cultural myths on accomplishment and BT transformation.[32] This study focuses solely on older women, with data gathered over a two-year period from 2015-2017.

Kaufman's and Davidman's earlier studies of women were ethnographic studies, like this one. Kaufman's was a qualitative study, gathering data from intensive face-to-face interviews of more than 150 women and extensive field study in five urban areas across the United States; Davidman's used a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods to gather data, including in-depth interviews at the modern Orthodox Lincoln Square Synagogue located on the Upper West Side, Manhattan, New York, and a combination of interviews and questionnaires at the Lubavitch Bais Chana residential learning center in Minneapolis-Saint Paul, Minnesota. Both researchers augmented their data with field observation in a wide variety of venues; this study includes field observations as well. Two earlier studies of the BT phenomenon took place at least a decade before Kaufman's and Davidman's research: Janet Aviad, looking at American men

[30] Sarah Bunin Benor, *Becoming Frum: How Newcomers Learn the Language and Culture of Orthodox Judaism* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2012).

[31] Roberta Sands, "The Social Integration of Baalei Teshuvah," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 48, no. 1 (2009): 86-102.

[32] Lilah Devra Shapiro, "Driven to Orthodoxy: Jewish Identity and Narratives of Exceptionalism, Essentialism, and the Family in American Culture as Motivations for 'Conversion' to Orthodox Judaism" (PhD diss., University of Chicago, 2012).

studying at BT *yeshivot* in Israel touched peripherally on women in her work[33] and M. Herbert Danzger used a similar focus in his study of BT development of both men and women.[34]

Kaufman uses feminist theory, looking at both its cultural and political manifestations, in her work, while Davidman employs an anthropological approach to examine why women are drawn to observant Orthodoxy and how they effect that transformation. Interestingly, Davidman chose to use the word "conversion" to describe the change from non- or minimally observant to the stringent observance required by Orthodoxy.[35] My research, which uses the term "transformation" to describe the process of becoming BT, more narrowly follows Davidman's, while looking less incisively at the gender issues that underlie Kaufman's study.[36]

The earlier studies of BT women by Kaufman and Davidman differ from my work in three fundamental ways: location of the study, age of the cohort, and time period of the study. First, the earlier studies were situated in major cities with sizable Jewish populations that spanned several generations; this study takes place in a markedly newer Sunbelt community with a much smaller Jewish population that has grown appreciably over the past three decades, and without the depth of multi-generational families that characterizes older, more traditional communities.[37] Second,

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[33] Janet Aviad, *Return to Judaism*.

[34] M. Herbert Danzger, *Returning to Tradition: The Contemporary Revival of Orthodox Judaism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989).

[35] Religious conversion signifies a fundamental change in identity from one religious tradition to another. Though the term conversion is often used in discussions of BT transformation, I posit that BT transformation does not connote conversion; such a transformation does not require a switch from one religious identity to another. Rather, it is a shift from one way of actualizing that consistent religious identity to another. It can be argued that both conversion and transformation require construction of a new identity, but in BT transformation, the fundamental religious identity of the individual remains constant; what changes are the ways it is animated and the degree of stringency of that animation.

[36] The impact of gender roles in the process of BT transformation will be more fully explored in Chapter Six, Being.

[37] The most recent Jewish demographic study of the community where this study takes place was completed in 2000, under the auspices of the Jewish Federation. It reported approximately 120,000 self-identified Jews and about 3,600 self-identified Orthodox Jews. Most communal professionals estimate that the number of self-identified Jews has most likely increased by another 20,000-30,000 Jews in the past sixteen years, and that the number of self-identified Orthodox Jews has also increased appreciably. As

and most critically, their participants were two or more decades younger than the women in my cohort. And third, the earlier studies of BT women took place three decades before I embarked on my examination of older BTs, situating them in a very different historical, social, political, cultural and technological context. The world is a very different place in terms of educational and professional opportunities for women, social and cultural mores, and conventions as to women's roles in both the public and private spheres, particularly in terms of marriage and children, home and family.[38] All the women in this study are or have been married and have children, most combining those roles with work outside the home; the majority of the women in Kaufman's and Davidman's studies were single and expressed a yearning for marriage and family. From a technological perspective, the explosion of technologies of the past two decades has radically changed how we receive and consume information, opening up myriad outlets for exploring observant Orthodoxy through a variety of websites, chat rooms, and social media platforms, not to mention devices, that were not available for the women in previous studies.

All three factors fundamentally distinguish this study from those that preceded it. As Connerton observes, "behavior is situated with reference to its place in life history… and in reference to its place in the history of the social settings to which we belong." So, he says, "The narrative of one life is part of an interconnecting set of narratives; it is embedded in the story of those groups from which individuals derive their identity."[39]

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evinced in my fieldwork, the community has a visible Orthodox presence, a variety of Orthodox outreach programs, and a growing array of religious, communal, and educational institutions to serve the Orthodox population.

[38] According to the United States Department of Labor, 57 percent of women of working age were part of the labor force in 2016 and 70 percent of women with children under the age of eighteen were part of the labor force. Forty years ago, there were approximately 30 percent less women in the work force, including those with children. While women's earnings still trail men's, they have also appreciably increased in the past forty years. Significant changes are also evident in marriage, according to studies by the Pew Research Center. In 1960, one in ten women over the age of twenty-five was not married; in 2012, one in five was not married. The Pew study also shows rising trends towards not marrying or marrying later in life. As illustrated by both Davidman's and Kaufman's work, desire for marriage and family are key factors motivating young women to explore BT transformation.

[39] Paul Connerton, *How Societies Remember* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 31.

Most significantly, the subjects in my study evidence a maturity born of years of life experience, of choices made, and remade, of both accomplishments and disappointments, and of successes and challenges. Their lives are stories already writ large, replete with spouses and children, extended family and colleagues and friends, nuanced in their complexities. The lives of women in some cases more than half their age, the vast majority unmarried and without children, are often still unformed, made of stories yet to be written, of narratives still to be unspooled, of identities yet to be constructed.[40]

For the women in my study, their identities are more fully formed when they begin the process of taking on the serious obligations that require making substantive changes in their everyday lives.[41] These are changes that impact not only fundamental religious belief and practice, but also, more essentially, their everyday lives. They substantively affect and alter relationships— or create new ones — often causing undue family stress and diminishing long time friendships.[42] However, these women exude a strong commitment to engage in the process of becoming observant and exhibit almost a steely resolve to take on those obligations. Particularly among the older subjects, those in their 60s and 70s, a compelling self confidence shores them up, with less concern about what others think— and more of a burning desire, and determination, to continue to grow in their belief and practice at their own pace.

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[40] Davidman describes all the women in her study as in "a transitional phase of adulthood." Her Lincoln Square cohort consisted of a majority of unmarried women with ages ranging from twenty-four to fifty-two, with most between the ages of twenty-nine to forty. Her *Bais Chana* cohort was appreciably younger, nearly all in their twenties or teens, with about a third teenagers and nearly half between the ages of twenty and twenty-five. Only three of the sixty women were married. In Kaufman's study of 150 women from five large cities, nearly two-thirds of the study participants ranged in age from twenty to twenty-five. Most were not married, fifteen were divorced, and ten were engaged to be married.

[41] All of the participants in this study are currently or were previously married. Four have been married for more than four decades; five for almost two decades. Three have been divorced, one remarried. Two are currently single. All have children and six have grandchildren. All are college graduates with advanced degrees. Three are retired; the remainder work in a variety of professions, some full time, some part time.

[42] The impact of BT transformation on personal and communal relationships will be more fully examined in Chapter Five, Belonging.

The study uses a modified grounded theory approach to gather and analyze data, allowing themes to arise from field observations and the participants' stories that correlate to the research questions.[43] Thus, it places those questions within the context of American Jewish history and American Jewish collective memory, examining the phenomenon of religious transformation and identity construction from the perspectives of time (both eternal and diurnal), embodied experience, and spiritual development. It locates the endeavor at the intersection of tradition and change, at the confluence of past, present, and future. It asks questions and raises issues of particular concern to those interested in American Judaism that resonate within the larger American religious landscape.

Thus, this study explores a particular response to the dual trends evinced in American religious life today, both a turning toward more traditional ritual and practice, and a turning away from old forms and institutions and towards new and innovative modes of religious experience.[44] Such changes are evident across the vast expanse of American religions, particularly as the number of so-called "Nones," and SBNRs, spiritual but not religious, engender a plethora of new ways of being religious or experiencing religion.[45] The phenomenon has garnered attention from religious scholars seeking to understand it and religious leaders seeking to respond to it.[46]

[43] See Appendix I for a detailed description of the methodology used in this study.

[44] Harvey Cox, a preeminent American theologian who served as the Hollis Professor of Divinity at Harvard Divinity School until his retirement in 2009, identified the two notable trends in American religion today and predicted their continued ascendancy during a lecture as a scholar in residence at the ASU Center for the Study of Religion and Conflict on January 28, 2016, and then in an informal conversation about my work on February 5, 2016, in his office on campus.

[45] The results from the 2014 Pew American religious landscape study, released in May 2015, shows an uptick in the number of Americans identifying as "Nones," from 16 percent in 2007 to 23 percent in 2014.

[46] Kaya Oakes, *The Nones Are Alright: A New Generation of Believers, Seekers and Those In-between* (New York: Orbis Books, 2015). Oakes, a lecturer at the University of California at Berkley and a writer and poet, explores the phenomenon of DIY (do it yourself) religions manifest among many young people who are seeking spiritual connections outside of traditional religious pathways.

This study also explores religious impetus in terms of a search for meaning and community, which is implicit in the BT phenomenon and more widely manifest in a turning back to traditional modes across the expanse of American religious expression.[47] As Robert Putnam[48] explored in his groundbreaking study of the disintegration of American communal life, and more recently evinced in the social, cultural, and political dislocation manifest in the 2016 presidential election, there are troubling disconnections within the broader American populace and a weakening of a vital American pluralism, predicated on a vibrant communal life, that pose pressing challenges for its religious groups. Additionally, the impact of life course on religious belonging, and particularly the needs of older adults confronting substantive losses in terms of personal relationships, professional status, financial security, and health and wellness, is a rich area for future study, particularly as this cohort continues to grow in numbers into the twenty-first century.

All are issues that warrant more thorough study, in American Judaism and in the broader religious and social context.

History's Impetus, Impact

The historical examination of the BT phenomenon evinces yet a more recent manifestation of the challenges of realizing meaningful religious identity within the context of America's vast freedoms and the underlying tension that exists in being both Jewish and American. This tension has its beginnings in the fundamental cycle of exile and return that has been replayed many times over in Jewish history. Thus, it captures the innate difficulty in leaving one place to settle in another, and the concomitant struggle to preserve, or re-conceive, Jewish

[47] Arnold Eisen, *Taking Hold of Torah: Jewish Commitment and Community in America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996). Eisen, current head of the Jewish Theological Institute in New York, foresaw two decades ago the loss of community and meaning across America — and a yearning to recover both — as a result of the freedoms and choices modernity has engendered.

[48] Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of the American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001).

identity within an alien environment, while accommodating the surrounding culture.[49] Both Jonathan Sarna[50] and Hasia Diner,[51] in their more recent comprehensive histories of American Jewry, key into the inherent conflicts that arise from the desire to preserve the tradition of the past while also situating oneself in the present.

Efforts to confront and contain such conflicts are manifest initially in the conceptualization of Orthodox Judaism in late nineteenth century Europe as a reaction to the development of more progressive streams of Judaism: the founding of the Reform movement in late nineteenth century Germany and, later, the development of both the Conservative and Reconstructionist movements in mid-twentieth century America. Prior to this time, there was little formal denominational distinction in Judaism.[52] However, the seismic changes wrought by modernity, first in Europe, in response to the Emancipation and the Enlightenment, which broadened the social and cultural landscape for some Jews, and later in America, in response to the newfound freedoms democracy allowed, spawned a more clearly identified traditional Orthodoxy and new, more liberal forms of Jewish practice and belief. It also engendered new forms of Orthodoxy — the beginnings of the Modern Orthodox movement — that sought to further distill observant practice, preserving its essence in a form more consonant with modernity. And, later, in mid-twentieth century America, a concomitant movement to recover the stringent Orthodoxy of the Eastern

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[49] David Biale, *Cultures of the Jews: A New History* (New York: Schocken Books, 2002). Biale explores the syncretic impact of diasporic culture on Jewish practice.

[50] Jonathan Sarna details the development of various streams of Judaism in his comprehensive study, *American Judaism: A History (*New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005).

[51] Hasia Diner traces the development of American Jewry in her historical retelling, *The Jews of the United States, 1624-2000* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2006).

[52] Lawrence H. Schiffman, in his book *Text and Tradition: A History of Second Temple and Rabbinic Judaism* (Hoboken, New Jersey: KTAV Publishing, 1991), provides a comprehensive history of Judaism in the Rabbinic period. He makes clear that while the Judaism of the Rabbinic period was rooted in the Biblical Judaism of ancient Israel, it was also influenced by sects that developed during that time. These sects engendered a variety of approaches and a system of belief and practice that Schiffman describes as both "composite and dynamic." While its essential monotheism remained a constant, it was informed by the new ideas and approaches of succeeding generations of Jews. However, it was not until the Enlightenment and Emancipation in Europe in the nineteenth century that Judaism began to develop particular streams or denominations. Jacob Katz, in his book *Out of the Ghetto: The Social Background of Jewish Emancipation 1770-1870* (New York: Schocken Books, 1978), explores this phenomenon.

European *yeshivot,* destroyed in the Holocaust, and recreate it in America. Each of these denominational distinctions sought to re-imagine a Judaism either more reflective of contemporary reality or more reverential of the past.

Later historical developments in the modern period — the founding of the state of Israel in 1948, the Six Day War almost two decades later, the American civil rights movement, and the freeing of Soviet Jewry — coalesced to infuse American Jews in the mid to late twentieth century with newfound pride and a sense of activism that augured a revitalization of American Judaism, including an emboldened observant Orthodoxy, which portended the coming return to a more observant practice and belief within a segment of American Jews.

The counter cultural movement of the 1960s and 1970s, engendering cataclysmic social change and challenging traditional societal conventions and constraints, spawned a growing interest in observant Orthodoxy and the BT movement. With its mantra of "peace and love," girded by legislation that broadened civil rights and personal freedoms, it fostered a more open, and progressive social policy that celebrated differences and heightened ethnic and religious distinctiveness. The movement's emphasis on personal autonomy and individual fulfillment inspired spiritual searches, leading some of the so-called "hippie Jews" to recover their Jewish roots. It also stimulated new communal efforts to reach those seeking to reconstitute their Jewish identity and help facilitate their turn towards heightened observance. Visionary leaders, such as the Chassidic Rebbe Menachem Mendel Schneerson and the Lithuanian Rabbi Aharon Kotler, were signal in inspiring BTs through their foundational efforts at creating *kiruv*, outreach, programs, and institutions to attract and educate seekers.

Danzger and Aviad, in their early studies of the BT movement, unpack this quest for enhanced spirituality that led some Jewish seekers back to their religious roots and the work of those significant leaders who facilitated their return. Aviad characterizes the return to observant Judaism as a return home, even, as she writes, "it is a home where they personally have never

lived."[53] Many prospective BTs have little, if any Jewish education or background and are non- or minimally observant when they begin to turn towards observant belief and practice.

Davidman and Kaufman further enriched the literature on the BT movement, with seminal studies examining the turn of young Jewish women towards observant Orthodoxy. Their work evinced another reaction to modernity; their work, however, is couched in feminist, or anti-feminist terms, as a response to the blurring of traditional values and women's roles, and a desire to reinvest marital and maternal identity with heightened valence.

In the latter part of the twentieth century, sociologist Samuel C. Heilman clearly identified and explicated both a rightward tilt in American Orthodoxy[54] and a growth in its appeal. He attributed it to a loosening of cultural convention and constraint, a lessening of firm moral grounding, and clear ethical precepts, that left many feeling unmoored and undirected. Heilman presaged a growing desire for structure, order, and tradition in response, as well as Orthodoxy's ability to provide that through punctilious observance of its intricate system of divine law. He foreshadowed the latest Pew Study, which shows Orthodoxy, and observant Orthodoxy, as a growing segment of American Jewry.[55] Heilman distinguishes two categories of contemporary Orthodox Jews: contrapuntalists, those who seek to live in what Berger calls "plural life-worlds," and enclavists, those who seek to withdraw as much as possible from the outside world and privilege their religious cohesiveness over individual identity or association. Within the BT movement, and in this study, both are evident.

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[53] Aviad, *Return to Judaism*, 4.

[54] Heilman's comprehensive study of the changing landscape of American Orthodoxy tracks its turn towards a heightened stringency and a more punctilious practice among a growing segment of its followers.

[55] The recent Pew Research Religion & Public Life Project, A Portrait of Jewish Americans, attributed the younger average age and high fertility rate among the stringently Orthodox, as well as a decline in the rate of loss of retention among those identifying as Orthodox today, as reasons for Orthodoxy's stable ten percent share in the American Jewish population and predicts that the share of Orthodoxy in the Jewish population will grow. The study evidenced far greater attrition among America's more progressive Jewish streams, provoking concern among their leaders.

The types of outreach to the less or non-observant and the encounters to help bring them closer to traditional practice and belief are as varied as the spectrum of Orthodox practice. Modern Orthodoxy hews to a less exacting approach, seeking to bring Jews closer to meaningful Jewish identity through enhanced education and experience. Similarly, the Hasidic Chabad Lubavitch strive to engender personal growth through a more open and spiritual encounter. The more stringently Orthodox, such as the *yeshivish kollel* movement, hew to more purposeful efforts at *kiruv,* or outreach, and a progressive assumption of enhanced obligation. Adam Ferziger[56] explores the differing Chabad and *Kollel* outreach efforts, and their growth and appeal over the past two or three decades. Rabbi Haym Soloveitchik[57] comments on the growing emphasis on punctilious observance among the more stringently Orthodox, while Jack Wertheimer[58] looks at how that plays out within the *kiruv* movement. The rabbis canvassed in this study, representative of a variety of Orthodox perspectives, further enrich the discussion of outreach, its profile now, and its place within the BT movement.

The women in this study reflect Orthodoxy's — and stringently observant Orthodoxy's — continuum. There is decided individual choice in the profile, pace, and progression of each woman's turn toward heightened observance, as this study shows, as well as discretion in the approach of the teachers, mentors, and rabbis who guide them. Still, the data manifest an idealization of the Orthodoxy that I define as "stringently observant," — eschewing the more polarizing, and often pejorative, terms of *Haredi*, Black Hat, or ultra Orthodox[59] — and an

[56] Adam S. Ferziger, *Beyond Sectarianism: The Realignment of American Orthodox Judaism* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2015).

[57] Rabbi Haym Soloveitchik, "Rupture and Transformation: The Transformation of Contemporary Orthodoxy," *Tradition* 28, no. 4 (1994).

[58] Jack Wertheimer, "The Outreach Revolution," *Commentary* 135, no. 4 (2013): 20-26.

[59] Benor, *Becoming Frum*, 9. Benor provides a clear explanation of Orthodoxy's continuum, choosing to use the term "Black Hat" — referring to the headgear that distinguishes more stringently observant Orthodox men — for those who represent Orthodoxy's rightward segment, as it is the term used more consistently in the community in which she worked. The term *haredi,* more commonly used in Israel

aspiration to embrace its heightened obligations, even if they now fall short, even if, their turn, or return, to a more traditional Jewish practice and belief is now only, in Proust's words, "a signal for the future they hope to build."

Beyond history, both memory and identity inform my understanding of the BT movement,[60] from the autobiographical memory of the study participants, now viewed through the lens of newfound religious fervor, to the collective memory of the Jewish people, as Yerushalmi so articulately describes, including the powerful resonance of the Jewish national story and its divinely inscribed system of laws. Such an imperative, and such a desire for the authenticity that comes from hewing to its obligations, becomes a compelling factor in religious transformation. It turns on the heightened awareness of the divine presence, and the desire to animate this presence through performative acts, as delineated in the pronouncement of the ancient Israelites at Sinai, "we shall do, and we shall hear." Davidman,[61] in her recent work on embodied acts, shows how acts such as eating, dress, or prayer become constructs of identity, while Benor explains how such practices often inspire and deepen belief.[62] Erica Brown[63] explores the connection between the material and spiritual, and shows how they can be mutually compatible in

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and in academic research, as she explains, appears occasionally in her work. I chose to eschew both Black Hat and *haredi,* as well as the term ultra-Orthodox, which Benor rightly identifies as appearing more frequently in the press and among outside observers, because they have become politically charged.

[60] Psychological and psychoanalytical approaches also inform the understanding of identity transformation, but they are not the theoretical focus of this study.

[61] Lynn Davidman, *Becoming Unorthodox*: *Stories of Ex-Hasidic Jews* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015). Davidman's earlier work focused on those returning to observant Orthodoxy. Her seminal study of the phenomenon is the basis for her book, *Traditions in a Rootless World, Women Return to Orthodox Judaism. Becoming Unorthodox,* her most recent book, looks at the reverse dynamic, those choosing to leave that world behind, exploring the process of "unbecoming" and in doing so uncovering similar themes in the process of returning to observant practice and turning away from it.

[62] Benor, *Becoming Frum*.

[63] Erica Brown, "Orthodoxy and the Search for Spirituality in Adult Education," in *Jewish Spirituality and Divine Law*, eds. Adam Mintz, Lawrence Schiffman, Robert S. Hirt (New York: Yeshiva University Press, 2006), 271-295. Brown, a community educator, posits that spirituality and divine law are mutually compatible in Orthodoxy and that study and ritual practice are spiritually transformative.

observant Orthodoxy, while Tanya Luhrmann,[64] delves into the process for realizing divine presence, key in Orthodox practice and belief. Kaya Oakes,[65] writes about opening up new spiritual spaces, a response to the move toward more traditional practice, while Robert Wuthnow,[66] writes about '"practice oriented spirituality" that integrates hearing and doing, integral to Judaism, all locating the discussion within the larger context of American religion, while illuminating the BT phenomenon.

These spiritual perspectives on seeking and actualizing divine presence speak to a belief observed among BTs that is suspended between time and space. It is both eternal, spanning generations from the primordial to the present and beyond, and diurnal, animated by time-bound rituals that provide a compelling consistency through punctilious replication. Eviatar Zerubavel[67] conceives of veritable "time maps" that locate individuals within the expansive framework of Jewish collective memory and the more circumscribed framework of individual memory. Such maps provide a "mental schemata" that underlie a coherent narrative, and a coherent sense of self, individually and communally, that that narrative evinces. Such a coherent narrative informs the identity of those turning towards observant Orthodoxy and becomes, as Griel and Davidman describe, "a story we tell about ourselves."[68]

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[64] Tanya Marie Luhrmann, *When God Talks Back: Understanding the Evangelical Relationship with God* (New York: Vintage Books, 2013). Luhrmann is the Watkins Professor of Anthropology at Stanford University. Her work focuses on how ideas become real for people; this latest book explores how the idea of the divine becomes manifest for evangelical Christians.

[65] Kaya Oakes, *The Nones Are Alright*.

[66] Robert Wuthnow, *After Heaven: Spirituality in America Since the 1950s* (Los Angeles: University of California Press. 1998). Princeton University professor Wuthnow writes of the changing phenomenon of spiritual search in recent decades.

[67] Eviatar Zeruvabel, *Time Maps, Collective Memory and the Social Shape of the Past* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003). Rutgers University sociologist Zerauvabel maps collective memory across time and space.

[68] Arthur L. Griel and Lynn Davidman, "Religion and Identity." *The Sage Handbook of the Sociology of Religion*, eds. James A. Beckford and N.J. Demerath (Los Angeles: Sage Publications, 2007), 555.

The above claims provide a framework for exploring the meme of lost and found — the thematic underpinning of this study of *ba'alei teshuvah,* those formerly non- or less observant Jews who turn toward observant Orthodox Judaism — and for delving into the essential research questions it evokes: what is the impulse that inspires such a fundamental life change; what is the process for making such a change; and how does this change impact the sense of self, their families, and their communities?

Study Road Map

The study is comprised of six chapters to provide a kaleidoscopic view of the impetus for return, the process of the return, and the impact that such a life change can have on the individual, within both immediate and extended family structures, and on communities. It also includes three appendices that provide a detailed description of the methodology used; a biographical profile of study participants; and a glossary of terms.

This chapter, Beginnings, laid out the research questions that inspired this study and the scholarly perspectives that inform it. It summarized the literature, distinguishing this study from earlier ones, and highlighted key insights gleaned, including the profound losses that can inspire a move toward observant Jewish practice. It examined the phenomenon of loss and its consequences from the perspective of autobiographical, retrospective, and collective memory. It considered the phenomenon of spiritual search such losses can engender — the experience of being or feeling lost that propels it — and the interplay of memory and history that infuses the search from the perspective of time, past, present and future.

Chapter Two, Becoming, explores the process of identity transformation from non- or lesser observance to more stringent belief and practice. It looks at both formal and informal experiences, those that take place at home, in the synagogue, or in the larger community. It examines the critical role of mentors and teachers in inspiring and guiding BT development. It looks at family members and friends and the role they play in supporting or facilitating development. It considers the timing, pace and progression of the process; it also provides an overview of communal efforts at *kiruv*, leaders in those efforts, and resources developed to

support them, such as the Artscroll publications that make prayer books and other textual resources more readily available and accessible to those engaged in becoming more ritually observant, as well as the proliferation of online resources.

Chapter Three, (Em)bodying, explores the role of performative acts in expressing identity. It draws on anecdotal evidence that highlight experiences of taking on a variety of religious obligations, including, *kashrut*, Sabbath, and holiday observance, modest dress, and the laws of ritual purity. It considers timing, pace, and progression, as well as the impetus for taking on or deepening new religious obligations. It looks at communal and home based embodied rituals, such as challah baking, candle lighting, blessings and prayer, and speech, through the lens of memory and history, considering notions of correctness, authenticity, conformity, hyper-accommodation, and habit. It also considers the aggregation of "cultural capital" that is sought to assert individual authenticity and achieve communal acceptance.

Chapter Four, Believing, explores the phenomenon of spiritual search and the means for inspiring and animating awareness of spiritual presence. It looks at strategies for doing this, including prayer, performative acts, and embodied rituals that inspire awareness, awe, and gratitude. It considers the development of belief, faith, trust, and the notion of a divine plan. It explores the relationship of doing and believing, drawing on anecdotal data from study participants that flush out pertinent themes, and fleshes them out with their stories.

Chapter Five, Belonging, looks at the individual within the family and within the community. It considers both nuclear and extended families, looking at the impact of family relations on the BT process. It looks at the role of friends and mentors in the process as supporters or resources. It also looks at the loss of former friends as each BT transforms her life and moves away from previous activities or behaviors or social networks. It looks at how new social networks are formed. The study also looks at the role of the community in asserting pressure to conform to communal norms, to encourage heightened observance, and also to criticize or respond negatively to the inability to take on new obligations or to hew to them fully.

Chapter Six, Being, examines more fully the phenomenon of BT transformation as a process, as well as the notion of personal growth and aspiration endemic to it. It looks more fully

at the impact of gender, and how such understandings of gendered roles and responsibilities, i.e., as daughters, wives, and mothers, impacts the identify construction of BT women. It also examines the impact of historical, social and cultural contexts, as well as the impact of life course, or stage of life, position, as both affect and effect BT religious transformation. It also lays out conclusions on what has been lost and found, which are drawn from an intensive analysis of the data corresponding to the research questions posed, and limns the phenomenon of the findings culled from this data analysis within American Judaism and in the larger context of American religion.

Appendix I provides a detailed description of the methodology used in the study.

Appendix II provides short biographical summaries of each of the study participants, locating them by age, stage of life, family configuration, prior religious background and education, secular education and work experience, lifestyle.

Appendix III provides a glossary of Hebrew words used as well as other terms specifically related to Jewish belief and practice.

CHAPTER TWO: BECOMING

Beginnings that stir an incipient awareness of something missing, often prompted by profound loss, induce a nascent process of becoming, as vague yearnings for recovering what has been lost become more fully realized. Engendered by real-life experience, recollected in personal memory, impelled by an underlying discontent, disillusion, disappointment, or despair, those initial stirrings take form in a cardboard carton, around a table, in a book, on a screen, in a class, or in a *shul*. The materiality of each loss gives shape and substance to the ineffable longings it evokes, evincing the faint outline of the narrative of becoming those beginnings will come to write.

This chapter shows how a coalescence of experience constructs identity, one experience at a time, creating a coherent narrative of self. It illustrates how such a process takes place over time, its pace and progression determined by each individual, inspired by profound loss that engenders a search for meaning or understanding, infused by memory and informed by an abiding intellectual curiosity to learn and do more. It describes the impact of generational and historical context, the diminution of Jewish belief and practice and the normalization of less or non-observance, and the yearning for the stability and security that an age-old religious system can provide. It shows how the rhetoric of choice informs their move toward Orthodoxy as a product of their age and maturity as discriminating consumers and directed learners. And it limns the many variations of being Orthodox, and many programs and institutions that seek guide those interested in becoming Orthodox on the path toward heightened observance and the variety of choices to be made for those on that path.

Memoirist Paul Connerton tells us beginnings by their very nature “have nothing to hold on to,” so their meaning must be derived from the context in which we place them and the shape

we give to them. Those "experienced objects," as Connerton calls them, embody the memories that give them meaning and the significance they imbue to the ensuing narrative.[69]

It is a narrative that develops over time, as singular in pace and progression as the identity of its author, each reflecting a host of impulses that animate the process of becoming and propel it forward. Meeting, seeing, hearing, learning, reading, going, doing, believing, and belonging, inform each story of becoming, and the new identity it engenders, each narrative as rich and varied as those who are on the path to being.[70]

But its becoming can begin in a box, around a table, in an ark.

Giving Form to Feelings

A battered cardboard carton, a jumble of papers and notes and cards, gave form to Rena's vague sense of discontent. Going through the detritus of her late mother-in-law's life as she grieved for her, she began to think about her own life, about the choices she had made as a woman, a wife, a mother. "I'll never forget going through all this stuff," she confides, "… boxes and boxes —coupons mixed with letters and pictures and resumes … everything all mooshed together. And I had to delicately go through everything so I wouldn't lose precious memories."

It was a seminal moment for Rena, a self-described workaholic, who juggled a full-time corporate marketing position with running a home and caring for three little ones. Her mother-in-law's battle with cancer and premature death had put Rena's husband in a tailspin. He had sought comfort from a local Orthodox rabbi to deal with the loss, and while both Rena and her husband had more recently been reading and learning about the Judaism they did not know

[69] Connerton, *How Societies Remember*, 6.

[70] The impulses that animate BT transformation will be more substantively explored in subsequent chapters, Believing, (Em)bodying and Belonging, and in the concluding chapter, Being. This chapter limns the operative process and progress of becoming with a less extensive analysis of the specific phenomenon at play.

growing up, they had not yet considered embracing a more traditional practice themselves nor had they considered the changes that such a move would entail. Yet, that day, as Rena cracked open each box, the path began to open up before her. Her life was non-stop, her home office, which she jokingly referred to as her throne room, in a corner of the dream home she and her husband had worked to hard to purchase, was adorned with a wall full of professional awards and certificates of accomplishment.

"And as I was going through these boxes, I'm like, what is my life about? When I die, what are my kids going to go through?" she recalls asking herself.

"What's the point?"

For Carrie, who proudly shows off her grandmother's brass candlesticks that now grace her sideboard, those moments came around the table, first as a young wife and mother who prided herself on eating breakfast and dinner together as a family each day. Losing her father as a youngster had left a hole in her life and her heart, and meeting her husband, marrying, and having children made that family time exceedingly precious. But it was later in life, as her children were grown and went off to make lives of their own, as she and her husband confronted both the satisfactions and challenges of being empty nesters, that they begin deepening their Jewish knowledge and understanding, reading, taking classes, and traveling to Israel. They were exposed to a variety of teachers, but it was the observant Orthodox rabbis who are instructors in their Melton Program[71] in the large Midwest city where they then lived who had the most impact. "These rabbis were authentic," she still marvels " they not only talked about something but they lived it. We were blown away." Spending an evening in one rabbi's *sukkah,* having dinner around his *Shabbos* table, was a remarkable experience. "So we were, 'where'd this come from? Has it

[71] The Florence Melton School of Adult Jewish Learning is an international network of community-based schools dedicated to providing opportunities for adult Jewish learning. Established in 1980 by the late Florence Zacks Melton, it began with three pilot programs in North America and now boasts 50 schools in the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, Australia, South Africa and New Zealand reaching some 4000 students weekly. According to its website, it is the largest pluralistic adult Jewish learning network in the world.

been here all along?'" she recalls asking. And as the couple's knowledge of Orthodox belief and practice grew, so did their conception of that table, and those around it, as it expanded to encompass more traditional observance and to seat a raft of community members now as close as family.

"I'm about my hands," says Aileen matter-of-factly.

We are sitting in her bright, airy office, located in the quaint "cottage" behind her house. On the tidy desk, a colorful spring bouquet enlivens the room. A computer occupies another clean workspace, with a neat container of office supplies to its side. On a rear counter, there's a whimsical centerpiece created for an upcoming *bat mitzvah* party, and in the corner, three gaily wrapped packages, gifts for newly arrived little ones. A self-described Jewish Martha Stewart, Aileen's creative skills have given shape and form to her gradual transformation as an observant Jew as she shares them generously with the new community that has warmly welcomed her.

Currently working as an educational consultant, she spent many years in interior design, honing her innate sense of space, line and proportion, as evident in her own office and adjoining home as in those of her clients. She shows off her kosher kitchen with pride: its sleek surfaces and stylish accouterments evidence her professional expertise and enviable aesthetic. Its design also precisely meets the needs of the kosher cook, with its dual work and storage spaces, a work of love inspired by the prospect of meals cooked and shared there with her observant Orthodox son and his family.

The expression of her new identity through the work of her hands comes naturally for her. Aileen explains that her father was in the corrugated carton business for many years; she boasts that she learned to "figure" (design) a box in three dimensions by the time she was five. More recently, she created a website for Jewish home design and co-wrote a novel with her daughter. It all, she laughingly says, "came out of these fingers," holding up her hand.

But it is a powerful memory from her childhood that even more poignantly connects the material with its spiritual valence. Her father, the box manufacturer, a non observant Jew, an usher in their congregation who preferred lingering outside to greet latecomers rather than praying in the sanctuary, volunteered to build the ark for the fledgling Reform congregation where Aileen grew up. And even for someone not necessarily religious, the work of his hands, making something religious for a religious place, was imbued with religious meaning.

"My father understood the meaning of that act in the collective unconscious way," she says softly now. Something hit him very powerfully.

"He was crying while he was doing it."

So these recovered memories of the past, materialized as Connerton's "experienced objects," animate the process of becoming as they evoke meaning and engender religious consciousness. For Rena, rifling through a box of her mother-in-law's old papers invokes questions of meaning and purpose, for Carrie, sitting around her *Shabbos* table invokes her longing for the stability of familial and communal connections, for Aileen, recalling her father's tears as he builds an ark, invokes an incipient awareness of the divine as actualized in doing and its emotional impact. Purpose, order, and feeling, all give meaning to these acts, heightening their impact and their potential to affect us in often very substantive ways, particularly in constructing a new identity.

Those recovered recollections, so often retrospectively remembered, powerfully construct Zerubavel's temporal topography that stretches across time, conjoining past with present, presaging the future, as they cohere into a congruent narrative. His time maps make real the connection from generation to generation in families and communities, informing individual memory and collective memory, as those turning toward observant Orthodoxy seek to re-imagine an identity imbued with enhanced Jewish practice and belief. Zerubavel writes of the conflation of

those mnemonic strands into “a remarkable existential fusion” that becomes endemic in constructing a new identity.[72]

Connerton, too, writes of recollection at work in that larger context, evoking historical events as his schematic framework, yet personal memory, too, is at play, helping make sense of experiences and infuse them with meaning. “Our experience of the present very largely depends on our knowledge of the past,” he writes, suggesting, like Cubitt, the primacy of memory in constructing a coherent sense of self.[73] “To remember, then, is precisely not to recall events as isolated; it is to become capable of forming meaningful narrative sequences.”[74]

So Aileen’s poignant memory of her father building an ark resonates deeply for her as she moves towards heightened belief and practice. That she recalls it so vividly attests to its weight and significance, what Sarah Ahmed has observed as its perpetuation. “What do we remember?” she asks. “What sticks.”[75] And what sticks is steeped with meaning that informs our very sense of self. Or as Maurice Halbwachs so keenly observed, memory and identity are two sides of the same coin.[76]

The search for meaning infuses the American Jewish zeitgeist across its broad spectrum of belief and practice. While often informed by a fierce American individualism and belief in the autonomy of the sovereign self, it retains its primacy as a motivation for religious practice and belief. And it is most often found in experience. “Jewish meaning is not only personal,” write

[72] Zerubavel, *Time Maps,* 3.

[73] Connerton, *How Societies Remember*, 3.

[74] Connerton, *How Societies Remember*, 26.

[75] Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 11.

[76] Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

Steven M. Cohen and Arnold Eisen, in their study of American Jewry on the dawn of the 21st century, "but (it is) constructed, one experience at a time."[77]

So the rabbi of a stringently Orthodox congregation observes the experiences of his congregants as they find their way on the path to a more meaningful life through traditional practice. "… [T]here's little things I see," he confides, "eyes closed at the third meal on *Shabbos* afternoon, a *tallis* over a man's head, eyes tearing up during the *Hallel.*

"Something is resonating," he says, and that is meaning.

Mature Seekers, Discriminating Consumers

Arriving at Rena's house, she points out the overstuffed bookcase in her family room, filled to overflowing with hundreds of tomes on a variety of Jewish subjects. I had first met Rena very early in her journey, as a young married woman, when she and her husband were just beginning to explore Judaism. They read voraciously and took classes — like Carrie and others in this study, they availed themselves of Melton's adult education program — and were inspired to seek group settings, as well as continue their own individual pursuit of Jewish knowledge. As evidenced in this study, those seeking to learn more about Judaism in general, and Orthodoxy in particular, are self-directed learners, mature students who allow their own needs and interests to determine what books they read, what classes they take, what programs they attend, what teachers they follow, and what websites they click on. They are discriminating consumers of Jewish content, guided by their age and experience to find what, or who, speaks to them.

They differ in their becoming, or taking on the obligations of observant Jewish life, from their earlier counterparts, subjects in the two most recent comprehensive studies of *ba'alei teshuvah* women, one by Davidman and the other by Kaufman, in this and many other substantive ways. Women in both Davidman's and Kaufman's studies participated in group programs, activities or classes offered under the auspices of particular congregations or other

[77] Cohen and Eisen, *The Jew Within*, 36.

Jewish outreach organizations. The women in this study engaged in both individual and group activities, but most often initiated their exploration of heightened belief and practice on their own, through self-directed reading or online research, something not yet available to the women in the earlier studies. They also took advantage of a variety of programs and activities sponsored by many organizations or institutions — different from cohorts in the earlier studies, none were in a residential environment and none were participating in a formal program sponsored by a particular institution — that reflected their individual interests or their own comfort level. Their independent study informed other aspects of their transformation including choices as to modest dress, adherence to kosher dietary requirements, Sabbath and holiday observance, and following the laws of ritual purity that regulate their marital intimacy.

Leah, the now single mother in her sixties who was raised in a traditional Conservative home and gradually moved toward heightened observant Orthodoxy (as did her three grown children), expresses a very clear sense of self. She confidently makes her own choices, draws her own lines within the strictures of Orthodox practice. She works hard to maintain friendships with congregants from the mainstream Conservative congregation where she formerly belonged, finding ways to socialize with them without abrogating the prohibitions of *kashrut* or *shabbat* observance. She dresses modestly, while interpreting stipulations on dress personally, comfortable with the length of her skirts, the dip of her necklines, and the denier of her hose. She has little patience for the self-appointed communal arbiters of appropriate dress.

Exuding a disarming toughness, she challenges her detractors, “You don’t like what I’m wearing?” her knit tube skirt and top discreetly covering both knees and elbows, “Too bad. I’m strong enough to say that.”

Not all my subjects are as confident as Leah, particularly the younger ones, in their mid to late forties, who are still wrestling with communal pressure to conform to certain real or perceived standards. Lara, the young woman haunted by those lost in the Holocaust, divorced and remarried, with a son from each marriage, displays a palpable discomfort in making decisions not

only about how to dress but how to make her way in the Orthodox world. The almost twenty year age difference between Leah and Kara evinces a significant divergence in their maturity and confidence in their choices and their ability to actualize them. Lara speaks painfully of spending hours alone at night surfing Jewish sites on the internet, grateful for the anonymity and privacy she needed. Her initial steps towards becoming Orthodox are fraught with anxiety and self-doubt, which continue to plague her on her journey.

Hannah, in her late forties, married with a twelve-year-old daughter, is exceedingly articulate as she describes her religious search. Powered by her own intellectual curiosity — wanting to know the hows and whys of Jewish ritual and practice — and inspired by a family background of conflicted Jewish denominational identities and a sense of profound loss of tradition, Hannah professes to a compelling desire shared with her husband to learn and do more. They discovered their mutual longing on their first date, he raised Reform with little substantive background, and she with a traditional mother and a Reform father compromising on a Conservative upbringing for their children. Hannah is both sympathetic to her mother's lack of substantive Jewish knowledge — no formal Jewish education, but rather learning by doing at home — and also less forgiving as she sees her mother bypassing later opportunities to enhance her understanding. She is determined to approach creating a meaningful Jewish life differently.

"I want to do more, understand more," she says.

So, as the couple grows beyond the lesser level of observance of their non-Orthodox congregation, they try out a more stringent practice. The death of her husband's sister is the impetus for him to seek out a daily *minyan* to say *kaddish*, which further draws the couple to the Orthodox community. Hannah's participation in a women's only trip to Israel sponsored by a national Orthodox organization also further intensifies the pull.[78] Hannah calls their gradual

[78] The Jewish Women's Renaissance Project, sponsored by *Ner L'Elef,* an Orthodox outreach initiative, takes a group of young women from communities across the United States for a weeklong trip to Israel. There the women are exposed to a host of experiences, spiritual, ritual, historical, social, designed to heighten their understanding of Jewish tradition while seeking to create a sense of community among them. All of the women are mothers, a critical factor in their response to the experience, non-Sabbath-observant,

engagement in observant life "an experiment," describing the couple's first efforts at keeping the full 25 hours of Sabbath observance, wondering if it is something they will do once or twice a month or try weekly. She also begins to experiment with more modest dress, choosing more skirts than pants, which had been the mainstay of her wardrobe.

She speaks of adding more tools to her toolbox, as she gains the knowledge and understanding that her mother did not have, and uses them to make conscious choices as to her family's practice. Yet, she is well aware that she is heading into territory fraught with pitfalls and doubts, struggling to find her way, despite her self-confident demeanor.

"I'm trying it on for size," she says.

Process, Pace, Progression

As BTs on the path toward heightened religious practice and belief "try it on for size," they manifest a number of underlying commonalities in what is for each of them an individual pursuit. Shared threads gleaned from the stories of my study participants resonate with the findings of earlier studies of BT women by Davidman and Kaufman as well as in Benor's more recent work. First and foremost, the data shows that becoming *frum*, or observant Orthodox, is a process.[79] While there are three ritual practices that are signal in that development for women — keeping the laws of kosher observance, keeping the laws of Sabbath and holiday observance, and keeping the laws of ritual purity — there are myriad steps along the way in fully observing each of

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but interested in learning more about observant Orthodoxy. They commit to a year of continuing study and communal participation after returning from Israel. Three women in this study participated in a JWRP trip. Hannah called it a seminal experience, laughingly speaking of a trifecta of experiences that catapulted her ahead on her search, the trip, the community challah bake and its *Shabbos* Project, a community-wide *Shabbaton.*

[79] Benor, *Becoming Frum*, 16-17. Benor delineates four specific phases in the process of becoming Orthodox. Phase one is interested prospective BTs, those in the initial stages of the process, attending some events, accepting invitations for *Shabbos* or holiday celebrations at rabbis' homes; phase two is peripheral BTs, those marginally affiliated but with a range of levels of observance; phase three is community BTs, those who decide to move into an Orthodox community and take on heightened religious obligation; phase four is yeshiva/seminary, those spending time in a residential setting for further study before moving into an observant community. Benor's delineation of particular stages in development is reinforced by this study, as is further shown in Chapter Three, (Em)bodying.

these (and a continuum of interpretations on stringency), and a multitude of other minutiae in the controlling, but potentially meaningful, system of Jewish law to be confronted.[80]

For many, the data show, the process often begins with dietary changes, gradually giving up non-kosher foods and separating dairy and meat, and some type of heightened Sabbath observance. Study participants offered insights into taking on the laws of the Sabbath, particularly the prohibitions against driving, working, and using money, which required substantive changes in their lives. Dina, a twice converted Jew, married with four children at home, and who is now hewing to an observant Orthodox lifestyle, describes the gradual path from driving to Sabbath services at their Orthodox synagogue and then going out to lunch, to gradually becoming completely Sabbath- and kosher-observant.[81]

"You're going from your own 'out to lunch *kiddush*' on *Shabbat* … and using your TV and cell phone and not keeping kosher to keeping a kosher home (and) not going anywhere on *Shabbat* except to *shul* and wherever you're going, you're walking.

"It is not easy."

Kara, the married mother of three growing daughters, who initiated the family's gradual move towards becoming Orthodox, speaks poignantly of a similar trajectory, her initial step toward Sabbath observance turning off the radio in the car as she and her daughters drove to synagogue.

[80] The inherent duality of Jewish law is both its power to legislate and control behavior and its concomitant power to evoke both meaning and purpose through adherence to its intricate system of prescribed and proscribed acts. This dichotomy is further explored in Chapter Four, Believing, where I look at the conflict between Jewish law and spirituality.

[81] The laws of Sabbath observance prohibit thirty-nine categories of work during the period of the Jewish Sabbath, from sundown Friday until sundown Saturday. Included in the prohibitions are not driving or using electricity. The dietary laws of keeping kosher proscribe eating in non-kosher restaurants. Kosher restaurants, which are obligated to uphold the Sabbath laws, are closed on the Sabbath.

"It took awhile for the radio to go off," she confides. "And, yeah, that was a big thing. Because we used to sing. I remember a song in particular we used to sing on our way … so it was big when we finally turned off the radio on the way to *shul*."

Each woman, each family, begins the process of becoming observant at a different entry point and each progresses at a different pace. About half of the subjects in this study would consider themselves Sabbath-observant now, eschewing work, driving, spending money, and the multitude of other prohibitions that arise from the Sabbath laws. Most difficult has been turning off iPhones and other devices for the 25 hours of observance. The others observe the Sabbath in varying degrees of stringency, the most lenient going to synagogue every Saturday, but driving there. Yet the possibility of increasing observance remains. Aspiration echoes through their stories.

"Right now, it's not my goal to walk to *shul* and wear long skirts," says Annie, who drives each Saturday to Sabbath services. "But five years from now, I could be in a different place." She is content taking baby steps, she says, and assuming those practices that are meaningful to her now. She picks and chooses, following her rabbi's advice to not rush the process. "Everything is very slow," she says. "I'm in control."

Dina, too, emphasizes the importance of pacing, of gradually taking on heightened obligations, and the pitfalls of rushing into something without fully understanding its ramifications. She tells of agreeing to appear in a PBS segment about women who have converted to Judaism precisely because she wanted to convey both the depth of commitment it requires as well as the seriousness of the enterprise and the length of the process. But dressed exquisitely, kneading *challah* in her designer kitchen, with her beautifully manicured nails, she exudes grace, style, and ease on the screen. Her message, though, conveyed more forthrightly in later conversations with me, reflects how very difficult it is to make such a substantive change.

She relates how she spent one year studying the laws of *kashrut* before her rabbi would *kasher* her kitchen, then another two years studying under an Orthodox *beit din*, for her conversion. "There's a lot to learn," she says, "and there's a huge transformation, for just even

two years." She cautions those who think the process will be either easy or quick. It is neither, she says, especially if you are married and have children, as all the older women in my study do.

"It is just so much more complicated."

For some, there is a compelling momentum that quickens the pace and speeds the progression, thrusting them forward. Rena tells of becoming Sabbath-observant only after observing fully once — when a rabbi and his family spent the entire 25 hours with her family at their home. The result was not only that the family took on Sabbath observance from that weekend forward, but, as she shares now, they inadvertently took on holiday observance as well.

"We decided to keep *Shabbos*," she says, "we didn't realize it meant *Yom Tov* too!"

Kara speaks similarly of focusing on *kashering* the family's new home, as they were moving toward taking on more a stringent observance. She did not initially realize that buying a house in an area with many observant neighbors within walking distance to the synagogue would mean that they would more punctiliously adhere to the laws of Sabbath and holiday observance. The move catapulted their transformation forward. Benor identifies the move into an Orthodox neighborhood as a key factor in speeding BT transformation.[82]

Hannah, keenly aware of how living within an observant community can powerfully impact the process, pace and progression of becoming Orthodox, expresses her hesitancy to move into such an enclave. Strongly self-reliant, she is striving to preserve her independence and gradually make those decisions for herself and her family. Aileen admits to a similar hesitancy to move into an observant neighborhood, aware of the pressure to conform.

Others in the study, further along in the process of becoming observant, tell of heightening their observance after suffering a loss or other difficulty in their lives. Ava decided not to drive on the Sabbath after her younger sister lost her battle with cancer. She asked her rabbi

[82] Benor, *Becoming Frum*, 17.

how women ritually mark the death of a loved one if they do not have the obligation to recite *kaddish*, the memorial prayer, as men do. She recalls him telling her that often women take on another religious obligation.

"My sister died on *Shabbos*," she tells me, "And we drove to the mortuary to make the funeral arrangements. And that was the last time I ever rode on *Shabbos*."

"I don't know if it gave me structure, or comfort," she responds to a question about how it made her feel. "(But) I felt better.

"It made me feel like I had more control."

Rena tells a similar, though less wrenching, story, of making the decision to keep kosher after a family member decided to marry a non-Jew. It was a breaking point, she says.

"I woke up one day and realized, I need to help them. And I thought, maybe I need to keep kosher." So she did. Such breaking points, says Rena, come along the way, and spur more stringent observance.

"It's a ladder," says Rena, an apt metaphor for those turning towards heightened observance.

Order and Structure, Change and Choice

Each rung of the ladder can be construed as taking on another obligation that provides the structure and order that many BTs seek. Searching for an elusive clarity that many feel is missing in today's world, they return to tradition to recover a moral certitude through the rigid structure of observant Jewish life. That such an impulse is a response to modernity is evinced both in the earlier studies of BT women and in this one as well. However, for many, the recovery of what has been lost is made real through the thoroughly modern rhetoric of choice.[83]

[83] Davidman, *Becoming Unorthodox* 82.

The search for order often becomes acute as individuals age and are confronted with life's losses, the death of a loved one, the end of a marriage, or a financial reversal. Often, as my data show, these experiences engender a search for the comforting security and stability of an age-old spiritual system to navigate the shoals of disappointment, discontent, desolation or despair.[84] So, as Heilman points out in his study of a return to observant Orthodoxy, they choose to turn towards "Torah true" Judaism, to recover observant Jewish practice and belief as a means of restoring order to their lives.[85]

The majority of participants in this study was raised in Reform or Conservative homes and had little, if any, previous exposure to the more stringent obligation that Orthodoxy demands. Yet as they struggle to make sense of their lives, and begin to explore Orthodoxy, they become more intensely aware of denominational difference and Orthodoxy's distinctive approach to Jewish law. And they gradually become disenchanted with the perceived accommodation and compromise non-Orthodox Judaism propagates, and choose to move away from less-demanding denominations.

Denominational differences in Judaism in general, and in Orthodoxy in particular, as discussed in the previous chapter, are not endemic to Judaism but have gradually developed since the end of the nineteenth century, as a response to modernity.[86] The beginning of such differentiation dawned in Europe, with the founding of the Reform movement and its loosening of traditional stricture to comport with the earlier intellectual flowering of the Enlightenment and the

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[84] Stephen J. Hunt, "Religion as a Factor in Life and Death through Life-Course" in *Sage Handbook of the Sociology of Religion*, eds. James A. Beckford and N.J. Demerath. (Los Angeles: Sage Publications, 2007), 608-629. Hunt explores the turn towards religion among older adults as a means of reconciling the losses of aging that result from retirement from the workforce and the end of active parenting roles.

[85] Heilman, *Sliding to the Right*, 5. Heilman's work, tracing the movement toward stringent Orthodoxy among American Jews in the beginning decades of the twenty-first century, limns the appeal of an ancient tradition imbued with divine authority, rooted in an intricate system of laws, and situated in community. Anything less than such "Torah true" Judaism, he posits, "is considered counterfeit."

[86] Schiffman, *Text and Tradition,* and *Katz, Out of the Ghetto,* explore this phenomenon, as previously cited.

concomitant Emancipation, which appreciably expanded the civil rights and protections of Jews. European Orthodoxy asserted its identity, and then gradually developed different degrees of stringency. Jacob Katz, writing more than 30 years ago, called some strains tradition-bound, fervently loyal to tradition, and those who were less so, and more open to moderation of religious obligation, he called traditionalists.[87] Similarly, in America, Orthodoxy asserted its authenticity in response to the more liberal approach and burgeoning appeal first of Reform Judaism and later of the other progressive streams, Conservative and Reconstructionist Judaism, then diverged yet again into a more liberal modern Orthodoxy and, in response, a more stringently "tradition bound" Orthodoxy.[88]

Adam S. Ferziger, in his incisive work on the diversification of Orthodox belief and practice, looked at the phenomenon through the lens of deviance. In his book, *Exclusion and Hierarchy,* reprising his teacher Katz in more contemporary terms, he posits that deviance is manifest in both pre-modern and post-modern Judaism, suggesting that in the pre-modern world, deviance was considered "disloyal," while in the modern world, it is construed as a manifestation of both the freedom to question the normative and the freedom to choose. "The gradual way in which non-observance became a legitimate form of Jewish identity for many Jews can be described as the normalization of deviance," he writes. "The acts that were previously considered to be the antithesis of a Jewish lifestyle became accepted and preferred options for vast numbers of identifying Jews."[89]

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[87] Jacob Katz, "Orthodoxy in Historical Perspective," in *Studies in Contemporary Jewry II*, ed. Peter Y. Medding (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1986), 3-5.

[88] The notion of authenticity pervades the American Jewish denominational landscape as the many ways of being, and identifying as, Jews proliferate. It is assessed in terms of differing criteria by each denomination according to their reconstruction of which factors have always informed — or have been imagined to inform — essentially defined Judaism. The growth of stringent Orthodoxy, and its triumphal positioning as the Jewish archetype, has only further roiled the perception of Jewish identity, particularly among its non-Orthodox adherents. The question of "who is a Jew?" continues to provoke strife.

[89] Adam S. Ferziger, *Exclusion and Hierarchy, Orthodoxy, Non Observance, and the Emergence of Modern Jewish Identity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005), 6.

Such perceived deviance from traditional observance — and the resulting compromise and accommodation some BTs evidence — is a key factor in their discontent with their former non-Orthodox affiliation and their current attraction to strict Orthodox observance. Also notable in this shift is the emphasis on individual choice as an underlying principle. More than half the participants in my research articulated a disaffection for what they construed as compromise or accommodation by the non-Orthodox — and the legitimization of those practices, or in Ferziger's terms, "the normalization of deviance" — some speaking in disparaging terms of their former affiliations with Reform or Conservative congregations. They reiterated the compelling authenticity of Orthodoxy, which they found to be lacking, or non-existent, in their previous encounters within the non-Orthodox streams of Judaism. Only one of my cohort, Ava, was raised Orthodox — though she describes it as "traditional" — and has moved towards the more stringently "tradition-bound" Orthodoxy of Katz's loyalists, which she finds more fulfilling.

She shares her story of growing up in a home in a densely Jewish Midwest suburb with an observant father and a less observant mother, who succumbed to her husband's desire to be Sabbath-observant and maintain a kosher home. Ava's early years were happy, walking to *shul* with her father on Saturdays, playing silly games along the way. But when she became a teenager, and the majority of her Jewish friends were not Sabbath-observant, she became less content as her social life was impacted by Sabbath prohibitions.

"My friends all went to public school — as did I — but they all went to the mall on *Shabbos*, and I had to stay home."

That budding resentment was only exacerbated by her father's selective interpretation of the laws of *Shabbos* observance.

"If my father wanted to watch a baseball game, we were allowed to turn on the TV on *Shabbos*," she recalls. "If the telephone was ringing, and he didn't like hearing it ringing, we could answer it on *Shabbos.* (But) we couldn't call out."

Such inconsistencies bred not only deep-seated resentment, but also a brewing rebelliousness she acted on once she went away to college.

“The first thing I did when I went to college was ride on *Shabbos* and start smoking cigarettes,” she recalls.

Yet, after marrying, she and her husband gradually found their way back to an even more punctiliously observant Jewish life. Two of their three children are Orthodox, one stringently so, and Ava revels in the joy that Jewish structure and stricture seem to impart to their lives.

Carrie, who found authenticity around a *Shabbos* table, and now lives in a home with just such a table, confides that in her early years, her Reform family had a Christmas tree. While her mother’s second husband insisted on ending the practice, she recalls later renewing the custom with a small table top tree in her own home when her children were young. Only a phone call from a visiting stepsister — asking pointedly if there was a tree in her home — caused her to quickly dispose of the objectionable object.

“Oh, I don’t have one. Come on over,” she recalls telling her stepsister. “And I quickly took this little green bush I had and pitched it.

“I never thought of it as offensive,” she says now.

Only later did she tell her children simply, “We’re Jewish. We don’t have a tree.”

She gently laughs in chagrin at the story, and her understanding now of the incongruity of a Christmas tree in a Jewish home.

Leah, growing up Conservative, was keenly aware as a child of the inconsistencies in her Jewish upbringing. While she and her siblings went to synagogue on Saturday mornings, her father went to work. She speaks later of growing disillusionment as she confronted the nascent movement of her childhood congregation towards expanding roles for women and her own discomfort with that progression. Enrolling her children in the local Orthodox day school further escalated that disquiet, as she began to question what she had been taught and what she construed as inherent contradictions.

"I grew up with the Conservative laws, never thinking to question them," she says now. "I never thought there was anything beyond that. (Then) my kids are in day school, and now I say, wait a minute, that's not what I was taught. But that's not what is in the Torah."

She had accepted Conservative's more modulated approach to Jewish law as "being the right way," she says now. But the attempt to preserve the essence of Jewish practice and belief while accommodating the modern world no longer worked for her.

"They were creating problems. The rules were not clear."

That epiphany, and her growing acceptance of the Torah as the true source, led her to begin learning on her own, even as she learned from her children, and to begin to move toward more stringent belief and practice.

With her characteristic bluntness, she says she realized, "We were doing it all wrong."

The desire for "doing it right," and for clarity, order and structure, emerges from my research. It arises from a need for constructing a cohesive personal narrative and a coherent sense of self. There is a search for a certitude that the study participants feel was lacking, or nonexistent, in their previous encounters with Judaism, and the appeal of what they perceive to be, as Sarah describes it, "the real deal."

The pursuit of "authenticity" is a response to modernity and its seeming moral vacuousness.

The data in this study reinforce the findings in previous studies that BTs evince a compelling desire for the framework that Judaism's intricate system of laws provides. Kaufman goes so far as to suggest that her data reveal "that the inviolability of Jewish law is the key attraction to Orthodoxy for the women under study."[90]

While my findings evidence a similar impetus, I posit that the age and maturity of my study participants mediates their acceptance of the "inviolability" of the law and moderates the

[90] Kaufman, *Rachel's Daughters*, 21.

pace and progression of their acceptance of those obligations, as informed by personal choice and confidence in those choices. My data on pace bear this out, with only two of my subjects articulating an incontrovertible belief in *halachah*, or Jewish law, while others couched their gradual acceptance of its authority as a process: a series of "baby steps," as one respondent described her progression, or a journey, as another subject characterized the process. It is reflective of the continuum of observant Orthodoxy and the differentiation of stringency it demands, and the lesser strictness it allows, among prospective BTs.

Hannah likened her growing knowledge and understanding of Jewish law as adding tools to her Jewish toolbox, or acquiring keys to open new doors.

"What I've been presented with are tools or keys," she says, "and I've been given the chance to try different keys with different doors and see what opens … trying out different practices … and seeing what works for me."

Davidman suggests that for her Lincoln Square study subjects, who have similar educational and professional profiles to those in my study, the rhetoric of choice characterizes their transformation. Even as they consider hewing more closely to Jewish law, they proclaim that their actions are precipitated by personal choice, though it may become personal choice within the rubric of communal responsibility or requirement.[91] Still, it is reflective of the more complex notion of choice that asserts individual autonomy and acclaims the pluralism that allows for such individuality.[92] Such an emphasis on choice has given rise to two seemingly contrary responses in Judaism, and more widely in American religion: a return to fundamentalism, as evidenced in the BT movement, and a turn toward new, more innovative religious expressions, as seen in the

[91] Davidman, *Tradition in a Rootless World,* 172.

[92] Will Herberg's classic book on American pluralism, *Protestant, Catholic and Jew*,, describes the development of an American civil religion characterized by religious pluralism in the mid-twentieth century. Later scholars evidenced its decline, and then its change from a passive pluralism, with acknowledgement of religious difference but little engagement, and then more recently evidencing a more inclusive Judeo-Christian pluralism with diminished distinctiveness.

Jewish *havurah* and renewal movements of the mid-twentieth century, and the more recent pop-up synagogues or "labs," creative, experiential Jewish incarnations. Such innovation is reflective of diminished religious and denominational identification across the greater American religious landscape, as manifest in the growth of a segment of the population identifying as Nones, either professing no organized religious tradition or no denominational identifier within those traditions, and the SBNRs, spiritual but not religious, those charting new religious ground outside of those traditions.[93]

But as Ferziger and others suggest, and as my data show, the definition of what constitutes the compelling authenticity that informs such fundamentalism is elusive and gives rise to a multiplicity of ways for being, and becoming, Orthodox. Those approaches, and the communal organizations or institutions that advance them, are as varied as the phenomenon of American Orthodoxy. As Heilman, in his study of the rightward tilt of American Orthodoxy today, makes clear, Orthodoxy is not a monolith, but rather an aggregation of a variety of different approaches that reflect multiple interpretations and variations in terms of traditional belief and practice, as well as a variety of choices in its pursuit.

Varieties and Variations

The process of becoming Orthodox is not easy, even when living simpler lives without the complications of spouses, children, or close extended family. It involves a fundamental shift in lifestyle, requires a vast amount of learning — even for those starting out with more substantive

[93] Preeminent American theologian Harvey Cox shared his perspectives on the future of American religion during an informal conversation at Arizona State University last year as a scholar in residence. Tanya Marie Luhrmann, in her book *When God Talks Back* (New York: Vintage Books, 2013), explores spiritual resonance in the contemporary world. Kaya Oakes, in her book *The Nones Are All Right: A New Generation of Believers, Seekers and Those In-Between* (New York: Orbis Books, 2015), looks at the phenomenon of the Nones and SBNRs and their impact on the changing American religious landscape. The Nones figure prominently in the changing Jewish landscape; the 2013 Pew Research Center survey of American Jewry, and its succeeding 2015 Portrait of American Orthodoxy, found that Jews fall into two main categories, those who say they are "Jews by religion," and those who say they are "Jews of no religion," but have a Jewish parent or were raised Jewish or consider themselves Jewish in some way and describe themselves as atheist, agnostic, or having no particular religion. Pew Research Center for Religion & Public Life, *A Portrait of American Orthodox Jews, A Further Analysis of the 2013 Survey of U.S. Jews*, (August 25, 2015).

Jewish knowledge and experience — and challenges or tests relationships in many, often unanticipated, ways. Yet each transformation is unique, proceeding at its own pace and progression, with a wide variety of approaches to help shepherd the newly Orthodox in their development.

Heilman, writing ten years ago, neatly identifies two broad categories in American Orthodoxy: the enclavists, who seek to create insular communities and separate themselves from the greater world, and the contrapuntalists, who strive to preserve their particular identity while functioning or participating in multiple worlds.[94] But within those two categories, there are today multiple gradations dependent on a particular theological orientation, rabbinic imperative, or communal convention, and many points of entry into Orthodoxy.

Ferziger, using his lens of deviance, adopts the more complex cultural grid developed by British anthropologist Mary Douglas, which lays out two dichotomies, isolates and individualists versus enclavists and hierarchists, to illustrate gradations within Orthodoxy. Isolates and enclavists assert the primacy of their worldview and withdraw from the secular world, as do Heilman's enclavists. Individualists and hierarchists, on the other hand, choose to live in the wider world, as do Heilman's contrapuntalists, and are more accepting of the gradations, or hierarchy, of belief and practice within Orthodoxy.[95]

Ferziger's bright line of "deviance," which marked clear boundaries between Heilman's enclavists and contrapuntists,[96] has gradually blurred in the past two decades, as Ferziger finds

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[94] Samuel C. Heilman, *Sliding to the Right: The Contest for the Future of American Orthodoxy* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2006), 4-5.

[95] Ferziger, *Beyond Sectarianism*,12.

[96] Jeffrey S. Gurock, the Yeshiva University historian whose work has limned the history of American Orthodoxy used the terms "devotee" and "deviant" to distinguish between those who hewed to punctilious Jewish practice, and those who did not, and, later, the more hard-edged terms "resisters" and "accommodators" to further delineate the difference in degree of observance among Orthodox Jews.

and my data show. Instead, there are more liminal boundaries that allow for a more expansive view of *kiruv,* the traditional term for outreach, or bringing Jews closer to observant belief and practice, moderating its preoccupation with strengthening belief, practice and allegiance among those already considered "Torah true", towards efforts to engage those beyond observant Orthodoxy's purview. Hence, a more accepting attitude towards those who hew to a lesser degree of observance, and a more welcoming and accessible attitude towards those who want to learn more, has developed in outreach efforts among the observant Orthodox.

Kiruv developed in America initially as a modern Orthodox response to assimilation and fears that Jews were immoderately mediating Orthodoxy's demanding strictures as they acculturated as Americans. The mid-twentieth century spawned a variety of "inreach" initiatives to shore up modern Orthodoxy and to retain its followers, and their children and grandchildren, with a renewed emphasis on Jewish day school education, youth programs, and campus activity.[97] Also, by the mid-century, the more observant flank of Orthodoxy responded almost simultaneously, from two very different perspectives. A small coterie of Eastern European rabbis who survived the Holocaust and emigrated to the United States in the 1930s and 1940s were intent on recreating in the new promised land the promise of Zion of old.[98] They professed a compelling desire to preserve traditional Eastern European Jewish life after the devastation of the

[97] Jack Wertheimer, in "The Outreach Revolution," *Commentary* 135, no. 4 (2013): 20-16, credits the modern Orthodox movement with incipient efforts at *kiruv* in the United States. Early programs were targeted at Jewish veterans returning from World War II and Jewish schoolchildren enrolled in public schools. By the mid-century, Torah U'mesorah was founded to encourage and support the founding of Orthodox day schools across the country with many students coming from non-observant or non-Orthodox backgrounds. Rabbi Moshe Weinberger, in his book *Jewish Outreach Halachic Perspectives* (Hoboken: KTAV, in association with AJOP, 1990), also explores early efforts at *kiruv,* including the "pioneering work" at Yeshiva University's Torah Leadership Seminars and the Orthodox Union's National Conference of Synagogue Youth. Benny Kraut, in his book *The Greening of American Judaism: Yavneh in the 1960s* (New York: Hebrew Union College Press, 2010), writes as both participant and observer of the Yavneh, Jewish Student Association, a student founded and led modern Orthodox organization on elite university campuses dedicated to helping modern Orthodox students live committed Orthodox lives within secular society. Today, such university outreach, by both modern and stringently observant Orthodox groups, has increased as the campuses have proven to be fertile ground. In the community where this study is located, one such initiative has been exceptionally successful in attracting students to stringent Orthodoxy and has spawned a study center, and more recently, a new congregation, to serve the young adults as they leave university enclaves and move into the larger world of work, marriage, and family.

[98] Sarna, *American Judaism*, 296-304.

Shoah through a revitalization of Orthodoxy, but they began to diverge in method and intent, specifically on the issue of *kiruv*. More than twenty-five Hasidic groups — most notably the Satmars and the Skevers — settled initially in Brooklyn and surrounding areas. Their leaders sought to create separate enclaves adhering to the values of the "Torah true" life, resisting acculturation and accommodation with little or no engagement with their non-observant or non-Jewish neighbors. A second group, this one led by a group of Lithuanian rabbis, including the charismatic Rabbi Aharon Kotler, embraced a similar vision, though with a more narrowly defined mission of creating Jewish study centers, *yeshivot*, in America to educate and train a new generation of rabbinic leaders, who could inculcate Old World Jewish values to sustain new centers of Jewish life.

A third, more open outreach approach, was embodied in the efforts of another Hasidic faction, the Lubavitchers, who eschewed the closed enclave model, favoring efforts to reach out and engage the less observant in Jewish life. Led by their compelling leader Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, who arrived in the United States in 1941, the same year as Kotler, the Lubavitchers sought to create a cadre of emissaries to carry their message across the world, with the hope that their outreach efforts would hasten redemption, or the coming of the messiah. Ferziger, studying the phenomenon of Orthodox *kiruv* in the twenty-first century, traces the more recent moderation of enclavist and isolationist sensibilities and the embrace of individualist and hierarchical ones — which heighten the importance of *kiruv* and broaden its boundaries — that beg comparison with the Lubavitcher model. In his book, *Beyond Sectarianism*, he compares the community *kollel* model, which grew from Kotler's original conception of closed study centers to a more open system of communal centers spread across the United States, with the Lubavitcher Chabad centers, which have proliferated today to more than 3000 around the world.[99]

[99] In an interview with the head of the community *Kollel* where this study is situated, he estimates that there are now about thirty such community *Kollels* in the United States, with an informal communication network among their leaders to share information on programming, fundraising, and other issues.

What is particularly notable over the past two decades is the continuing narrow inreach focus of the modern Orthodox and the broader outreach focus of the more stringently Orthodox. Ferziger attributes this to triumphalism, as observant Orthodoxy's appeal grows while its more modern counterpart's profile diminishes.[100] He points out that, in the mid-twentieth century, many were sounding the death knell for American Orthodoxy, casting it as the "dwindling and insignificant remnant of Eastern European Jewry" and suggesting Judaism's future was in the more progressive Conservative and Reform streams of Judaism. But the successors to Rabbis Schneerson and Kotler, persuaded that the threat to American Judaism was not extinction but rather assimilation and the diminution of Jewish identity, embraced *kiruv* as a central goal, evidencing "an enhanced concern and responsibility for other Jews who stand outside their own natural milieu."[101] Orthodoxy's numbers have increased many times over, precisely, asserts Ferziger, because of their less sectarian — or enclavist or isolationist — stance and openness to those who, in his terms, "fall short."[102] They also manifest an understanding that today's world is not nineteenth century Eastern Europe, but rather a pluralistic, individualist environment that requires an Orthodoxy that reflects its emergence from "voluntary, modern trends resulting from

[100] The 2013 Pew Research Religion & Public Life Project, *A Portrait of Jewish Americans*, attributed the younger average age and high fertility rate among the stringently Orthodox, as well as the decline in the rate of loss of retention among those identifying as Orthodox today, as reasons for Orthodoxy's stable 10 percent share in the American Jewish landscape, and predicted that the share of Orthodoxy in the Jewish population will grow. The study evidenced far greater attrition and diminished affiliation rate among America's more progressive streams of Judaism, provoking concern among its leaders.

The succeeding 2015 Pew Center Portrait of American Orthodox Jews found that 62 percent of U.S. Orthodox Jews identify as *haredi* (stringently observant) and 31 percent identify with the modern Orthodox movement. Of the adults who identify as Orthodox, 70 percent were raised Orthodox while 12 percent were raised Conservative and 5 percent were raised Reform. The women in this study are among those groups who are leaving the more progressive streams of Judaism for the more rigid Orthodox. Interestingly, the Pew study also evinced a reverse trend: 52 percent of those American Jews raised Orthodox have left Orthodoxy, a phenomenon that has more recently garnered the attention of researchers and inspired a number of mainstream memoirs of going OTD, off the *derekh,* or off the path of Orthodoxy. It has also engendered a resource and support organization, Footsteps, for those transitioning from observant Orthodoxy to a non- or less observant lifestyle. Still, as the 2013 study showed, the younger age and high fertility rates among the Orthodox continue to boost their numbers, as does a compelling attraction to the lifestyle as its appeal and numbers grow. This contributes to the "triumphalism" that Ferziger observes.

[101] Ferziger, *Beyond Sectarianism*, 11.

[102] Ferziger, *Beyond Sectarianism*, 13.

the interface of long-held traditions with the changing world of the last three centuries."[103] Even the most stringently observant rabbis interviewed for this study express an understanding that Orthodoxy, in order to be meaningful, must be more reflective of the world today. The rabbi who inspired Rena, Kara, Carrie and Hannah, professes a fidelity to "what was, not 50 years ago, not 100 years ago, but for the last 3000 years." Yet he goes on, "Having said that, there is absolutely no doubt that the way we are —some of the ways we do things today are different from the way our grandparents did them."[104]

The large Southwest city where this study is situated manifests Ferziger's dichotomies, and their moderation, in its variety of institutions and approaches that are dedicated to modeling, encouraging, and advancing observant Jewish life. The respondents in this study have taken full advantage of the range of available resources, typifying varying degrees of stringency, taking classes, attending events, participating in *Shabbos* or holiday celebrations, and enjoying home hospitality. However, as they progress from Benor's early interested or peripheral stages of BT transformation to the more committed communal or yeshiva/seminary ones, they align themselves with a particular congregation or community that most reflects their own spiritual or religious sensibilities.

Hasidic Chabad Lubavitch, a presence in the region for more than 40 years, beginning with one rabbi working out of a small ranch house in a residential neighborhood and now growing to encompass fourteen centers and more than a dozen rabbis, often serves as an accessible point of entry for those in the "interested" cohort of BTs, some of whom are simply in search of

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[103] Ferziger, *Beyond Sectarianism*, 3.

[104] The rabbi goes on to speak of the more liminal boundaries among Orthodoxy's many streams, describing the growth of such "mergers" that allow his synagogue, patently rooted in his Eastern European Lithuanian (or Litvish, as it is often called) sensibility, to be infused with the "fire" of the Hasids. "This is a non-Hasidic *shul* with a Hasidic reach to it," he says, "where more than 50 percent of the Torah messages that we give derive from Hasidic sources. Where the magic and the fire, we talked about before, comes from the Hasidic approach."

companionship[105] or the services Chabad provides.[106] It offers a wide variety of classes and programs, including a preschool, summer camp, and both youth and adult offerings. It has extended its impact through a keen assessment of communal needs, its founding rabbi confides, a vibrant volunteer program to serve the community's senior population, a youth program pairing kids with special needs with those without such limitations, and establishing an active presence on the university campuses. Doors are open to all, many programs free or provided with nominal charge, while the organization engages in continuous fundraising using a full panoply of methods, strategies, and tools to cover its costs. It has a prominent virtual presence as well: its interactive website, http://ww.chabad.org, is a veritable treasure trove of information on myriad Jewish subjects, from ritual practice to holidays, and from text study to Jewish values.

Using Ferziger's identifiers, the Chabad rabbi is hierarchal and individualist, open to a variety of ways of being Jewish and respectful of individual choices. He believes fully that showing Judaism's beauty, exposing people to its joy, and identifying and meeting needs are the ways to bring them closer to Jewish practice and belief. "Our doors are always open," says the rabbi. He eschews the term "*kiruv,*" or outreach, parsing the dynamic in more spiritual terms of bringing Jews closer to God. And while the women in this study gradually come to a heightened consciousness of divine presence and the fundamental role of God in Judaism's intricate system of laws, initial outreach programs and classes emphasize more accessible notions of Jewish peoplehood and communal belonging, rather than divine province and authority. As the data in

[105] Interviews with rabbis serving the community where this study is located note that loneliness, often a symptom of the anomie that modernity evokes, can be an impetus for those reaching out to synagogues or other religious institutions. The former *Kollel* director noted that often those engaging in one-on-one Torah study are sometimes impelled by the need to talk to somebody. "They're just feeling lonely," he says. They continue learning because "it's a way to continue having a friendship (with) a rabbi, which some people want, which some people are looking for."

[106] The Chabad Lubavitch vision to send emissaries throughout the world to light a Jewish spark sprang from its revered leader, the late Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, known as the Rebbe. Initiated in the mid-twentieth century in response to the growing assimilation and acculturation of Jews, it is the most far-reaching Jewish outreach movement in the world. The original Chabad rabbi in the city where this study takes place was sent there by the Rebbe to engage in *kiruv* and grow the Jewish community, as the local rabbi related in an interview for this study.

this study show, such understandings, and such approaches, develop over time, as individuals progress in their spiritual transformation and acquire facility with both ritual practice and the necessary language to express divine essence.[107]

The data from my study attest to Chabad's openness and appeal. Several of the subjects recall attending programs or classes sponsored by Chabad early in their transformation, finding them accessible and welcoming. Particularly for women like Lara, unsure of herself and self-conscious, the large group settings allowed her the anonymity she desired; she could slip in and out inconspicuously with little, if any, interchange with others. The events attracted large crowds — the rabbis often invite the entire community (which I presume is their donor database) and often there is no charge for the event, with refreshments included.

The crowd is decidedly diverse, including some who appear to be observant Orthodox, dressed modestly with heads covered, and others who appear to be more secular, the women in slacks or short skirts, and the men in more casual garb. A monthly women's Torah study, led by two of the rabbis' wives and held in a private home, attracts a group of women spanning a variety of ages and backgrounds. The small group setting was intimate, with a mostly new group each

[107] Sociolinguist Benor, in her book *Becoming Frum*, delves into language development and its role in religious transformation — including heightening spiritual quiddity — among those new to stringently observant Orthodox. She points out that language is key to BT transformation, including the Hebrew and Aramaic of Jewish study and prayer and the colloquial Yiddish of Eastern Europe spoken by ancestors of Jews from that region, as well as the modern Hebrew spoken in Israel. However, her study evinces two key findings on the use of "loan words," distinctive terms borrowed from these languages that connote belonging: first, BTs aspire to increasing familiarity and use of loan words as a mark of authenticity, and, second, rabbis and teachers use less "loan words" with groups of BTs than they use with those who are more knowledgeable, seeking to enhance comfort and understanding. Benor compared the use of loan words in two lectures given by the same rabbi and video taped by a New York-based Orthodox organization that produces informational videos. The first lecture is geared towards those new to Orthodoxy; the second is geared towards those with more knowledge and linguistic facility. The lecture for those new to Orthodoxy used only thirteen Hebrew or Yiddish words, while the one for those knowledgeable about Orthodoxy used forty-seven. Benor, *Becoming Frum*, 152-153. Interviews for this study, with rabbis conversant with both the holy and colloquial languages of stringently observant Orthodoxy, evinced a tendency to use English rather than Hebrew or Yiddish terms as a means of assuring my understanding and of assuring that their message would be more universally understood.

Chapter Three, (Em)bodying, and Chapter Four, Believing, draw on Benor and others in more fully exploring the development of awareness of divine presence and ways to actualize it. They also explore the growing understanding, and acceptance of, the primacy of God in Jewish belief and thought.

month, including college students, older, retired women, and a few young married women with little ones. The study portion was usually elementary, keyed to the cycle of Jewish holidays or the time of the year, with ample time for easy conversation over coffee and cake. The intimate location in a rabbi's home, though, might have been off-putting for women, like Lara, who sought the anonymity that large gatherings and public venues provide.[108]

Another local rabbi, who is also Hasidic but not aligned with the Chabad movement, leads an independent Orthodox Sephardic congregation that also reflects Ferziger's more open identifiers. This congregation, too, offers a full spectrum of programs to its growing congregation of about 500 families, many with young children at home. *Simchat Torah* barbecues that attract hundreds, *Purim* carnivals, weekly themed *Shabbat* dinners, a popular women's book club, lectures on everything from the afterlife to ritual purity, and an active online presence, engage a growing swath of the community. I also attended a number of these events in the course of my fieldwork. Magnetic, energetic, and engaging, the rabbi says that he sees himself as a facilitator, a matchmaker, who brings people closer to each other[109] and to God. He sees the potential for

[108] While Chabad "outreach" events are characterized by openness, the welcome by the community and ultimate "acceptance" of new members may be predicated on their ultimate acceptance of its strictures of ritual and practice. Dina, a Jew by choice, who sought an Orthodox conversion under the guidance of another Chabad rabbi in the community, found the process to be exceedingly rigorous and the rabbi exceptionally demanding. She spent a full year studying the laws of *kashrut* before the rabbi *kashered* her kitchen. "He quizzed me on everything," she recollects. "He had to test me on everything."

She spent another two years traveling to a larger city in the region to study for conversion with a *beit din* there. Perhaps because Dina was a convert, not born and raised Jewish, the rabbi held her to a higher standard than those for BT transformation. Traditional rabbinic sources warn of the possibility of converts, with lesser Jewish knowledge, understanding and experience, undermining or perverting normative practice.

However, for others in this study, Jews by birth who are becoming BTs, there is a preoccupation about unduly high expectations that might preclude their acceptance or assimilation into stringently observant communities. As Benor has noted, there is a continuum of BT transformation from interested, to peripheral, to communal, to yeshiva/seminary, with corresponding expectations. Such "expectations," whether real or imagined, led Hannah to hesitate before moving into an observant neighborhood, and, Aileen, to equivocate about whether she and her husband would ever make such a move. Neither Hannah's nor Aileen's experiences were within Chabad Lubavitch, but rather in stringently Orthodox communities that were spawned by the community *Kollel*. This subject is more thoroughly limned in Chapter Four, Belonging.

[109] This rabbi also clearly identified an overwhelming loneliness that plagues society today, caused in part, he suggests, by the breakdown of the family, and assuaged by the sense of belonging that active Jewish involvement can provide. He says that this brings many prospective congregants to his doors. Annie, one of the women in this study, is one of them.

personal growth as unlimited, and his job to help his congregants realize it. The majority of his congregants are not Sabbath-observant, but they are open to his gentle prodding to consider taking on additional obligations, one at a time.

"You can never be complete," he says. "You are always growing."

Annie and Dina are two of his congregants. Dina and her husband are original members, their elder son's bar mitzvah almost a decade ago the first at which the rabbi officiated since arriving in the community. The couple has been active congregants and significant financial supporters, helping the fledgling congregation move to a new home, within walking distance to theirs, early in its existence. Dina currently serves on the congregation's board of directors. She appreciates the rabbi's openness, and his acceptance of his congregants at whatever level of observance they choose. She and her family are one of a very small number of families who are Sabbath-observant, and do not drive on the Sabbath. Annie is not, or not yet, Sabbath-observant and drives to synagogue on Saturdays. Annie lauds the rabbi's approach, finding it not only welcoming, but also inspiring. She has embraced his mantra to take on "one *mitzvah* at a time," and assuming new obligations thoughtfully, at her own pace, and in her own way. "The rabbi and his wife have said many, many times to people who are just starting to become aware of Orthodox Judaism, "don't rush the process, take it slow. You don't have to do everything all at once. Pick and choose." So Annie is now taking on the most rudimentary requirements of *kashrut,* attending Sabbath services regularly, and going to the rabbi's classes. "I can take what I want, when I want it, and where I want it," she says of the newfound religious obligations. "It's baby steps." Such an approach, particularly for women who are coming to stringently observant Orthodoxy later in life, is appealing. It is more congruent with their age, maturity, life course positionality, and self-confidence to make their own choices and guide their own religious transformation, one *mitzvah* at a time.

The local community *Kollel*, aligned with the more stringent observance of the national rabbinic organization, Agudath Israel[110] and the educational programming of Aish HaTorah[111] was founded fourteen years ago, an outgrowth of a then just burgeoning growth spurt of the observant Orthodox community. It is emblematic now of the trend Ferziger discerns, a softening of the strict sectarianism of its predecessors and an openness to those who are not, or not yet, fully observant. Spurred by a charismatic congregational rabbi who started a number of his congregants on the path to heightened observance, it was funded initially by a handful of families who engaged four rabbis and their wives to create a community learning center. The *kollel* model is based on the premise of inspiring greater learning, and interest in growing observance, through the presence of a core group of observant families living and learning in the community. The rabbis study with each other during the day, then provide learning opportunities for interested community members in the evenings or on the weekends. Their wives take on a variety of roles, serving as role models and mentors for those new to Orthodoxy, with some later taking on more formalized educational or administrative responsibilities.[112]

The Aish HaTorah website, http://www.aish.com, rivals Chabad as another superior source of information on Jewish practice and belief. Such online resources provide ready sources

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[110] Agudath Israel of America — its predecessor, Agudath Israel, founded in Kotowicz, Poland in 1913 — was founded in New York in 1922 to serve as Orthodox Judaism's umbrella organization, according to its website, http://agudathisrael.org/about. Its members reflect a stringently observant Orthodoxy. According to Jonathan Sarna in his book, *American Judaism*, previously cited, Agudath Israel of America was founded in response to the lessening levels of observance of American Jews, and the lessening stringency of its rabbinate; its founding, in opposition to the Orthodox Union (an organization of less stringently Orthodox rabbis), was to "re-invigorate the authority of European-trained rabbis" and promote a more "exclusive definition of Orthodoxy," 191.

[111] Aish Ha Torah was founded in Israel by Rabbi Noah Weinberg in 1974 to reach out to young Jews traveling in Israel and introduce them to observant Orthodoxy. It has since grown to a global network of *yeshivot*, or learning centers, some of which have become congregations, and a multitude of innovative programs, with a vibrant web presence that attracts thousands of users daily.

[112] Adam S. Ferziger, *The Emergence of the Community Kollel: A New Model for Addressing Assimilation* The Rapport Center for Assimilation Research and Strengthening Jewish Vitality (Bar Ilan University - Faculty of Jewish Studies, 2006). Ferziger traces the development of the community *kollel* in the United States since the 1970s to the present, exploring a variety of aspects of the model including objective, mission, training and the impact the *kollel* has on the community in terms of development of additional Jewish institutions.

of information for the women in this study. The anonymity of the web is appealing, particularly for those just beginning to explore observant Orthodoxy, and its accessibility from anywhere, any time, makes it immeasurably valuable to those who are self-conscious about their incipient interest, allowing privacy and confidentiality. Another resource for several of the women in the study, suggested by the *Kollel*, is the Partners in Torah, a national program that connects individuals exploring stringently observant Orthodoxy with those already observant for weekly one-on-one study sessions by phone. Again, distance learning has a heightened appeal for those who prefer to learn in the privacy of their own homes, rather than face-to-face or in a group setting. Both Rena and Carrie laud their partners as significant forces in their transformation.

As the *kollel* has grown, adding more rabbis and programming, and as its initial leadership has been succeeded by a new cadre, it is redefining its role and reconstituting its mission. Its annual fundraiser — which in past years had featured more serious speakers on weighty religious subjects — has become a trivia night, with teams of supporters competing against each other, testing their knowledge of arcane minutia from a broad swath of popular culture. Attendees at last year's event, The Q, were pleasantly surprised by the rabbis' depth of knowledge of sports, movies, TV shows, music and other cultural expressions, dispelling notions that they had little, if any, exposure to secular culture.

The women's division has expanded its reach, engaging women in small groups to learn in local coffee shops where they can get to know each other in comfortable, non-threatening settings. Its director learns one-on-one with more than two-dozen women, meeting in their homes or other venues that they choose. Programs geared to a larger audience often are held in local hotels or at the non-denominational Jewish Community Center or community day school.[113] It is a

[113] Gender separation extends to one-on-one or small group study, with the women's only programming meeting a specific need in the community for opportunities for serious Jewish study among women. However, male rabbis and teachers do teach or speak in larger women-only or mixed group settings, a moderation of gender separation practice that reflects a more recent approach to *kiruv.*

sponsor of the annual women's challah bake, which attracts close to one thousand women, pairing an Orthodox leader and a non-Orthodox leader to headline the program.[114] Key to the women's department's success, says its director, is providing good information, creating close relationships among the women, and connecting them with the community.

The current *Kollel* director, who describes his mission in life as learning Torah and teaching others, sees his job as bringing those he reaches closer to Torah values. He says his work is "creating opportunities for people to learn about Torah Judaism" and that the pace and progression of that learning is up to the learner. "Our mission is not to make people observant," he says, "our mission is to provide them with opportunities to learn about Torah."

As data in this study shows, human connections and communal belonging are critical components in the transformation process. Lara speaks of the close relationship she has forged with the *Kollel* women's director, now considered both a teacher and a friend. Sarah, the retired Jewish educator, also names the women's director as her mentor, and speaks of the kindness of the community and its acceptance, making her feel both welcome and valued. She has become active with the fledgling Orthodox girls' high school, working tirelessly to help raise funds and plan events, and a member of one of the more stringently Orthodox congregations that grew from the *kollel.* Rena, who left the corporate world to stay home with her children and pursue a new career as a freelance writer, tells of the keen perception of the former *Kollel* director when he asked her to help develop a new publication for the group. "He matched the job with my interests," she says, incredulously, even now, and grateful for his acute sensitivity to her needs then.

[114] Several of the women in this study attended the challah bake and participated in its following Shabbaton, the Shabbos Project. Hannah calls this bake one of three seminal experiences in her progression so far, the others being the women's trip to Israel and her husband's "pushing" towards taking on more stringent observance. "The trifecta," she says.

The *Kollel's* work in the community has spawned a more stringently Orthodox Jewish day school which now competes with the more modern Orthodox day school founded more than fifty years ago. It has also spawned a religious girls' high school and a boys' yeshiva, as well as two observant Orthodox congregation,. a new *mikvah*, or ritual bath, and a new *eruv, or* boundary where Sabbath proscriptions for carrying do not apply. All of these reflect the growing presence and strength of a more stringently Orthodox perspective. The rabbi for one of the newest congregations, located in a suburban enclave with a nascent observant population, originally came to the community as a *kollel* rabbi, but responded to the needs of those living in the outlying area and founded the congregation ten years ago. A powerful presence, and a compelling speaker, he has grown a small congregation, which began with not even a *minyan* of ten men to one that now boasts ninety families that embrace his fiery commitment to observant Orthodoxy. He boasts that more than half of his congregants are now Sabbath-observant, and that those who are not, understand fully, and are exceedingly respectful of, the standards he exemplifies in his own punctilious practice.

"We're open," he says of his congregation, which has been a haven for BTs, many of them older and four of who are subjects in this study. "But when you enter these walls, this is an embassy of Torah. And you behave in this sovereign land like that embassy of Torah." While his vision of "Torah true" Judaism hews more closely to Ferziger's sectarian model, his charismatic approach softens its austerity and attracts followers with its compelling zeal.

Rena and her husband Chad were original members of this congregation, her husband and the rabbi being the first two men of the requisite ten for Orthodox men to pray together. She recalls her husband walking three miles each way to the synagogue, even in inclement weather, before they moved to a home closer to their place of worship. The rabbi's wife became one of Rena's confidantes and mentors. Kara and her husband also found a home in the congregation, first introduced to the rabbi, and encouraged to join, by old friends who had become Orthodox. Kara says she was more interested in trying out the congregation than her husband. "He said, 'it's great if you want to do that,'" she recalls, "'you can go, but I'm not interested.'"

Her husband eventually bonded with the rabbi, connecting over baseball. The rabbi invited him to play on the *shul* softball team, shattering stereotypes. Kara says her husband got to know the rabbi as a person while playing on the team. “He was like [the rabbi] is kind of normal. He’s not so imposing.”

Now the family is an active member of the congregation, having *kashered* their home and moved within walking distance of the synagogue. Kara’s husband attends *minyan* daily and fully shares his wife’s commitment to becoming more stringently observant Jews. Carrie and her husband have followed a similar pattern, attracted by the rabbi’s imposing presence, and Hannah and her husband are considering joining the congregation.

The Jewish community has other institutions that follow a less stringent approach, including a modern Orthodox congregation that has been in existence since the 1960s and an adult Jewish learning program founded by a bright, young, energizing open Orthodox rabbi, who was succeeded by an equally magnetic and progressive rabbinic leader. The old-line, modern Orthodox congregation is more moderate in its approach than *Kollel*-affiliated congregations, while still hewing to the traditional Orthodox ritual practice of the umbrella Orthodox Union. It has a variety of classes and programs that seek to enrich the knowledge and understanding of its members and others who are interested in learning, including a men’s *Daf Yomi* group, studying the Talmud, a monthly men’s night out, Scotch and Cigars, open to the community, and a popular monthly book club for both men and women. The younger rabbi on staff provides a series of classes throughout the year geared to preparing for Jewish holidays, and his wife has been the spark behind a number of community wide programs, including an annual kosher fair. Still, in conversations with its rabbis and members, there is a sense that the congregation remains committed to preserving its membership and heightening their level of belief and practice, and less so to reaching out to engage a larger segment of the community. None of the women in this study affiliate with this congregation, and yet most are familiar with or know its leaders and often

participate in its community programming, even if its spiritual orientation is not reflective of their own.

The more progressive, independent adult learning program, which provides another avenue for reaching out, offers an extensive range of speakers and learning opportunities across the Jewish denominational spectrum on a wide range of pertinent topics, attracting an audience of mostly serious, older learners. Its current director is committed to the tenets of open Orthodoxy, as envisioned by its founder, Rabbi Avi Weiss, and seeks to be pluralistic in the array of programs he provides, the audiences they attract, and the discussions they engender. His approach to outreach is similarly broad. “The way I think of outreach is to further people along their unique mission and to just give them the wisdom and tools and inspiration to grow,” he says. Eschewing denominational identifiers, he says that he hopes to inspire “intentional decisions” about Judaism among those he reaches. His programming attracts a variety of participants, more from the modern Orthodox community than those from the more stringently observant. However, modern Orthodox rabbis and Chabad rabbis have served as speakers in panel discussions that probe a variety of Jewish issues.

Interestingly, in my fieldwork in this community, each of the rabbis interviewed preferred not to use the Hebrew term “*kiruv,*” translated into English as “outreach”, and were similarly disaffected with the use of the term *ba’alei teshuvah.* The Chabad rabbis speak in terms of personal growth, while the *Kollel* rabbis speak of enhancing commitment and obligation. The Chabad rabbis are clear in their distaste for the term BT, seeing its translation as “masters of return,” as both inherently elitist and judgmental — who is closer to God?, asks one — and arrogant. The Sephardic rabbi bridles, “We are never masters or owners.” He goes on to characterize *kiruv* as an ongoing endeavor. “We are all always aspiring to do more,” he says, noting that even rabbis are called students of wisdom. “We are always students.”

Conversations, both formal and informal, with a broad spectrum of rabbinic leadership, evidenced the inherent tension for many between opening doors and inviting in those who want to learn while maintaining their personal standards for belief and practice.

"There's a tremendous tug of war between openness and standard bearing," says the *Kollel* turned congregational rabbi. "It is the greatest challenge." He criticizes those outreach programs that romanticize observant Jewish life, lauding its rewards without clearly delineating its obligations. Hannah echoes the rabbi's criticism, telling of "trying Chabad" and finding its more accepting and less demanding approach as "soft sell." Dina also cautions against such rosy-hued notions of observant life. "People think it is the answer for everything, and it's not," she says with characteristic bluntness. "It's hard." Yet, the rabbis' embrace of the challenge to balance openness with rigor further reinforces Ferziger's perception of the softening of attitudes toward those of lesser or non-observance and a diminution of the notion of deviance or falling short and their deepening commitment to *kiruv*. Such a paradigm shift is emblematic of a national change in attitude among a host of leaders engaged in *kiruv*.[115]

The process of becoming, which began with those faint stirrings of loss and precipitated a search to find what has been missing, gradually is materialized in memories and objects that ground the BTs. It is furthered with both self-directed and experiential learning and the steady guidance and support of teachers, rabbis, and community members, who provide knowledge and opportunities for engagement.[116] It is informed as much by progression and pace as by deeply personal wants and needs — a yearning to connect with the past, a desire to invest the present

[115] A conversation among fifteen *kiruv* professionals that appears in the Fall 2012 issue of the Orthodox journal *K'lal Perspectives* highlights this and other underlying issues of concern in the enhanced outreach efforts in stringent American Orthodoxy. Of particular note, on the issue of the inherent tension for stringently observant *kiruv* professionals and their less observant followers, Rabbi Sholom Kamenetsky, Rosh Yeshiva of the Talmudical Yeshiva of Philadelphia, cautions *kiruv* professionals to uphold Jewish law, but emphasizes that "no one should go into *kiruv* imagining that he will always be able to preserve 'West Point' standards in the field." Thus, Kamenetsky observes that those engaged in *kiruv* will often "find (themselves) engaged in many types of activities (they) never imagined doing in the *yeshiva* or *kollel*."

[116] The impact of family, community, teachers, rabbis, and mentors will be fully explored in Chapter Five, Belonging.

with renewed meaning and purpose, a longing for order and structure, and an aspiration to access the ineffable, often sensed before it is known.

But the becoming is only fully realized as BTs not only learn to, but also do, take on the performative acts that are vested with a compelling spiritual valence they can embody.

Or as Carrie reflects on her incipient path to becoming observant Orthodox, which began with taking classes, reading, and studying.

“If you are really learning something, and believing it, you start doing it.”

CHAPTER THREE: (EM)BODYING, BEHAVING

More than 800 women crowd the vast space, filled wall-to-wall with rows and rows of plastic-covered folding tables placed end to end to accommodate the throng. They excitedly greet each other, then find a place, usually with a gaggle of friends, or perhaps a sister or daughter or granddaughter, at one of the spots where a mixing bowl, spoon, disposable gloves and several plastic bags holding the requisite flour, salt and sugar are arrayed in front of them. They've been provided all the ingredients to make challah, the traditional Jewish braided bread, and they are here to learn how.

The annual Challah Bake[117] attracts women from across the community, observant or not, affiliated or not, veteran bakers and first timers. It has been staged as a part of the *Shabbos* Project,[118] a worldwide effort to introduce Sabbath observance to the non- or less observant, and it has been an effective program to engage women and provide both useful information and hands-on experience, two key elements of educating those less familiar with Jewish observance.[119]

[117] The Challah Bake was initiated by a group of stringently Orthodox BTs who formed a core committee that grew through conscious efforts to engage women and organizations in its planning and execution from a broad swath of Jewish life. Its strategic identification as a communal event, open and welcoming to all, is reflective of a newer approach in *kiruv*, as Ferziger finds, which seeks to cast a wider, and less intimidating, net in the larger community, seeking to enhance Jewish identity and engagement, but not necessarily to promote an observant lifestyle.

[118] "The Shabbat Project," as described on the Shabbos Project website, www.theshabbosproject.org/en/about, "is a global, grassroots movement that brings Jews from across the world together around our shared heritage of Shabbat. The initiative was introduced in South Africa in 2013 to astonishing effect, and in the days that followed, the Jewish world heard, and was inspired by, how the majority of the community kept Shabbat in full, and how Jews were brought together in unprecedented ways." The community where this study is located participated in the worldwide effort to spread *Shabbos*-observance for the past two years. Shabbos Project 2018 is set for October 27-28.

[119] The Challah Bake has become an annual community event, attracting similar crowds over the three years it has been existence in this community. Its reach is broad, engaging a variety of Jewish organizations as partners and attracting women across a wide spectrum of age, stage of life, Jewish background, and geographic area. I attended the first Challah Bake in 2015 as part of my fieldwork.

A pair of leaders, carefully selected to reflect the diversity of the group and the event's openness to all,[120] offer teachings on the meaning of the ritual, both materially and spiritually, and then step-by-step instructions to guide the group in measuring, mixing, kneading and braiding. Challah helpers at each table circulate to answer questions and help the uninitiated, as they combine the ingredients, work the dough with their hands, repeatedly pressing and folding, and then use their sticky fingers to roll it out into strands and braid into a consummate whole.

By evening's end, as each loaf is safely nestled in a disposable pan, ready to go home for baking, scenting kitchens with its warm essence, the spirits in the room are palpably rising just like the yeasty dough that fills the pans and becomes the toothsome loaves that will be proudly displayed on their Sabbath tables and hungrily gobbled up.

Such embodied acts — the work of our hands, as Aileen calls them — are laden with meaning, transforming simple flour, water, and salt into the bread that has sustained Jews, physically and spiritually, for millennia. The braided strands span generations, evoking memories, real or imagined,[121] of *yiddishe mamas* toiling in their kitchens, their fingers methodically kneading the dough, wresting the mix into loaves that bring families together as much to fill their stomachs as to feed their souls.[122] Their actions transcend time and space, imbuing women

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[120] Each of the challah leaders is chosen to represent a segment of the community and avoid a semblance of denominational sponsorship. In past years, the strategy has led to a pairing of a stringently observant woman, one of the *rebbetizins*, or rabbis' wives, from the Orthodox community, and a representative from the non-Orthodox community: the first year a woman cantor from a large Reform congregation and, the second year, a woman rabbi, who received Conservative ordination from a non-denominational, egalitarian congregation. Each presents an overview of the ritual of challah baking reflective of her own religious perspective. The pairing of Orthodox and non-Orthodox leaders is innovative, as many stringently Orthodox leaders would not participate in communal programs with leaders from the non-Orthodox community, citing a concern that collaboration would suggest agreement with their more liberal views.

[121] Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001). Boym explores the phenomenon of nostalgia, which derives from the Greek, *nostos*, to return home, and *algos*, pain, in remembering the past. She suggests that home that has been lost or displaced can be deliberately re-imagined. Kerwin Lee Klein, "On Emergence of Memory in Historical Discourse," *Representations* 69 (Winter 2000): 137, describes nostalgic memories as a "re-enchantment" of the past.

[122] Jenna Weissman Joselit, *The Wonders of America: Reinventing American Jewish Culture 1880-1950* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1994). Joselit describes the phenomenon of "kitchen Judaism" and its propensity to bring families together and preserve a sense of Jewish identity as they strove to construct identities that were both American and Jewish.

present, crowded into a noisy gymnasium, its floor dusted with flour, with memories of the past, auguring a future that circles back as it lurches forward and even upward as it leavens divine presence. For as the repetitive kneading activates the yeast and causes the bread to rise, so the sages teach, and the challah leaders share: the repetitive actions animate their prayers and lift them up to the heavens.

Meaningful experiences that inspire or deepen religious transformation reside in the body's very corporality and its mind's capacity. These embodied acts have both a visceral essence and an emotional valence that infuse them with a compelling resonance. They animate religious experience through acts and practices that make religion both real, and accessible, especially, I contend, to those new to religious belief and practice, by locating that practice within their material world. As Robert A. Orsi writes, when arguing for the primacy of such everyday acts as a critical dimension of lived religion, religion understood from within the personal milieu in which individuals practice or follow it, "The material world is not the inert background to cultural practice; it is the essential medium."[123] And the body, as both agent and object in that world, also acts and is acted upon through embodied experience. David Morgan, writing more recently on the interplay between embodiment and material culture, explores the variety of ways "in which religions work upon the body, making it the medium for the sacred to happen viscerally and materially."[124] He underlines embodiment's role in shaping, transforming and projecting the body within its material and cultural environment.[125]

So it is that becoming more observant turns on such performative or embodied acts, for some, as a beginning, a fleeting exposure to the enduring Sabbath rituals, an enjoyable evening out, but right now, nothing more; for others, a deeper connection to the meaning of such acts in

[123] Robert A. Orsi, *The Madonna of 115th Street* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), xxi.

[124] David Morgan, "Material Culture and Embodiment in American Religion," in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Religion: Religion in America* (Oxford University Press, March 2015), 23.

[125] Morgan, "Material Culture," 7-8.

constructing a traditional Jewish self. Thus, the challah bake is emblematic of the newer turn in *kiruv*, or outreach, as Ferziger has found and this study corroborates, to expose wide swaths of the community to the richness of Jewish life by doing Jewish things — making challah, keeping kosher, lighting candles, dressing modestly, or regulating desire — often simply enhancing appreciation, but, in some cases, awakening an incipient desire to learn and do more and connect more fully with the enduring Jewish story through such embodiment.

This chapter elucidates the potency of embodied acts and behaviors in informing BT identity. It shows how such material acts and behaviors inspire a visceral response that animates awareness of spiritual presence. It shows how such an awareness is manifest across time and space, powerfully connecting BTs to generations past and future. It argues that memory is a conduit, those remembered acts the "material repositories" that impel the subjects in this study to learn, do and understand more. It illuminates how they consciously choose practices and behaviors, a gradual accretion of acts that inform how they behave publicly and privately, regulating dress, food, sexual desire, Shabbos and holiday observance, and life cycle events. It manifests a compelling sense of personal responsibility for spiritual development and the acts and behaviors that inform it.

Making and Marking

And so it is that doing becomes being, and that embodied acts invest identity with both a material and spiritual quiddity that works at making us who we are. Davidman, writing more recently about those who have moved from more stringently observant to less so, makes a clear connection between embodied acts and identity construction. "… [B]odily practices are not only visible signs of an interior identity," she writes, "they actually create one … (so) the very performance of (embodied) rituals constructs identity."[126] And Benor, writing of the weight of such

[126] Lynn Davidman, *Becoming Unorthodox* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 212.

practice on BT transformation, [127] also notes the primacy of acts over beliefs in the process in inscribing identity and literally incorporating it.

"Religious and cultural practice may take precedence over full acceptance of the underlying system of belief," she writes. "Newcomers may take on religious laws and cultural practices before they fully accept the theology."[128]

In this study, rabbis who are involved in *kiruv*, or outreach, to those attracted to observant Orthodoxy consistently assert that it is doing that precedes believing, and that it is the constancy of ritual and performative acts that inscribes identity and its embodiment. "After the actions, the heart follows," suggests one rabbi, drawing on a teaching from Maimonides.[129] "Doing awakens the heart," he says. "At the end of the day we are defined by our actions." He echoes a local Chabad rabbi who encourages those interested in learning more about Judaism to take on even one new ritual act. "Even one *mitzvah* is better than none," he says, suggesting that each additional ritual obligation brings a person closer to God.

But it is the doing that comes first.

This is replicated in studies of teaching and learning in other religious traditions, and in other instances of religious change, where experiential encounters are prime factors in facilitating change. Juliette Galonnier and Diego de los Rios, writing about pedagogies in conversion to Islam and Christianity, find a similar emphasis on ritual performance and bodily acts as key in teaching approaches and a clear predilection among those seeking to construct a new religious identity for acquiring "know-how" before "know-what," or becoming proficient in practice before

[127] Benor calls on Pierre Bourdieu's description of such practices as "cultural capital," which exists in three states: embodied, objectified, and institutionalized. It includes bodily practices, such as dress, objects, such as books or religious texts, and engagement with institutions, such as learning centers or *shuls.*

[128] Benor, *Becoming Frum*, 79.

[129] Maimonides, Rabbi Moses ben Maimon, also known as the Rambam, is a medieval Sephardic Jewish philosopher who became one of the most prolific and revered scholars of the Middle Ages.

becoming accepting of belief.[130] My research, while studying religious transformation, not conversion, evidences a similar sequence in learning behaviors, with a propensity to master religious practice preceding the proclivity to access its deeper spiritual significance. However, in contrast to the previous work of Davidman, Kaufman, and Benor, the women in this study also articulate a profound desire for the "know-why," as I call it. They profess an overwhelming need for understanding the intellectual rationale for particular beliefs and practices that validates their choice to become more ritually observant and propels that choice forward.

Ava, who was raised in a traditional, Sabbath- and kosher-observant home, speaks of her frustration growing up with the lack of explication and constancy in following Jewish law. "When I was growing up, there were rules. But there was no reason for the rules, and there was no consistency," she says of her parents' home, where her father was the arbiter of observance and her mother operated with little, if any, learning, save the "kitchen" knowledge she had grown up with.[131] Consistency of ritual and practice confers on it a normative status, as the data in this study show, and lends it a compelling authenticity, which the subjects in this study seek. Ava suggests that her father might not have known the more detailed rules of observance as they were not transmitted — "lost in translation," is how she puts it — and her mother had not been raised with much Jewish background. "She didn't know," Ava says of her mother's efforts to keep a kosher home. "Nobody taught her." As Ava grew older, and began taking on more stringent observance, she felt compelled to seek "an explanation" for those religious obligations. "It has to make sense to me," she says.

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[130] Juliette Galonnier and Diego de los Rios, "Teaching and Learning to Be Religious: Pedagogies of Conversion to Islam and Christianity*," Sociology of Religion* 77, no. 1 (2016) (Oxford University Press on behalf of the Sociology of Religion, 2015): 64.

[131] Heilman, *Sliding to the Right,* 136. Heilman uses the term "recipe" knowledge, which I have broadened to "kitchen" knowledge, to refer to the "taken for granted information needed to live everyday life." He distinguishes everyday knowledge from textual knowledge, the other determinant for observant Jewish life among mid-twentieth century American Orthodox Jews. Heilman borrowed the colorful term from Alfred Schutz, the late nineteenth century Austrian sociologist and phenomenologist. It appears in Schutz's *Collected Papers*, vol. 2, *Studies in Social Theory,* ed. Arvid Brodersen (The Hague: Martinus Hijhoff, 1971), 300.

Hannah, who is experimenting with a more religious lifestyle, expresses a similar frustration with her mother's lack of Jewish knowledge and her own desire to learn more. "I grew up with a role model," she says of her mother. "She kept kosher, she lit candles, but she didn't understand why she did any of these things." Hannah, who has been gradually increasing her level of observance along with her husband and school-age daughter, is approaching the phenomenon of becoming observant Orthodox as an experiment, collecting data and analyzing it to find its underlying principles. "I need an intellectual reason for doing things," she says. "If you're gonna make choices, there has to be a reason for them." Others in my cohort echo a similar need for rational explanation of *halachic* obligations as predicate for their acceptance.[132] Carrie expresses a need for "clarity." Sarah speaks of the appeal of Orthodoxy in its emphasis on "doing" and "knowing the laws and following them." Such a reasoned approach, I posit, is reflective of their maturity and the wealth of personal experience they bring to religious transformation, which includes the degree of their prior exposure to observant belief and practice. Still, I hold the primacy of performative acts and embodied experience in inspiring such change, with its rational explanation, gleaned from Jewish text and its interpretative authority, only further girding its impact. The embrace of divine authority usually comes later, but gradually develops from these incipient experiences.

The Challah Bake at the local Jewish Community Center, a non-denominational communal space, becomes a site for identity construction, as embodied actions are mapped on Zerubavel's temporal framework. Such a phenomenon calls on religious theorists from Rudolf Otto,[133] to Mircea Eliade,[134] to the more contemporary Thomas Tweed[135] and Jonathan Z.

[132] A rational or intellectual explanation is often a justification for an action, such as the reason why soup can't be reheated on the Sabbath or cereal boxes can't be opened, both acts, one lighting a fire, the other making a vessel, a container, proscribed by the laws of the Sabbath prohibiting work. For some subjects in this study, with little prior knowledge of Jewish law, reading the literal words in the text satisfies their desire for "clarity."

[133] Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1958).

Smith,[136] to explain how such an ordinary place can be vested with spiritual significance. Otto writes of the duality of human experience constructed of sacred and profane worlds; Eliade theorizes on special places where holiness resides, where his "axis mundi" is pitched into the ground as a pole connecting heaven and earth, transforming the *terra firma* from chaos to order. But it is Smith who observes that it is what happens there that matters: action sacralizes a place, and acts make it holy. Physical location is incidental or accidental, he posits, dispelling Eliade's rumination on the wanderings of an ancient people in search of a spiritual vortex. Instead he locates such a concentration of divine energy firmly in its "making" rather than its "marking,"[137] writing perceptively that it is human beings that "bring place into being."[138]

Riv-Ellen Prell, writing about contemporary changes in ritual practice that is sourced in Jewish text and embedded in Jewish memory, recognizes the enduring power of those acts that are in the "making." "While Jewish texts and a body of Jewish laws may provide the script for ritual actions, the lived experience lies in the drama of it, the actual performances that engage actors in culturally rich and distinctive ways of shaping their lives according to the sacred calendar."[139]

E.M. Broner, writing about memories of her youth that bring place into being, poignantly remembers her mother and grandmothers lighting the *Shabbos* candles. "Each had her own candlesticks," she writes, "in my grandmother's case, from Russia. The tabletop would be flickering with flame. The women closed their eyes with the traditional prayer, then made three

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[134] Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane* (New York: Harcourt, 1957).

[135] Thomas Tweed, *Crossing and Dwelling* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008).

[136] Jonathan Z. Smith, *To Take Place: Toward Theory in Ritual* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

[137] Smith, *To Take Place*, 18.

[138] Smith, *To Take Place*, 28.

[139] Riv-Ellen Prell, forward to *Inventing Jewish Ritual*, by Vanessa L. Ochs, (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2007), x.

concentric circles, the first fanning the face, the next reaching out, the third a wide encompassing movement."[140] Lighting *Shabbos* candles, like baking challah, becomes a powerful experience for the women in my study, channeling foremothers past and future, as the symbolic circling brings them into the light. Dina speaks compellingly of making challah with her daughter. Lara speaks movingly of recalling those who perished in the *Shoah* as she lights the candles each week, and Carrie of lovingly kindling the Shabbos lights in her grandmother's candlesticks.

Such a place, and such a coming into being, as Broner beautifully evokes, and the data in this study show, is located, for many BTs, at home. It is actualized in Kara's fastidious cleaning of her kitchen to make it kosher,[141] the unusable housewares discarded, the replacements purchased, even down to buying two pairs of rubber gloves: one for washing dairy dishes, and the other for meat. It is in Ava's newly organized pantry — initiated by her newly fervent son — with its now neat rows of kosher foodstuffs. It is in Rena's daily recitations of more than one hundred blessings, including the one for using the bathroom, which hangs as a reminder to her little one over his potty chair. It is in Annie's handwritten journal jottings on gratitude, which have become the substance of her meditative morning prayers recited in her bedroom, and in Aileen's superb renderings of a beautiful observant home, with its precise spatial design — an efficient kitchen, equipped with dual appliances and work spaces for the requisite separation of meat and milk; a spacious dining room to accommodate large numbers of *Shabbos* and holiday guests; sturdy, low maintenance materials and fabrics for easy clean up; and ample storage for shelving religious books and displaying Judaica. The sacred infuses the profane, steeping place with both spiritual presence and divine dominion, illuminating the furthest corners of the space like the light of the *Shabbos* candles.

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[140] E.M. Broner, *Bringing Home the Light* (San Francisco: Council Oak Books, 1999), 1-2.

[141] The dietary laws of keeping kosher, including requirements for equipping the kitchen, preparing food, and eating, are based on obligations that are sourced in the Torah and are considered sacred and irrevocable by "Torah-true" Jews. They are discussed more fully in the section *You are What You Eat*, on keeping kosher.

Calling a place home "suggests an emotional component of it that has been constituted by the shared history of the building and its occupants," writes Simon J. Bronner in the introduction to a collection of essays on the domestication of Jewish identity.[142] That shared identity is constructed through the way Judaism is both practiced and experienced there.[143]

It is in the doing that the becoming is actualized, and that the believing begins to take hold. But as the ancient Hebrews responded to God when the laws were given at Mt. Sinai, "*na'aseh v'nishma*,*"* we shall do, and we shall hear,[144] there is first a commitment to take on diurnal obligations, and then a commitment to hear, to infuse them with the eternal obligation of divine authority.[145]

A weekly women's Torah class in Rena's home infuses it with a compelling holiness, she says. "Torah sticks to the walls," is how she describes the phenomenon. "When you have Torah in your house it affects the spirituality of your home." She likens her home, and her family who lives there, to a vessel. "Yeah, you know the vessel?" she asks, "The vessel can take on that holiness." Or, as Morgan would describe it, embody it. In Aileen's home, specialness permeates its walls on Friday nights. Years ago, when her children were home, a boisterous group of teenagers would often gather around her dining room table, where ritual was simplified to lit candles, a store bought challah, and a quick blessing over the wine, then an easy dinner ending with an array of luscious pastries from the family's favorite non-kosher restaurant. More casual, perhaps, than the remembered rituals from her own youth, but they were still a centerpiece of the

[142] Simon J. Bronner, "Introduction: The Dualities of House and Home in Jewish Culture," in *Jews at Home: The Domestication of Jewish Identity*, ed. Simon J. Bronner (New York: The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2010), 1.

[143] Bronner, "Introduction," 6.

[144] Rabbis Nosson Scherman and Meir Zlotowitz, eds., *The Chumash, The Stone Edition* (New York: Mesorah Publications, 1993). "Everything Hashem has said, we will do and we will obey!" Ex. 24:3-7

[145] The spiritual becoming of BTs is more fully discussed in Chapter Four, Believing.

week in her home. "*Shabbos* is our anchor," she says of the weekly home observance, which has taken on new seriousness and meaning with increased ritual, as she and her husband become more religiously knowledgeable and observant. And it is *Shabbos* marked at home.

The trope of home, coming home, being at home, or returning home, echoes through BT literature. Janet Aviad, in one of the earliest studies of BT transformation, describes the turn towards observant Orthodoxy among a group of young men and women coming of age during the turbulent 1960s and 1970s in America. As they embraced the prevailing rejection of social, cultural, political, and religious conventions and constraints in the pursuit of meaning, and experimented with new spiritual modes or paths, including psychedelic drugs and Eastern religions, many ultimately circled back to, as Aviad calls it, their "own backyards." "They attempt to return home," she writes, "even if it is to a home where they personally never have lived but which their fathers or grandfathers inhabited." Thus, they experience a return to something they feel is "theirs by birthright, although they have not really known it [or have experienced it] until adulthood." [146] Kaufman's subjects also play on the same meme, speaking of a "return" to Orthodoxy as a "coming home."[147] Feminist Laura Levitt also toys with it, contrasting a duality of the term for those caught in the in-betweenness of reconciling a return home to the traditions of their grandparents and an embrace of the contemporary home of American liberalism in which they have been raised.[148]

But it is the doing that informs the returning, the embodied actions that animate the becoming, as past studies and this more recent one show. Connerton's "experienced objects," those material repositories of memories past, engender "experienced beings," as individuals act, and are acted upon, and as they take on ritual and performative acts that infuse their sense of

[146] Aviad, *Return to Judaism*, 4.

[147] Kaufman, *Rachel's Daughters*, ix.

[148] Laura Levitt, *Jews and Feminism: The Ambivalent Search for Home* (New York: Routledge, 1997).

self as Orthodox women. They become both subjects and objects, as their identities are gradually shaped into more traditional models. As the progression moves from doing to hearing, the home expands from the spatial confines of a material dwelling and a nuclear family to the broader space of a neighborhood and a community, to the greater expanse of the cosmos and one's place there.

Throughout this study, the desire to be at home, to belong, resonates.[149] Lara speaks achingly of being alone and bereft and in need of a place, a home. She is still searching. Dina, who was raised as an evangelical Christian and questioned her faith as a young adult, also speaks of seeking a place and finding it as she challenged her non-observant Jewish husband to connect with his Judaism. The trope of community infuses Sarah's telling of her gradual turn toward observant Orthodoxy and finding a home there is one of her religious transformation's most compelling blessings. Kara, whose young family engaged in a long process of becoming, speaks of how being part of a community has infinitely facilitated her family's development and enriched their lives. The charismatic suburban rabbi speaks of the loneliness he observes that draws people toward a more stringently observant life imbued with shared purpose. '"People need relationships that make them happy," he says, "and make them feel they are not alone."

There is also the incipient connection to the divine that impels the women forward. Eisen and Cohen detect a desire for meaning as the underlying trope in their study of contemporary American Jewry across its denominational expanse and informing the larger American religious ferment.[150] Both Davidman and Kaufman hear a similar resonance in their study of a particular segment of American Jewry, those women seeking to become stringently observant. "Almost to a woman these *ba'alot teshuvah* describe their searches in terms of the need to anchor their

[149] The role of familial and communal relationships in BT transformation is more fully discussed in Chapter Five, Belonging.

[150] Cohen and Eisen, *The Jew Within*, 36.

everyday lives in a world that 'counts," writes Kaufman.[151] Davidman describes the women at Bais Chana, the residential facility where she conducted part of her research on BTs, as having " the same sense of void, a missing dimension of their lives … and an ongoing sense of being lost and disoriented."[152] In this study, similar themes echo. Leah speaks of "wanting to be part of something bigger" as a motivation for heightening her observance as her children heightened theirs. Ava, who suffered the devastating loss of her younger sister, and then those of her parents, seeks to enhance her connection with *Hashem* by taking on more *mitzvot.*

Broner, recalling the three generations lighting *Shabbos* candles in her childhood home, keys into the widening boundaries of home from its material space, to its social space, to its celestial space.

"My mother's movement was different," she continues in her recounting, "a bringing in of the circle, closer and closer. I could hear her whispering as private wishes were added to the traditional prayers. If I asked what they wished for my mother, shy in her life, would simply say it was for family. Then, at a later time, she would add, 'I'm bringing in the light.' My Big Baba, the taller of my two grandmothers, would say, in Yiddish, '*on mir, tsu dir, tsu di ganze, felt'* from me, to you, to the whole world. Both sets of circles ordered my life for a long time."

Hannah evokes Broner's circling over time and space, as she lights the candles each week.

"At sunset, when I am lighting my candles, women are doing it at the same time all over place in exactly the same way and have done so for thousands of years. … I love that sense of tradition that, 2000 years ago, someone just like me was lighting candles."

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[151] Kaufman, *Rachel's Daughters*, 33.

[152] Davidman, *Tradition*, 98-99.

As the subjects in this study take on ritual obligations, embodied practices, and performative acts, they create those circles, ever moving outward, animating home as a place of multiple dimensions, as a site for doing, becoming, and being observant Jewish women.

Spanning the Calendar, Measuring the Years

Time and space coalesce in the performance of rituals and acts, conflating place and compressing time. Morgan explains how time creates a trajectory for constructing religious identity that traverses space. "The body of belief and practice exists over time as well as space," he writes. "Its being is often structured toward an end, and, therefore, must be understood in terms of where it is headed. It does not exist in a single moment but is projected over a temporal course, waiting, anticipating, working toward fulfillment or realization."[153]

BT identity is constructed on such a plane, located in space, and animated by embodied acts, but both propelled by and actualized in time. It is time measured in the span of a day, from sunrise to sunset; in the span of a week, from one *Shabbos* to the next; in the span of a month, from the waning to the waxing of the moon that signals each month's passing; in the span of a year, marked with the enduring cycle of holidays and holy days. Life is meted out in time, measured in its fullness.

The passing of time, and its markings, those embodied or performative acts that bring it into being, is no more clearly evinced than in the cycle of life and its critical junctures. Birth, death, coming of age, and marriage all signal its passing with specific rituals or practices that BTs now embrace and infuse with enhanced meaning. Such acts further inscribe the new identity they are constructing with newfound resonance.

[153] Morgan, "Material Culture," 20.

The passing of time, and its enduring meaning, is no more clearly evinced than in its primordial beginnings. The Jewish laws of ritual purity structure the rhythm of a marriage, its coupling, and its conception of new life, prescribing particular times during the month, and during a women's menstrual cycle, for sexual intimacy and proscribing marital relations during others. [154] The roots of the ancient system are predicated on Biblical prohibitions of certain sexual behaviors and notions of purity and impurity; women are considered impure when menstruating and sexual relations are prohibited during that time and for seven days after.[155] In its more modern iteration, as Davidman suggests, the laws of ritual purity are often recast in terms of submission and surrender, submission to Jewish law and communal norms, and surrender to the discipline such submission requires to control desire. Such an understanding presents the laws as a compelling response to the objectification of women and the wanton sexual behavior prevalent in secular society.[156] Both previous studies find such an understanding appealing to prospective BTs.

Kaufman's subjects speak of the attraction of "obtaining control," the laws providing a temporal framework for sexual intimacy, requiring both husband and wife to "restrain" themselves. Her subjects, younger, less well educated, and with less life experience than those in this study, appreciate the mutuality of the laws, encouraging men to respect them as sexual beings and heightening their own self-respect and respect for their bodies. The two cohorts in Davidman's study differ in age, education, and experience. The younger group at Bais Chana, a more

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[154] http://www.chabad.org/theJewishWoman/article_cdo/aid/1541/jewish/The-Mikvah.htm. The laws of ritual purity, *Taharat Hamispachah,* detail the specific times when sexual relations and any physical contact between husband and wife are allowed and specific times when it is prohibited. The cycle turns on the menstrual cycle of the woman, with relations and touching proscribed during the days that the woman is menstruating, and for seven days after the flow ceases. The separation between husband and wife during that two-week period is called *niddah* in Hebrew, or "to be separated". After nightfall on the seventh clean day after her menstrual period, the woman goes to the *mikvah* for immersion and returns home permitted to resume relations with her husband. The cycle of abstinence and then resumption of intimacy turns on the natural cycle of fertility, with the women returning to intercourse when at their most fertile. This ritual inscribes the obligation to procreate and embodies the elevation of women as wives and mothers.

[155] Kaufman, *Rachel's Daughters*, 71.

[156] Davidman, *Tradition*, 114. Stringently observant Orthodoxy prohibits premarital and extramarital sex.

stringently observant residential program for BTs, and the older and more accomplished group at the modern Orthodox Lincoln Square Synagogue present two differing responses to the laws. The Bais Chana group expressed more "hurt" from prior sexual experiences than the Lincoln Square group, and was attracted to Judaism's elevation of the role of women as sexual beings. "Judaism looks on women not so much as sex objects," says one woman, "but as something much higher. Women are not treated as the playthings of men."

The Lincoln Square group expressed little trauma from prior sexual encounters, and less concern with the objectification of women, but a similar appreciation of Judaism's elevation of marriage and family and their role as women at its center. The emphasis on birth and childrearing was the most compelling rationale for taking on the laws of ritual purity for the women in the earlier studies and among the subjects in this study as well. The women in this study expressed little negativity about past sexual experience — though they did allude to being sexual active — and little concern with the more feminist concerns of female objectification. This finding reflects changes in the understanding of women's sexuality and the impact of the women's liberation movement, a clear indication of the effect of the historical, cultural, and social context, as is more fully explored in Chapter Six, Being.

Of the women in this study, half were still of childbearing age during the time of their religious transformation; of those, four shared that they had observed the laws of ritual purity, following the cycle for permissible physical contact and relations with their husbands, and immersing in the *mikvah*,[157] or ritual bath, at the end of each period of separation and resumption of relations. However, the fact that the women were new to the laws, had been married for a

[157] http://www.chabad.org/theJewishWoman/article_cdo/aid/1541/jewish/The-Mikvah.htm. A *mikvah* is a pool of water used for ritual immersion in Judaism. It is constructed according to very precise specifications, and must contain at least 200 gallons of rainwater that is mixed with tap water in what is called "the kissing of the waters." The *mikvah* is used by women for immersion each month at the end of the period of separation from their husbands as delineated in the laws of ritual purity and also at other times for spiritual cleansing, including conversion to Judaism. It also is used by men at specified times, usually before the Sabbath and before holy days.

number of years before deciding to follow them, and had lived many years in the secular world, impacted both their readiness to take on the obligations and their willingness to abide the inconveniences. Another subject does not follow the laws of ritual purity, but used the *mikvah* as a bride before her wedding and also when trying to conceive. Now married to her second husband, she says the couple are not yet ready to take on the restrictions of following the laws. While these findings are inconclusive, given the limited size of the study, they still further reinforce the impact of age and maturity on BT transformation and the studied approach to taking on new obligations the women in this study exhibit.

Ava took on this obligation later in life, hewing to the prescribed cycle for sexual intimacy for several years before reaching menopause. She was less taken with the ritual, put off by the process of having to call to make an appointment to go to the *mikvah* and the time it takes. She attributes her response to her age and to her status as a BT, new to the ritual. “I guess if I had grown up with it, it would have been a different thing,” she says. “I didn’t like it,” she says, “but I did it because it was a rule.” Ava expresses an inherent respect for Jewish law and a desire to comply with its strictures. Asked if there was a positive aspect to the ritual, she replied, “I didn’t necessarily feel spiritually cleansed, if that’s what you mean. No, not really.”

She stopped going when reaching menopause, the usual practice.

Dinah underwent an Orthodox conversion, which includes immersion in the *mikvah* as part of the conversion process. At the time, she and her husband had two children, but, following her conversion, she suffered two miscarriages. “Somebody told me, ‘you really have to do family purity and go to the *mikvah,*’” she recalls, and she did. She, too, describes the rudiments of the process as onerous, having to make an appointment, dealing with the women who supervise the

mikvah, feeling rushed. She particularly objected to having to take off her gel nail polish as part of the ritual cleansing,[158] describing the entire experience as "a *schlep*."

She says she continued to observe the ritual until after her younger two children were born, and then she stopped.

"I do think it is special," she says, "the actual [immersion] part is wonderful.

"I do feel it can be a place that you can pray and be closer to God."

Rena decided to take on this obligation to honor the memory of her aunt, who had put aside Jewish observance herself, but admired Rena's commitment to Judaism. She had read about the laws and had been impressed with the claims of health benefits and enhanced marital satisfaction from following them.[159] Then married for almost twenty-five years, with four children, she became pregnant with her fifth child soon after committing to the ritual. She was in her late forties.

She describes the cycle of separation and return to her husband, and the immersion in the *mikvah*, as something women need to experience to understand. "You can't learn it from a book," she says, "you have to do it."[160]

Lara, divorced and remarried, has not yet committed to *Taharat Hamishpachah.* She shares that she and her second husband have discussed doing so as they move toward becoming more observant, but they are not ready to submit to the laws regulating their sexual

[158] Before immersing in the *mikvah*, women are required to thoroughly cleanse themselves according to stringent instructions, to allow the water in the ritual bath to thoroughly engulf them. These requirements include showering, shampooing, combing out hair, removing all make up, including nail polish, and cleaning and cutting nails. Most *mikvahs* have shower facilities so women can ready for immersion there.

[159] Rena reports that studies have shown a lower incidence of ovarian cancer among observant Orthodox women attributed to the period of withdrawing from sexual relations with their husbands and "giving their bodies a break."

[160] Much of the literature on the laws of ritual purity emphasizes heightened desire and marital satisfaction engendered from the period of separation and abstention. Rena cites statistics that show a lower divorce rate among the stringently Orthodox and ascribes this to following the laws of ritual purity.

activity. “I would like to,” says Lara wistfully, having used the *mikvah* as a bride, before her wedding, and again, as a woman dealing with infertility and trying to conceive. She went to the *mikvah* twice when trying to conceive her older son, then several times again when trying to conceive her second child. Especially as she underwent fertility treatments, she found immersion in the *mikvah* comforting. The yearning to conceive, and the wrenching disappointment each month when it does not happen, is inordinately stressful.

“You feel like there is nothing you can do,” she says. Particularly years ago, when the subject of infertility was private, she felt very much alone. Going to the *mikvah* was something positive she could do to help.

“You can actually be in control,” she says of the monthly immersion in the waters, “you can be part of the process.”

She is amazed at the wisdom of the laws, assuring that couples will have intercourse during the most fertile time of a women’s cycle, heightening the possibility of conception, and further inscribing the primacy of motherhood in Jewish life.

She describes her use of the *mikvah* while trying to conceive as “very beneficial,” and the immersion, healing, and compassion of the *mikvah* lady, as comforting. “She cried, I cried,” Lara recalls. “Then she gave me a *bracha* [blessing] that the treatment should work this time.”

And finally it did.

Hannah, with an irregular menstrual cycle and a history of infertility problems, has had only one opportunity to use the ritual bath as a married woman.

She says that she yearned to have the experience, as she and her husband moved toward embracing stringently observant Orthodoxy, and it lived up to her expectations.

“I wanted to have a spiritual experience, and it happened,” she says, still buoyant from the experience.

Despite sharing the niggling discontents of the other women at the process — particularly feeling rushed because others are waiting — she says that her “one moment alone, when they are not hurrying you” was a “moving experience.”

For her, it inspired an intense connection to the women in her community, sharing their experience, making her feel like one of them, while also connecting her to the long line of Jewish women before her who have kept the monthly ritual.

“”It’s a connection to those who came before,” she says, evoking both Broner’s ever-widening circles of light and Morgan’s temporal course, conflating time and space, “maybe to ancestors, maybe to the matriarchal tree.

“It was divine.”

And it is a connection to those in the long line yet to come, with its focus on sexual intimacy and procreation. The weeks when women are permitted to have relations with their husbands are the most fertile time in the monthly cycle, and the time when they would be most likely to conceive.[161]

The miracle of birth becomes even more profoundly moving, as parents, or grandparents, see it as a promise fulfilled in creating yet another generation of Jews. The rabbi of the suburban observant congregation, who so keenly weighs the emotional responses of his congregation as a measure of their spiritual growth, describes the *bris*, or ritual circumcision, of the first grandson of one newly observant couple. They are the only ones in their families who have decided to take on a ritually observant Jewish life, he explains. And they marvel, recalls the rabbi, “this is the first *bris* in our family in over one hundred years that has been done according to *halacha* [Jewish law].” “That’s big,” says the rabbi. “I think these things are big for people.” And especially for those who are older and more keenly aware of their age and their legacy. “They want to know, how can I have an impact on my grandchildren?” the rabbi says, illuminating Morgan’s perception of time as projected into the future towards fulfillment. This sentiment permeates the stories of the women in this study, who express an abiding desire for recovering the past through enhanced doing, or embodying, as a means of insuring the future. Lara, the granddaughter of Holocaust survivors, so

[161] http://www.chabad.org/theJewishWoman/article_cdo/aid/1541/jewish/The-Mikvah.htm.

poignantly speaks of her responsibility to her grandparents for the Jewish identity of the generations that follow.

"Joshua [her younger son] is definitely the push for me to do more," she confides, as she struggles to move towards becoming Sabbath-observant. Dina, the twice converted former Christian, was driven to become Orthodox, to take on the rituals of *Shabbos, kashrut*, and ritual purity, to unconditionally assert her children's Jewish identity. And Hannah, even as she wrestles with committing to a more observant life, experimenting with heightened ritual practice, expresses her desire for her daughter "to be grounded traditionally" and wanting her to "have the skills and the knowledge to make decisions and the heart … to make decisions for herself and not feel like she's floundering." To know how, she might put it, and to know why, as she makes her own choices.

Birth is inscribed in embodied practice, as is coming of age. Rena's offspring marked the traditional *bar* or *bat mitzvah,* when a child takes on the responsibility of following Jewish law, with rituals that embody their commitment to Judaism. Her older daughters were fêted at women-only Sunday afternoon celebrations, where they spoke on the meaning of a particular reading from the Torah and related it to their lives. There were speeches by other family members lauding the character of the young girls, and at the most recent event, at which I was a guest, a retelling of the history of the family's matriarchs, an artful means of connecting generations past to those present, while illuminating their shared virtues and values. Each guest was given a book to take home on the power of speech, and the responsibility of being careful in how it is used: a fundamental Jewish value. The book as an experienced object, and its reading as the action it implies, is a subtle embodiment of Torah knowledge.

Kara and her husband, in the process of trying out a more observant lifestyle, had scheduled their eldest daughter's *bat mitzvah* at the Reform congregation where they then belonged. They decided to eschew celebrating her coming of age there, as their observance increased, and they became less comfortable with the Reform ceremony and the conventions of

that congregation in terms of dress, gender roles, and spiritual leadership. Instead, they chose an Orthodox *bat mitzvah.*

Hannah, still experimenting with heightened observance, and a member of both an observant Orthodox congregation and an egalitarian non-denominational one, insisted on having two *bat mitzvah* celebrations for her only daughter, one in each community. Guests were invited to a Saturday morning *Shabbos* service and *kiddush* at the egalitarian synagogue, where many congregants drive to services, prohibited by the laws of the Sabbath, where men and women sit together, also prohibited among the stringently Orthodox, and where women, including her daughter, are called to the Torah to read the weekly portion — inscribing her Jewish identity in that congregation — an honor reserved only for men and boys in Orthodox congregations. On Sunday, she and her husband hosted an Orthodox celebration, like Kara's daughter's *bat mitzvah*, where the all-female guests from both communities were asked to come modestly dressed, and the *bat mitzvah* girl gave a speech on the meaning of the week's Torah portion, accepting her role and responsibilities as an Orthodox young woman. Again, the rituals further inscribed religious identity in the doing, both for daughter and mother, while also vividly illustrating the "in-betweenness," as Benor calls it, that many BTs, such as Hannah, experience as they transition from one community to another. [162]

Marriage, with its own performative acts, material objects, and embodied rituals, further constructs identity. While the majority of the women in this study did not have Orthodox wedding ceremonies, having married before they considered taking on the more stringent practice of Orthodoxy, many incorporated more traditional elements in their weddings. They married under *chuppahs,* or wedding canopies, and they signed *ketubot,* or wedding contracts. During the ceremony, the bride circled her husband, the groom broke a glass, and the seven blessings were

[162] Benor, *Becoming Frum* 27. Benor draws on anthropologist Victor Turner's definition of in-betweenness as "a period of transition between two states of being."

sung.[163] Rena and her husband chose invitations in both English and Hebrew for their Reform ceremony, while Aileen and her husband chose a traditional Hebrew melody for their processional at her family's Reform temple. Kara and her husband, also married in a Reform ceremony, chose a traditional *ketubah*, inscribed in Hebrew calligraphy with their signatures at the bottom, now displayed prominently in their home. When I visit, her husband proudly points it out to me while boasting that his wife insisted on a *ketubah* (and admitting sheepishly that he did not know then what a *ketubah* was) and that she later initiated the couple's religious transformation. Again, with marriage rituals, embodied or performative acts, such as signing a *ketubah*, inscribed identity then, and now, as BTs marry off children who have chosen to become more observant themselves and choose similar partners. Aileen's son and his wife were married according to traditional practice, as were Leah's three children, Sarah's one observant daughter, and Ava's two sons, with varying degrees of stringency. Rena's oldest daughter is recently engaged to an observant young man, and the couple are planning a traditional Jewish wedding. Inherent in a Jewish wedding lies the potential for creating a new Jewish family, with yet another generation of children who are taught to follow the laws of Moses and Israel, as their parents committed in their marriage vows. Each new family furthers Morgan's temporal trajectory toward fulfillment, as each Jewish wedding is infused with the fertile promise of Jewish children.

The end of the life of a loved one often exposes those new to observance to a multitude of meaningful embodied acts and ritual practices that provide comfort during particularly difficult times. As discussed in Chapter One, the trauma of loss can often inspire religious search. Many of the subjects in this study cite the death of a parent or a sibling as the motivation for seeking out religious ways to mourn and grieve. For many, even those who are non- or less observant, the

[163] These women do not articulate a reason for incorporating traditional rituals in weddings that took place years before they had begun to learn about Orthodoxy, suggesting that even though they might have been ignorant of their significance they were subliminally drawn to embracing them.

The need to mention incorporating more traditional wedding rituals in ceremonies performed years before the women in the study had begun to explore Orthodoxy signals the intense attraction of recovering such ritual, suggesting that even if the women were ignorant of its significance, they were subliminally drawn to embrace it.

loss of a parent, in-law, or sibling engendered a pressing need to honor their memory in the traditional mode by reciting the *kaddish*, the Hebrew prayer for the dead.[164] The prayer is recited graveside at burial, then during the ensuing *shiva*, or mourning, period at home, a seven-day period for traditional Jews (sometimes shortened to a one- or three-day period by less observant Jews),[165] and then, depending on the degree of observance, for a month or a full year after the death, with a congregation. Orthodoxy requires a *minyan*, or a group of ten men,[166] in order for the ritual to be performed. "Saying *kaddish*," becomes a way of dealing with death, oftentimes embraced by those who have long-eschewed any traditional observance, or who have little or no knowledge of Hebrew and the ritual. It can be construed as a product of nostalgic memory, a responsibility recalled from parents or grandparents that weighs heavy with obligation.[167]

While only men are obligated to perform the ritual in Orthodoxy, the death of a close relative and the subsequent taking on of the rite initiate exposure to Orthodoxy for men and their wives. Aileen, Rena, and Hannah tell of their spouses suffering a loss and encountering a compelling need to "say *kaddish*." For them, it was a turning point in their religious development,

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[164] Leon Wieseltier, *Kaddish* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998). Eminent literary critic Wieseltier explores the compulsion to recite *kaddish* in his rumination on the traditional Jewish mourning ritual written after the death of his father. Wieseltier, who describes himself as a "diligent and doubting son" in the book's preface, committed to keeping the practice of reciting *kaddish* daily for the year after his father died, recording his thoughts and experiences in a journal which became this widely-read book.

[165] http://www.shiva.com/learning-center/understanding/how-shiva-observed. "*Shiva* begins immediately following the burial and lasts for seven days, ending after the morning service on the seventh day. *Shiva* is not observed on the Sabbath (Friday at sundown through Saturday at sundown) or holidays. While *shiva* is the seven-day period following burial – and many mourners do choose to observe *shiva* for the full seven days – it is common to find that some families may only sit *shiva* for one-to-three days, depending on many factors, including level of observance or the deceased's instructions or wishes.

"A *shiva* is traditionally observed in the home of the deceased, but may also be observed in the residence of an immediate family member. In today's world, many families are dispersed and live in cities throughout the country. As a result, it is becoming more common for a *shiva* to take place simultaneously in multiple locations. *Shiva* is usually observed in the home of the deceased, though sometimes it is observed in the home of a close relative or even in several geographic locations where family members may reside."

[166] The traditional *minyan* of ten men for prayer is required among Orthodox Jews, while Conservative and Reform Jews now count both men and women as part of a *minyan.*

[167] Cohen and Eisen, in their study of ritual practice of contemporary Jewry, found that family connections were a key impetus for taking on or recovering Jewish ritual. They tell of respondents who were compelled to go to synagogue on a regular basis after the death of a parent, or continuing to light a *yahrzeit,* or memorial, candle on the anniversary of a parent's death, 57-58. Lighting a memorial candle is a home-based ritual observed by many Jews, observant or non- or less observant, as a way of remembering the deceased.

drawing them to observant congregations that had a daily *minyan*, where knowledgeable and compassionate congregants would help them chant the ritual prayer, an embodiment of both their grief and their religious connection.

The death of Rena's mother-in-law, as described in Chapter Two, sparked her rethinking of life's meaning and purpose and also spurred on her exploration of Jewish tradition. She tells of her ignorance of ritual and practice, as she describes her surprise at how the Orthodox congregation where her husband had been *davening*, or praying, responded. "I opened the door and these people with black hats walk in my house with black coats on. I'm, like, what is going on? I'm in jeans, and I'm offering them a tray of cookies. I didn't know what was happening." The men were coming to say *kaddish* with her husband, and came everyday for the full seven days of the *shiva* period. The outpouring of communal support, and the comfort her husband derived from it, made an impression on Rena, despite her ignorance of ritual and practice, and the strangeness of the experience and its actors. She laughs at the changes in herself, then in her jeans and now, recounting the experience, with her hair, knees and elbows covered, carrying a new little one on her hip, as she has taken on a ritually-observant life, abounding with embodied practice and embedded with meaning.

Keeping *Shabbos*

Rena speaks with fervor of a life that has become richer and fuller as she has become more ritually observant. Her fifth child was born when she was almost fifty, a true gift, she believes, when she and her husband were already on the path to heightened practice and belief. Yet her capacity to laugh at herself, her knack for recalling their experiences, both the pain of sometimes wrenching choices and the joy they have brought, are leavened with the humor of her telling. She explains that her husband was the prime mover in their religious transformation, impelled initially by his mother's unanticipated illness and premature death. Although they both had been reading and going to classes for years, seeking to compensate for their lack of Jewish knowledge, she was not ready to take on the enhanced obligations that would radically change their life. "I was resistant," she says now, "fighting it all the way." Becoming Sabbath-observant

would ultimately mean trading in her "dream home" for a smaller house in a new neighborhood within walking distance to the synagogue. It would mean taking on the requirements of observance, the dozens of prohibited behaviors that would limit their lives for the twenty-five hour period of the Sabbath and most likely in a multitude of other big and small ways.[168] She was not ready, she explains, until a keenly perceptive rabbi offered to bring his family to her home for *Shabbos* so that her family could truly experience the Jewish day of rest.

"They could see we were floundering," Rena says, "that we were wanting to become *shomer Shabbos* but not knowing how." The rabbi and his wife and their then four or five children showed up at their door late one Friday afternoon, with *cholent*, the traditional Saturday afternoon dish, in hand.

"They were coming to our house and doing *Shabbos* with us," she says now, still incredulous at their generosity.

Rena says that she had been considering trying to become Sabbath-observant, but had not been able as yet to take action.

She recalls discussing her ambivalence with an observant friend who had encouraged her. She had been reading the classic Jewish handbook to observant Jewish life, Blu

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[168] Keeping *Shabbos* is a central tenet of observant Jewish life, sourced in the Torah, the five books of Moses. The sacred text, received by the ancient Israelites from God on Mount Sinai, scrolls out the Jewish meta-narrative from creation to revelation to redemption, and the intricate system of rules and laws that it requires. Such "Torah true" Judaism is "rooted in obligations," writes Heilman, in his study of the move to more observant Orthodoxy in America, where authority is "determined by law and tradition … irrevocable commitments to rules, codes, and a series of ultimate rabbinic authorities both dead and living." Heilman, 2. The creation story in the first book of the Torah tells of the six days of the world's making and the seventh day being reserved for rest. The divine obligation to desist from work on that day appears in the second book, Ex. 20:8, "Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy. Six days shall thou labor and do all thy work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath of the Lord your God: you shall not do any work — you, your son, your daughter, your male or female slave, or your cattle, or the stranger who is within your settlements."

The interpretation of that edict — how to make the day holy and what behaviors are prescribed and what behaviors are proscribed — is the subject of more than 200 pages of the *Shulkan Arukh,* the standard legal code of Judaism written in the mid-1500s by the Sephardic Rabbi Joseph Caro. It covers a multitude of questions from the meaning of the imperative to "remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy" to the preparation of the festive meal, to the timing of candle lighting, to the laws for the ritual blessing of the wine. Greenberg, in her mainstream manual for traditional observance, the book that is for Rena and others an initial source for these and other questions on ritual and practice, spends some sixty pages on Sabbath-observance, including a two page checklist of the thirty-nine prohibited activities for *Shabbos* and the three other proscribed categories. Blu Greenberg, *How to Run a Traditional Jewish Household* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1983), 30-94.

Greenberg's *How to Run a Traditional Jewish Household*.[169] "Well, why don't you just do it instead of reading about it?" her friend had challenged. "Just try it, just do it. Go stay in someone's house. Go see what *Shabbos* is; go turn your house over, do kosher."

The *Shabbos* with the rabbi and his family at her home was the turning point.

"So I just kind of jumped in, blind. I decided to keep *Shabbos,*" she says, and the family has been Sabbath-observant ever since.

Kara tells a similar story, only this time it is her family accepting an invitation to spend *Shabbos* at another family's home. The experience, before Kara and her family had relocated to the neighborhood within walking distance to the synagogue, was profound. It was further enhanced, as the family continued moving towards heightened observance and spent more time among the community of newly Orthodox Jews. Invitations for Friday night dinners and Saturday lunches abounded. They were astounded by the generous hospitality, cosseted by the genuine warmth of their hosts. *Shabbos* afternoons visiting with newfound observant friends made it easier to put aside their old weekend pastimes, turning off iPhones and not turning on televisions or computers. It opened them up to the joys of Sabbath-observance, as the couple and their three daughters were welcomed into the congregation's homes. Both Rena's and Kara's experiences reflect the impact of both personal and communal relationships in BT development.[170] All of the subjects in this study credit rabbis, teachers, and friends for modeling the behaviors they aspired to emulate. Ava speaks of watching the dynamics within her rabbi's family and wanting "to be like them." Kara credits the purchase of a house in an observant neighborhood and the embrace of the community for deepening her commitment to take on enhanced religious obligations, as does Carrie. Davidman found similar dynamics at play in her earlier study of BT transformation. "Behavioral changes often take place in the context of participating with other people," she

[169] Greenberg, *How to Run*.

[170] Chapter Five, Belonging, fully explores the impact of social relationships, including communal ties and personal friendships, on BT development. It looks at both the benefits and challenges of forging and maintaining such relationships.

writes.[171] Often they evolve, she found, as in Kara's case, with change happening over time and over a gradual "accretion of observances."[172] Subjects in this study evidence a similar pattern of becoming through embodied practices that is seminal to their transformation. "These changes in how women lived their lives were actually some of the most profound aspects of their return to Orthodoxy," says Davidman, again reinforcing the primacy of action.[173] It is, as Meredith McGuire finds in her study of lived religion, that the most powerful religious experiences are often those actions or practices that are replicated everyday. Religious meaning, she finds, is actualized in what people do and how they live.[174]

For some, the process of choosing, and assuming, new religious obligations and their concomitant behaviors is fraught with doubt and indecision. Hannah was slower and more deliberate in taking on the obligations of a more stringent practice; her husband, grieving the death of his only sister from brain cancer, and searching for ways to deal with that tragic loss, had found solace in the company of the men at the *shul*.[175] He was eager to heighten their practice. Hannah initially demurred, not yet ready to take on another step towards Orthodoxy, until she and her husband participated in the *Shabbos* Project and experienced the full twenty-five hour day of rest — "soup to nuts," is how she described it — with all its proscriptions, including driving, using electricity, tearing, and cooking.

"We were going to do it the way it really needed to be done," she says. "We stayed in our house [the couple does not live within walking distance of a synagogue]. I set all the lights ahead

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[171] Davidman, *Tradition*, 187.

[172] Davidman, *Tradition* 184.

[173] Davidman, *Tradition*, 188.

[174] Meredith McGuire, *Lived Religion, Faith and Religious Practice in Everyday Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

[175] Many men find the opportunities for male companionship an attraction of stringently observant Orthodoxy. Both Hannah and her husband clearly state the appeal of all-male prayer groups and study groups for him. "He wants to be with the guys," she says of her husband. "He wants some testosterone."

of time. He ripped the toilet paper. We picked board games that we could play. We set timers. We turned off the light in the refrigerator. I did all my cooking ahead of time."

It was a seminal experience for the couple and their daughter, what Hannah calls the second part of the trifecta that was pushing her forward. First had been working at the community Challah Bake, second, the experiment observing *Shabbos* at her husband's urging, and third, a week or so later, traveling to Israel with JWRP. She came home inspired, and told her husband that she was willing "to do that [fully observe *Shabbos*] more often, and see how it feels."

On her first week back, the couple replicated their *Shabbos* experiment. Hannah says she was open to doing it once a month or every couple of weeks, but her husband was ready to make it a weekly ritual. "And, lo and behold, the following week, he's running around the house turning off lights and ripping paper again."

Hannah is still ambivalent: both intrigued with the possibility of becoming stringently observant and hesitant to take on the obligations that would significantly change her life. When we speak, her husband and daughter either walk or ride their bikes to the synagogue on Saturdays, while Hannah drives and meets them later. The family has been spending the day in the neighborhood there, where, like Kara, they have been welcomed warmly by those who live there. They have observed *Shabbos* this way for a year.

The next logical step in their progression, says Hannah, would be choosing to move into the neighborhood. "When the lease on this house comes up, we'll start looking," she says. "And then I don't know what will happen."

Hannah's logical assessment of the costs and benefits of becoming Sabbath-observant reflect her age and stage of life, as well as her maturity. She is keenly aware of the need of the know-how and know-what of rituals, but also the know-why, including the ramifications. It is reflective of the experiences of each of the subjects in this study, who have parents, spouses, or children who will be impacted by choices that they may find personally satisfying but challenging in familial or collegial contexts. [176] Before their daughter's *bat mitzvah*, the couple were still going

[176] Such challenges to family relations are more fully explored in Chapter Five, Belonging.

to the egalitarian synagogue once a month, where one of the two ceremonies would be taking place, further complicating their weekly observance. “We drive because it’s too far to walk,” she explains. “My husband is not happy about it.”

Lara also speaks of the challenges of taking on heightened Sabbath-observance and the family tensions that it engenders. She also participated in the JWRP trip and came home inspired to increase her level of observance. Her husband, who was raised Conservative with minimal Jewish practice in his home, admired Lara’s resolve to learn and do more and was open to following her lead. She returned from Israel inspired to heighten their ritual observance, but found herself stymied by the location of their home, which precluded their walking to Saturday morning services, and her husband’s new business, which, despite his commitment to not working on the Sabbath, often resulted in disruptive emergencies. She finds herself frustrated, not only for herself, but also for her two sons. The women’s trip to Israel further reinforced her sense of obligation. “Going to Israel as a mother is special,” she says, “being there as a mother, something about wanting to bring it home and give it to your family and pass it on … it is very powerful.”

Yet her everyday life has slowed the pace and progression of her family’s transformation. “It’s really tough,” she says. “It’s just life circumstances, I guess, that get in the way.” Sometimes, she says, seeing how other women who traveled to Israel with her are changing their lives, she feels like, “I’m sinking, because I feel like I am getting left behind.”

Ambivalence, challenges, and choices all resonate through the stories of the subjects in this study. Process, pace, and progression of their religious transformation is a product of realistic assessment and thoughtful decisions, reflecting their maturity and the complexity of their social relationships in familial and communal contexts. They articulate a clear-eyed understanding of the gains and losses of becoming more stringently observant, which informs the choices they make, or not, and the timing of those choices.

Kara, with three daughters still at home, speaks of her family’s progression. “It is amazing how far we have come,” she says, as we sit around the dining room table in the family’s home in the Orthodox neighborhood where they moved two years ago. “We didn’t do a checklist of

everything we are going to do. Pretty much things have come naturally for us," she says, echoing Davidman's finding of a gradual "accretion of observances." Making choices is part of the process, she says. "[We] make choices, and [we] have to decide what is important."

Communal rabbis express sensitivity to the difficulties of older BTs making choices that fundamentally change their lives. The charismatic suburban pulpit rabbi, who speaks of setting his followers on fire, says, "They make tough decisions, they sacrifice. They tell their grown children I'm not available by phone [on the Sabbath or over other holidays]. They move their homes. They wake up early in the morning and come to *davening*." It is hard, the rabbi says, taking issue with others involved in outreach who gloss over the transformation's difficulties. "[They say about becoming observant] it's big and huge and macro, you'll love it. But it involves challenges. It involves challenges," he repeats.[177]

The Sephardic congregational rabbi counsels congregants moving toward heightened observance to take their time, taking on one new *mitzvah*, or obligation, at a time. He speaks of growth, of the desire to help others to continue to grow in their Judaism. And he emphasizes the fact that each person's path is his or her own. "My journey is not the same as yours, and it's not the same as anyone's in the world," he says. "But I have to grow." For some, it can be beginning to grow towards Sabbath-observance. "It could mean, let's have a family dinner every Friday, they might not call it *Shabbat* dinner, but it's a step forward. It's growth."

[177] Ferziger's comparative study of the development of Chabad and the community *Kollel* in his book *Beyond Sectarianism* delves into the perceived differences in approach for outreach of the two groups. Four of the subjects in this study (Aileen, Ava, Leah, and Sarah) are members of the stringently Orthodox congregation in the city where this study takes place and that is associated with the community *Kollel*. Lara, while affiliated with a non-denominational, egalitarian congregation, still has a close relationship with the head of the *Kollel* women's programs who she considers her teacher, mentor, and friend. Another three (Rena, Carrie, and Kara) are affiliated with a second stringently Orthodox congregation located in the city suburbs; Hannah, who belonged to the non-denominational egalitarian congregation at the beginning of this study, has now also become a member of the second stringently Orthodox congregation, as her transformation has progressed. Dina and Annie belong to the Sephardic Orthodox congregation, whose rabbi comes from a Hasidic background, but not the Hasidic Lubavitch group that Ferziger studies. Appendix Two provides fuller profiles of each of the women in this study.

Annie, one of his congregants, speaks of his encouragement to take "baby steps," slowly taking on those obligations that are personally meaningful and may gradually come to be infused with divine valence. She tells of first taking on the *mitzvah* of lighting *Shabbos* candles every Friday night, now attending services most Saturday mornings and working on improving her Hebrew proficiency, to better follow the order of the service.

Right now," she tells me, "It's not my goal to walk to *shul* and to wear long skirts." She keys off her rabbi's teaching, "My goal is to keep growing, to keep nurturing myself, taking care of myself, and to see where it's gonna lead me."

So the process of becoming spools out across time and space, marked by objects and subjects and made real by performative rituals and embodied acts, baking challah, lighting candles, making

Shabbos, using the *mikvah,*[178] gradually inspire those faint yearnings for transcendence and an incipient awareness of divine presence. It is Morgan's temporal course hurtling towards fulfillment, Thomas Tweed's imagined religious landscape marked by sites and sightings, and Smith's making place into being. So Annie lets the course unfold, taking it wherever it leads her.

And it leads her to the kitchen.

You are What You Eat

While we gobble the toothsome loaves from the challah bake, a mouthful of eggy bread becomes part of who we are.

"Embodied foundational elements[s]" is how Davidman describes such edibles, as they are both made and consumed.[179] So food, along with the strict dietary regime of observant Orthodox Jews, is a key element in BT transformation.

[178] These embodied acts gradually inspire those faint yearnings for transcendence (for meaning and purpose that goes beyond material experience) and an incipient awareness of the divine, more fully explored in Chapter Four, Believing.

[179] Davidman, *Becoming Unorthodox*, 190.

"The food we consume becomes a part of us," writes Davidman, noting both its personal as well as communal impact. "Strict observance of the laws of kashrut is a private and public symbol of a *frum* life."[180]

So Annie is gradually taking on the dietary prescripts that observant Orthodoxy requires.[181] Along with keeping *Shabbos*, keeping kosher is a seminal obligation of observant Jews, a distinguishing marker and a sign of serious commitment to heightened observance. Kaufman cites *Shabbos- and kashrut*-observance as the two primary measures of an Orthodox life.[182] The findings in this study reinforce this, as well as a gradual progression towards reciting blessings that actualize divine presence, particularly before and after eating, or upon arising or going to bed.

Annie, who grew up in a Reform household and raised her two grown sons similarly, had not kept kosher before and has only the painful memory of the tension in her childhood home between her grandma, who wanted to keep kosher, and her mother, who did not. But as she began her own exploration of observant belief and practice, she was drawn to follow the dietary laws.[183] "I wanted to be more aware of what I was eating," she explains, "[I wanted to] make eating a holier experience." She committed to separating meat from milk, to eschewing certain dishes, and to taking time to say thank you. "I go to a restaurant and don't order veal parmesan,"

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[180] Davidman, *Becoming Unorthodox*, 190.

[181] http://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/113425/jewish/What-Is-Kosher.htm. *Kashrut,* the Hebrew word for "fit", and its intricate laws delineate what is fit for Jews to consume and what is not. Its major principles include the following: not eating certain species of foods categorized as forbidden, including pork and shellfish; separating milk and meat, in both consumption and preparation, necessitating separate kitchen and dining utensils; only eating meat that is ritually slaughtered to specific practices; and assuring that fruits, vegetables, and grains are insect-free. A kosher supervision agency assures that all meats and prepared products ascribe to *kashrut* standards*,* rendering them kosher, or fit, to eat.

[182] Kaufman, *Rachel's Daughters*, 5.

[183] Annie explains that she took on her first new ritual obligation as part of the One Million Mitzvahs project initiated in her Orthodox congregation by its charismatic rabbi to memorialize three boys, Eyal Yifrach, Gilad Shaar, and Naftali Frankel, who were tragically killed by Palestinian terrorists in Israel in 2014. Naftali's mother, Rachel Frankel, came to speak at a public program sponsored by the congregation to initiate the program to increase observance in their memory. I attended the program as part of my fieldwork. To date, according to the congregation's weekly newsletter, the initiative has inspired congregants to commit to more than 1000 new ritual obligations.

she says now, “or cheeseburgers, and, yeah, I love cheeseburgers, or I used to love cheeseburgers.” She eats more slowly, thinking about what she is eating as she takes each bite. She also recites a prayer of gratitude before she eats. “It heightens the experience when you become much more aware of a divine presence in your food,” she says.

The women in this study echo Annie’s experience of animating divine presence through the embodied act of eating, a communal imperative among the stringently Orthodox, which further inscribes its resonance. They express an understanding of the basic laws of *kashrut,* separating milk and meat, not eating pork or shellfish, purchasing only approved grocery items, and following specific methods in food preparation.[184] They are gradually taking them on, though each at her own pace and in her own way. As with so many other ritual obligations of stringent Orthodoxy, keeping kosher is a process. Annie’s is consonant with her own slower progression of “baby steps,” while Leah and Ava exemplify more punctilious observance. Leah, who was raised Conservative and later became Orthodox, invokes divine authority when speaking about observance. “[The Torah] is what *Hashem* has asked us to accept,” she says, clearly delineating it as the “right” way. She keeps kosher at home and will only eat out at kosher restaurants. Ava has heightened her level of *kashrut* observance as she has learned more and deepened her commitment. Her children, one of whom is more stringently observant than she is, have raised the bar, encouraging her to study the myriad details of kosher observance.

Dina spent a full year studying the laws of *kashrut* and “practicing,” as she calls it, purchasing dual sets of dishes, pots and utensils, one for milk, the other for meat, including special kosher for Passover sets, before her then rabbi agreed to *kasher* her kitchen. “Every time I put food in my mouth, I think of *Hashem*,”[185] she says. “And I think it is such a beautiful *mitzvah*.”

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[184] The laws of *kashrut* are sourced in the Torah, Lev. 11 and Deut. 14, further explicated in the Mishnah and Talmud, where Jewish law is written down and codified.

[185] *Hashem*, in Hebrew, literally “the name,” is another word used for God by many observant Jews.

All of the women credit rabbis, teachers, friends, family, and community members with providing information, inspiration, and encouragement. Sarah tells of being "blown away," by one of her Melton teachers, an observant Orthodox rabbi. "He told great stories, and he made everything, rituals and everyday things, so meaningful," she recalls. " I still remember the story he told us about taking a blow torch to his barbecue before *Pesach*, and I thought, 'wow, that's so dedicated.''[186] Sarah says she was most impressed with the rabbi's approach, not telling but showing. "It wasn't like you should do this or you have to do this; it was just well, this is what I do and this is how some people celebrate." She began keeping a kosher home soon after she married, more than thirty years ago, but lessened her observance as her family grew and her children took on different eating habits. Now, as she has become more observant, she has heightened her personal observance both at home and outside.

Some of the women, like Leah, remember the accommodation of the more progressive streams of Judaism of their youth when the laws of *kashrut* were mitigated to allow eating out or other transgressions. There was a "superfluidity of *kashrut"* back then, recalls Aileen, part of "a kind of Chinese menu of Jewish tradition and/or culture," with families choosing which laws they followed, and which they chose to moderate or ignore. She has now *kashered* her kitchen after remodeling it, for ease of keeping the prescribed separations for cooking and eating, with the help of one of the *kollel* rabbis and his wife.

For many Jews in the mid-twentieth century, keeping kosher was reminiscent of their immigrant parents or grandparents, and not consonant with contemporary American life. Kara tells of growing up in a Reform home, with two sets of grandparents living nearby, one who kept kosher, and the other who did not. She and her cousins called the kosher grandma "crotchety." "She was a big rule follower," says Kara, recalling her grandma telling the kids that they had "messed up" if they used the wrong utensil for dairy or meat and that she had to "bury this knife

[186] Passover, the springtime holiday that marks the Jewish exodus from slavery in Egypt to freedom in the Promised Land, has its own set of stringent dietary prohibitions and requires its own arduous cleaning processes to make kitchen and other cooking areas kosher for Passover.

because of what you did to it." Neither her family, nor those of her cousins, kept kosher, and they used to joke about "how annoying" the grandma was about observing the dietary laws. In her childhood home, although her parents did not keep kosher, they did eschew pork or shellfish at home, a common phenomenon in the 1950s or 1960s, the era of a so-called "kosher-style" practice. Kara laughs as she remembers the first time her mother brought home a new product, Sizzlean, and the family was so excited. "Fake bacon!" Now, looking back, she says, "There were no rules really."[187]

There is, for the women in this study, a disillusionment with the Judaism of their childhood, with its loosening of structure and stricture and its lack of constancy and consistency. They are neither nostalgic nor enchanted with the moderated or modulated past that their parents had conceived. Rather, like Leah, Ava, Kara, Sarah, and Aileen, they are disenchanted with the diminished Judaism they grew up with and motivated to recover the more substantive belief and practice that has been lost, forgotten, or put aside. The meme of lost and found echoes, with the qualification and insistence on significance.[188]

For Kara, the knowledge and understanding of the laws of *kashrut* — the know-how, know-what, and know-why — has deepened her commitment to following observant Jewish law. Like, Sarah, she seems amazed that such laws exist and is working hard to follow them. While

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[187] Sarna, *American Judaism*, 272-293. Sarna tracks the changing landscape of American Jewry with the rise of progressive streams of Judaism and the moderating and modulating of practice, including the laws of *kashrut.* Families, particularly in the 1950s and 1960s, did in fact make choices, and ascribe to certain rules, such as not eating pork at home, even if they did not choose to stringently follow the traditional Jewish dietary requirements. Kara's comment that "There were no rules," is both a personal value judgment as well as a reflection of the power of retrospective memory as a tool in constituting identity, as she chooses to recollect the experience consonant with her new identity as an observant Jewish woman.

[188] Ochs, writing from a non-Orthodox perspective, makes a useful qualification of nostalgic remembrance, noting that while it can "be a motivating force in one's religious life [leading] to loyalty and connection," such an attachment to the past, however one chooses to define it, can also be "deadening," *Inventing Jewish Ritual*, 32.

The subjects in this study exhibit both a reverence for the past but also a consciousness of making it relevant and meaningful to their lives now. The rabbis engaged in *kiruv* in this study are keenly aware of presenting Jewish ritual within this context.

gradually moving towards keeping them —buying kosher meat, studying *kashrut* with one of her teachers, and peppering her rabbi with questions — *kashering* the kitchen in the family's new home two years ago was a dramatic turning point, though not without its missteps. She tells of the crisis when she bought "kosher" sausage and put it in her small dairy toaster oven to heat rather than her larger meat oven. "It was small, so we wanted to use a small oven." When she realized what she had done, she was beside herself. "For sure, I just killed my toaster oven." A call to her rabbi allayed her panic with instructions on what to do to remedy the error. Lara, who also *kashered* her kitchen after moving into a new home, and similarly wary of making mistakes, put up notes and reminders for her non-observant family and visiting relatives to avoid such catastrophes.

Benor, in her study of BT cultural transformation, classifies food as "cultural capital." She includes it, along with dress and home décor, as one of the valuable cultural dimensions that construct BT identity. Drawing on social theorist Pierre Bourdieu's three categories of cultural capital — embodied, objectified and institutionalized — she shows how cultural practices, such as eating, using *Shabbos* candlesticks, or attending a synagogue, inform both an individual and communal sense of self. The data in this study similarly evince a relationship between an individual commitment to Judaism's intricate system of laws, including *kashrut* observance, and communal belonging.[189] Older, more mature, and socially experienced, the subjects manifest a keen self-awareness of their insider/outsider positionality and the contingent relationship between levels of observance and communal acceptance.[190]

Hannah wrestles with heightening her *Shabbos*- and *kashrut*-observance, aware that lesser observance, and lesser-accrued cultural capital, may preclude communal inclusion. "I'm exploring this, I'm not card-carrying," she says at one point, emphasizing her liminal status in the

[189] The phenomenon of belonging is more fully explored in Chapter Five, Belonging.

[190] Benor, *Becoming Frum*, 78-80, 168-184.

Orthodox community. Yet later, she keenly observes, “I think that if you wanna be part of a community, you have to wholly jump in and be part of that community.”

Carrie’s decision to buy a *Shabbos* house in the observant neighborhood for Sabbath and holiday stays was a conscious act to enhance her acceptance. She also heightened her *kashrut* observance, sensitive to the standards of her new neighbors.

Kara also was motivated to more strictly adhere to the kosher laws. Reciprocating for hospitality of their neighbors — the numerous Sabbath and holiday invitations extended — she, like Carrie, understands the need to assure that guests will trust her *kashrut* observance and be comfortable eating in her home.

However, Davidman, Kaufman, and Benor reveal that keeping kosher is one of the most difficult life obligations for BTs to take on, with challenging social and familial consequences. Abstaining from certain forbidden foods and only eating in homes or restaurants where the strict laws are observed often has a chilling effect on family and social relationships. Such religious transformation by its very nature requires sacrifice, as one of the local rabbis says, yet for those who choose to follow the way, it can be eminently fulfilling and satisfying.

Dressing the Part

“I still miss my tank tops,” admits Ava sheepishly. We are chatting in her tiny office, adjacent to the workout area equipped with treadmill, weights, and a variety of other exercise gear, where she works daily with a range of clients on improving their physical fitness. An exercise physiologist, she has owned and operated her own women-only business for more than 20 years, serving, among others, a number of women in the stringently Orthodox community. She is dressed in clingy black tights, a stylish knit pullover and running shoes. Her head is uncovered.

When we finish our interview, she pulls on a fashionable, swingy black knit skirt over her tights, plops a baseball cap on her hair, and breezes out the door with me.

She looks the part of a contemporary Orthodox woman, knees, elbows, and head covered, yet still stylish and put together without abrogating the traditional standards for modest dress. She makes it look easy.

It is not.

Earlier she confided that she still feels guilty about wearing pants in the gym, and covering up when she leaves, but it is part of her job. Her shy admission about her beloved tank tops takes me by surprise; her honesty startling. She has been observant for at least two decades, gradually hewing more punctiliously to the standards of dress for Orthodox women. I would have expected her to be comfortable in her own shoes, or clothing.

Yet, Ava's experience highlights the difficulties for women who gradually move towards a more observant Orthodoxy and have already made certain lifestyle choices, including what they do and where they work. It also points to the impact of the changes that they make in their lives, and the things they give up, such as tank tops, which, for a fitness fanatic like Ava, embodied who she was.

Dress is a key identity marker, and for observant Orthodox women it sets them apart as well as defines them. Gender in Orthodox Judaism ascribes particular roles for women, with specific religious obligations that inscribe their roles as wives and mothers. Their dress and comportment reflect the roles they play, with their sexual selves revealed only within the privacy of their marital homes. In public, long skirts, blouses or tops with sleeves and modest necklines, stockings or socks, closed shoes and hair covered either with a hat or scarf or wig inscribe their identity and affirm their separateness. Orthodox women "are not to be seen as sexually tempting," writes Davidman, in her work on those who are shedding traditional identity.[191] Among those who are taking it on, dress is an embodiment of what Kaufman calls the accepted "code of modesty."[192]

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[191] Davidman, *Becoming*, 11.

[192] Kaufman, *Rachel's Daughters*, 82.

As with other ritual acts and embodied practices, assuming that obligation is a process, its pace and progression individual for each woman, reflective of her age and stage of life, as well as her lifestyle. As Davidman noted in her study of BT transformation among women at the modern Orthodox Lincoln Square Synagogue and a second group from the more stringently Orthodox Bais Chana residential BT outreach program, the women at Lincoln Square, better educated, older, with more experience in the secular world, had a more difficult time taking on many of the embodied practices of observant life than the younger, less experienced Bais Chana cohort. "One reason why the women at Lincoln Square were slower to change their lives was that they were already rooted, at least somewhat comfortably, in the secular world," she found.[193]

Such a finding is replicated in this study among older, well-educated women, which reveals a continuum of choice on dress, and for most of the women, difficulty in taking on this obligation. For many, it is an experiment, inspired by a consciousness of communal standards, often beginning with choosing skirts rather than slacks for classes or other programs in the Orthodox community. Lara tells of wearing skirts, and sometimes covering her head for her weekly study sessions with the *Kollel's* director of women's programming. "It's out of respect," she says. The director says that, while there is no code of dress for women studying individually or in groups, she has noticed that they come to see dress as an "identity marker," and that some, like Lara, begin to dress more modestly when they come to study. Still, Lara, a physical therapist who works with children, wears pants so that she can work comfortably with her clients. When we meet, she is dressed in form-fitting jeans, suede slides with painted toenails peeking out, and a short sleeve scooped neck T-shirt, with a headful of wild curls framing her face.

She says that when she goes to *shul* on Saturdays, she covers her head, often with an elaborate wrapped scarf, and wears a modest length skirt and blouse. She confides that a male friend, knowledgeable about Orthodoxy, teasingly asks if her outfit is Orthodox, or Orthodox-ish. Despite her laughter, her internal angst about taking on a new identity as an Orthodox Jewish woman is palpable. "I'm feeling like a fraud," she says, echoing doubts expressed by others

[193] Davidman, *Traditions,* 185.

further along in their BT transformation who question their own authenticity. Even Ava says she feels "guilty" about wearing pants to work. Hannah is struggling with dress also, wearing more skirts than pants, yet still not ready to cover her head. "I'm trying it on for size," she says, expressing concern about "what image I am trying to project."

Dina, impeccably put together in a modest black skirt and top, sandals, make up just so, and her dark blonde hair beautifully coiffed, admits to sometimes "running around like all the other moms here in Lululemon [a popular brand of exercise apparel]" during the week. She too speaks of the impact of dress on positionality, on where a woman is perceived within the continuum of Orthodoxy. "It's hard being inside and outside," she says, again expressing the agony of Benor's "in-betweenness."

Dress embodies personal religious identity, as well as communal identity and acceptance, as this study shows. As Morgan suggests in his study of the impact of embodied acts on religious identity, "(dress has the power) to limn the collective or social body at the expense of the individual."[194] Or in other words, it has the power to chill personal choice in deference to communal norms.

Kara says that she now chooses to wear more skirts than pants, more jackets than sleeveless tops. She says she is "internalizing modesty," as she struggles to find what works for her, admitting that she still likes to look "cute." Particularly working in the secular world, she strives to look professional, modest yet not too distinctive, which she fears might be off-putting to her clients. She had been covering her head, like Lara, when in Orthodox environments, with a hat or scarf, but has since purchased a wig and wears it in other surroundings as well. As the mother of three daughters, two still living at home, she is keenly aware of her responsibility as a role model for her daughters in terms of their wardrobe choices. Her dress communicates her positionality, not only to her offspring, but to the larger community as well.

Benor identifies key trends in taking on embodied practices, such as selective accommodation, as in Lara's choices of when and where to dress more modestly, to hyper

[194] Morgan, "Material Culture," 13.

accommodation, an exaggerated form of practice, to deliberate distinctiveness, Dina's everyday outfits, where BTs retain some of their former modes of dress in order to retain some sense of their former self.[195]

Davidman, studying both those who are moving towards observant Orthodoxy and those moving away from it, has found that changes in normative embodied practice, such as dress, disrupts confidence and diminishes a secure sense of self, further reinforcing the powerful impact of embodiment on identity construction.[196]

Morgan suggests that bodies are both subjects and objects in religious transformation, as they interface with the surrounding culture and engage in a variety of performative acts. "The body is made in material practice," he writes, as this study shows: BTs take on a variety of rituals, practices, and acts. Such doing, or making, brings not only material place into being, as Smith suggests, but also the interiority of personal space, and the very intimate, individual sense of self. And in doing so, it also sparks the possibility for that being to animate its spiritual dimension as well. "The body is made in material practice," he says, "and it serves in turn as the means by which experience is organized and made into the register of value and meaning."[197]

And that meaning and value, animated by embodied practices, sparks an awareness of divine presence, as doing inspires believing.

[195] Benor, *Becoming Frum*, 3-4.

[196] Davidman, *Becoming Unorthodox*, 17.

[197] Morgan, "Material Culture," 23.

CHAPTER FOUR: BELIEVING

Often on weekday mornings, the rabbi drives carpool.

He hurries his noisy gaggle of children into the family van, taking time to check that shoes are tied, shirts are tucked, hair is combed, faces washed. As he shoos them out of the car in the school parking to begin another day, he leaves them with the words, "be *mikadesh shem shamayim,"* a reminder that how they look, how they act, embodies God's presence.

"It's what I want every second of my life … every second of my family's life … " says the father of eight, "to sanctify God's name, to reflect His purpose. Even the smallest action is infused with God's holiness," says the fiery rabbi with a disarming tenderness as he speaks of his aspirations for his two daughters, now almost grown, and six younger children. "A smile is a *kiddush Hashem,*" sanctifying God, he says. And even the smallest action should be done with divine awareness.

Kiddush Hashem, proclaims the rabbi, but who is God and what constitutes His holiness?

This chapter shows how BTs sense divine presence and conceive of its power through a growing apprehension of God's hand in shaping their lives and God's plan in guiding them. It emanates from mindfulness, a growing self-awareness that inspires profound gratitude for all the positive aspects of their lives, which deepens as they become attuned to the existence of a heavenly, or spiritual, force as its source. Embodied rituals and performative acts continue to inscribe this divine presence, while the divine presence further inscribes the significance of the acts. Doing and being become mutually dependent, each informing the other, while the notion of God infuses the acts with compelling resonance, and the materiality of the acts infuse the divine presence with compelling materiality. As they conceive of the divine presence, they gradually come to believe in its power as something greater than themselves and a source of infinite comfort, particularly as they confront life's challenges.

Mindful and Grateful

Observant Jews seek out God's presence and diffuse its divine essence, embodying godliness and becoming its earthly purveyor.[198] But for those new to observant Orthodoxy, the question becomes how to conjure a real God from an ethereal being whose existence cannot be empirically proven and whose apprehension is beyond human sensory perception? And how to actualize that presence as the source of divine obligation? Luhrmann cogently parses the question in her work exploring spirituality among contemporary Christian evangelicals, and it resonates in the larger religious world. Especially for BTs, who are struggling to take on the divinely prescribed obligations of observant Jewish life, how can they find God and make Him real?

Luhrmann suggests, and my data show, that believing is a gradual process.[199] Grounded in experience,[200] as discussed in the previous chapter on embodied acts, believing unfolds over space and time, its pace and progression as individual as each believer and the religious identity she constructs. It emanates from learned behavior, an attitudinal shift, a studied consciousness, an acute awareness of the world and our place in it. And it emanates from heightened appreciation, and even awe, of God as the Creator, infusing even the most mundane act, a smile, a swallow of water, or a ray of sunshine with divine quiddity and profound gratitude.

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[198] The 2016 Pew Research Center, Religion and Public Life, in its *Portrait of American Orthodox Jews: A Further Analysis of the 2013 Survey of U.S. Jews*, found that Orthodox Jews are more likely than other Jews to believe in God with absolute certainty and participate in various Jewish religious practices; 89 percent (including 96 percent of the stringently Orthodox) say they are certain in their belief of God compared with 41 percent of Conservative Jews and 29 percent of Reform Jews, 17.

[199] Benor, the sociolinguist, has also found that an apprehension of God is a process, while Luhrmann, echoing Benor's findings and her linguistic parlance, likens the process of knowing God to "learning a foreign language," *When God Talks Back*, xix.

[200] Luhrmann asserts the primacy of experience in making God real. She writes that once divine presence is apprehended as a magical "hyper reality that demands a willing suspension of belief," God becomes known through experience. "Direct personal experiences … make God real and integral to one's sense of self," *When God Talks Back*, 301.

Annie awakens each morning with renewed thankfulness for the gift of a new day and its innate promise. She takes a few moments to express her gratitude, reading through entries in her handmade journal, perhaps adding another to the plain loose-leaf notebook that has become her early morning *Siddur*, or prayer book. She has taken the traditional ritual of beginning each day with prayer and made it her own.[201]

Her initial exposure to the practice of starting her day with a thank you came not from a rabbi or other Jewish teacher but from secular self-help guru Wayne Dyer, whose best-selling books and talks have helped many who are searching for purpose and meaning.[202] She was surprised to find Dyer's suggestion of beginning each day with a "gratitude list" was actually reflective of an age-old Jewish practice which gave it added weight as she was beginning her religious search. Now, her rabbi urges her to hone her awareness and appreciation, she says. She spends five minutes each morning doing that, sitting on the edge of her bed, facing East, the traditional direction for Jewish prayer, to read through her journal.

"I get up and thank God for making me holy," she says, "and from that follows my gratitude list."

She thanks God for all the conveniences in her home, for her car, for her job, and for all the goods and services that make her life comfortable. "I go through this whole thing with passion and intensity. I close my book. I get a glass of water. I turn on my computer, and I'm ready to hit the ground running. It puts me in a positive frame of mind, no negativity in the morning. Zero."

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[201] Jewish observance includes an early morning prayer recited just as one awakens and begins another day. Called in Hebrew the *Modeh Ani*, "I gratefully thank you," it thanks God for opening our eyes and restoring our faculties to us.

[202] Wuthnow, in his work exploring contemporary American spirituality, notes the emergence of the self-help movement and its leaders, such as Dyer, as an alternative path for those seeking spiritual succor. "Best selling authors have counseled millions to look into their own souls and to get in touch with their inner selves," he writes, *After Heaven*, 13.

It is a daily reminder of divine presence, and all that she has been given, says Annie. It renews her sense of purpose and allays the loneliness and despondency that can sometimes engulf her.

The notion of God's presence, and its impact on their lives, as they not only recognize divine being but also actualize it through the embrace of divine obligation, is very real for the women in this study. Each of them expressed a belief in God, several tracing it to remembered perceptions of the divine from childhood that became more fully formed through experience or understanding as they matured.[203] Ava, who grew up in a traditional home, says she always felt as if God was there. "I felt like He was my personal God," she says. She talks to God all the time now, confiding in Him, asking for guidance, asking for blessings for herself and her family, and saying thank you. "I do a lot of thanking," she says. "There's something about gratitude that is a good thing."

And as she cultivates her appreciation for all she has been given, or found, and contends with all that has been lost, she has also gradually taken on more *mitzvot*, or religious obligations, to further strengthen her relationship with God and assert His authority. "My relationship with God is very important to me," she says.

Rena, who was raised with little or no Jewish background, says she had "little or no conception of God when I was growing up." Still, she recalls writing a letter to God as a young child and placing in on the windowsill for Him. "So I had some concept that there was some sort

[203] A similar unformed belief in God's existence, but not necessarily His presence, is detected in prior studies of BTs. Kaufman reports that her subjects express a belief in "a divine source," while Davidman's data evinces a similar finding, though a decidedly more intense belief among the cohort of women at the more stringently Orthodox Bais Chana outreach program than at the modern Orthodox Lincoln Square program, where about half of the women responded that they were "not certain" of God's existence and two-thirds reported that they had never had a spiritual experience. Davidman, *Tradition*, 102-103. Data from Aviad's earlier study of BT men in Israel, *Return to Judaism*, also evidences an underlying belief in God among subjects.

of thing out there," she says, as I gently probe further. Perhaps her response is a retrospective memory of the past honed by her full embrace now of an all-knowing, all-seeing divine presence who is "intimately involved in every single person's life," as she describes God and His power.[204] Perhaps it was a flicker of consciousness even then, as she now believes. It is difficult to discern how much of Jewish memory past is colored by Jewish memory present, and the religious path my subjects have chosen to pursue.[205]

So Rena now tells of "making it holy," reciting nearly one hundred blessings during the course of her day [206] investing routine acts or occurrences with spiritual valence. "*Baruch atah adonai, elohenu melech ha'olam*, blessed are thou, our lord our God, king of the universe who …" she says that she whispers, expressing her awareness of and gratitude for any one of the everyday occurrences she encounters. "It makes me stop, slow down, be present," she says of the continuous flow of words of thanks. And it inscribes her belief in God the Creator, a God who is the source of all things, a loving God who inspires such acts to bring us closer to Him.

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[204] Boym's nostalgia — a romanticized longing for the past — often infuses retrospective memories of those seeking to recover the lost or discarded observant Orthodox practice of the past.

[205] Both self-reflection and reflexivity is discussed more fully in the methodology section of this dissertation. They informed the data gathering and analysis as I monitored my responses to my subjects and later reflected on their words. Particularly when speaking about the more recent past, I often heard gentle derision of the more progressive streams of Judaism and disparagement of the perceived lack of constancy and consistency in their interpretation of Jewish law. I heard discomfort with the concomitant accommodation of ritual and belief to comport with secular values. I also heard a nostalgic glossing over of the recovered past, as subjects re-imagined the stringently Jewish lives of their ancestors. Hearing what the subjects were saying through the lines, and discerning their message, required an acute self-awareness to protect their words from my personal perception and preserve their meaning. Such an "interactive interviewing process" is intrinsic to the grounded theory methodology employed in this study. Svend Brinkmann and Steinar Kvale, in *InterViews: Learning the Craft of Qualitative Research Interviewing* (Los Angeles: Sage Publications, 2015), discuss these interviewing techniques and describe interview data collected using such a process as "a reality constructed by interviewer and interviewee," 52. Interview techniques are more fully discussed in Appendix I.

[206] The teaching to recite one hundred blessings a day derives from a verse in the Torah, Deut. 10:12, in response to the question what does God ask of you? It is codified in the *Shulchan Arukh*, Rabbi Joseph Caro's sixteenth century compendium of teachings on the Jewish code of law. According to the Chabad website, praying the requisite three times a day and saying blessings both before and after eating help to reach the quota. http://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/987904/jewish/How-Many-Blessings-does-a-Jew-Say-Each-Day.htm.

Dina, raised in a devout, evangelical Christian household, recalls going to church three times a week and being very active in the church's youth ministry. "I used to take the bus to church sometimes, just to sing songs," she recalls of her youth. She tells of growing up on a raisin farm, and of how the family's dependency on the cycles of nature further deepened her faith. "You learn how the picking goes, and the drying, and you pray for rain. So much depends on the weather, because if the rains didn't come … there was a drought … that was a big deal."[207]

She remembers talking to God, asking God for things, arguing with God. "God wants us to talk all the time," she says. "And I do." Even when she felt betrayed after a youth minister in her church abused her younger brother, her belief in God remained strong. It caused her to question her church's teachings on forgiveness and salvation and precipitated a religious search that ultimately led her to Judaism. Still, she says, her faith was not shaken.

"Faith is my middle name," she says. "I've always remained close to God."

Sarah, raised with little Jewish education or experience, speaks of a compelling desire to learn more about Judaism that developed, as she grew older.[208] She tells of her decision to keep a kosher home after she and her husband married, even though neither of them had kept kosher growing up. She tells of her interest in Jewish learning, first to enhance her professional credentials as a Jewish educator, later to satisfy her personal yearning to know more, of seeking out classes and programs to further deepen her knowledge and understanding, even many years before she turned toward Orthodoxy. "I think God is always there, " she says, even if when she was younger she was not as acutely aware of His presence. "And then if we want to seek him out, that's our opportunity," she says. "God wants us to know him." Her God is not a distant God, but One who draws us near, who wants to be part of our lives.

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[207] Awareness of the cycles of nature, the randomness of natural disaster, and innate human vulnerability, vividly materialize God's presence and power for believers such as Dina.

[208] Stephen J. Hunt, "Religion as a Factor in Life and Death through the Life Course," in *The Sage Handbook of the Sociology of Religion*, eds. James A. Beckford and N.J. Demerath III (Los Angeles: Sage Publications, 2007). Hunt explores the relationship between religion and life course location, including the increase in interest, self-reflexivity, and questioning of meaning and purpose among respondents further along their life course trajectories.

Her own divine acquaintance developed as one of her daughters became more religious and took on the obligations of a stringently observant life. She recalls her daughter occasionally asking Sarah to pray for her, and doing it, even though she was not sure of its impact. “She’d say, I need this prayer; can you pray this for me? And I thought that it was something important to her, and I did it,” Sarah explains. Gradually, she began to believe in its power. “It seemed to work for her,” she says, reflecting that the experience influenced her own spiritual progression and gradual acceptance of divine authority.[209]

Carrie speaks similarly of a growing awareness of God’s presence as she and her husband grew older, as they became empty nesters, as their busy professional lives slowed, as they aged and faced significant health challenges. Once their children were on their own, the couple spent their time taking classes, attending programs, traveling to Israel and gradually getting involved in Jewish communal life in a way they had not before. In her earlier years, Carrie says, she had little sense of divine presence, and neither looked for it nor sought it out. Only now, she sees that her need to seek out God, and find Him, and to believe in Him, is perhaps what inspired her own spiritual journey and propelled her forward. This need echoes through the stories of the women in this study, women who have suffered loss and its profound desolation or despair; they are seeking company, seeking comfort, and seeking consolation. “Where is God?” Carrie asks in response to my question on how she finds God, “wherever you let Him in.”

Growing up, Carrie had little sense of such spiritual presence, she says. Her family had lived for five generations in a large Midwest Jewish community where “everybody I knew was Jewish.” They were members of an established Reform congregation where being Jewish was

[209] The impact of the religious transformation of adult children on the move toward stringently observant Orthodoxy among the subjects of this study is more fully discussed in Chapter Five, Belonging.

more a shared cultural identity than a mark of religious distinctiveness.[210] She knew little of the intricate system of Jewish laws that had come from God and demanded adherence. “We grew up in a Jewish neighborhood,” she says, “not an observant neighborhood,” noting how the more assimilated Jews clearly distanced themselves from their more observant brethren.

She describes her family’s congregation as “classical Reform.” its tenor almost churchlike, characterized by reserve and restraint,[211] without any of the appealing spiritual vibrancy of observant Orthodoxy, with its all-encompassing God and “Torah true” obligations.

Aileen, also growing up in the mid-twentieth century in a similar Reform congregation on the East coast, echoes Carrie’s experience. She is more pointed in her criticism of her Reform upbringing, faulting the more liberal practice of her youth for offering a Judaism bereft of God. “God was completely absent from that much vaunted education [which she received in the mid-1950s in her family’s congregation] as were the tenets of behavior; we were taught about *Shabbos* and holidays — history and observance — but not the objects of that veneration.” Judaism, she suggests, was “no more than an identity/cultural thing with the concept of the Torah as a history book.”[212] Yet, she too found God later in life, in the depths of despair, as she battled stage four cancer and sought His help for the strength to go on. She was ready to let go of the God-less Judaism of her youth and, in Carrie’s words, let God in.

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[210] Cohen and Eisen, in their study of contemporary American Jews *The Jew Within*, note the emphasis on cultural identity and the lessened emphasis on religious distinctiveness as embodied in ritual and practice in mid-twentieth century America and a growing return in the latter years of the century to meaningful practice informed by individual choice and animated by experience.

[211] Sarna, *American Judaism*, 194-198. Sarna describes the essence of mid-twentieth century classical Reform Judaism as one informed by modernity, moderated religious practice and social justice initiatives, which attempted to provide a way for Jews to be both Jewish and American.

[212] Aileen shared these thoughts in an email she sent to me after our second interview when I began to explore her spiritual grounding. She confided in the email that my questions evoked deeper issues that she had really not thought about before, and, it was only later, late at night, that she was able to crystalize her thinking and write the response from which these words are taken. As Davidman notes in her book, *Becoming Unorthodox*, on the impact of self-narrative on identity construction, “Each time a person provides a narrative account of his life, he is recreating his identity through the very telling,” 208.

God's Hand

God-less Judaism, as characterized by Aileen, lacks the authenticity and authority of the "Torah true" Judaism the women have now embraced. Its appeal emanates from a yearning for certainty, for order, for control, for comfort, for purpose, and for meaning, as the data show. It derives from an innate acceptance of divine existence and divine imperative, a belief in an omnipotent God, and an obligation to hew diligently to His demands.

Its roots are in the Torah, in its very beginnings with God as the Creator of heaven and earth and all thereof.[213] Its theological foundation is more clearly explicated in *The Thirteen Principles of Faith*, as compiled by the revered Jewish scholar Maimonides in the twelfth century, which begins with belief in the Creator and goes on to establish the divine origin of the Torah and its immutability.[214] It is evinced in the earlier writings of the Greek philosopher Aristotle[215] and later recast by the Catholic cleric Thomas Aquinas in his five proofs for the existence of God.[216] It continues to be revisited by more contemporary scholars, such as Rabbi Leo Baeck,[217] who explores the tension this belief engenders between God's immanence, His closeness to us as a God who loves and protects us, and God's transcendence, His distance from us as a magisterial

[213] Gen. 1:1.

[214] Maimonides's *Thirteen Principles of Faith*, derived from the Torah by the twelfth century philosopher and codifier of Jewish law, Rabbi Moshe Ben Maimon, contain the "fundamental truths of religions and its very foundations." http://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/332555/jewish/Maimonides-13-Principles-of-Faith.htm.

[215] Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, Book 12, chapters 6-10. Aristotle, writing in 350 BCE, established the principle of a "prime mover" in the universe, "unchanging and eternal," "the source of all process and change," whose mode is "being good." http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/metaphysics.12.xii.html.

[216] St. Thomas Aquinas delineated the five proofs for the existence of God in the *Summa Theologia* written between 1265 and 1274 CE. A succinct explanation of the five proofs is found in *The Catholic Faith Handbook for Youth*, https://www.smp.org/dynamicmedia/files/7bd9dab3b7eb75e6859e4f4e47daf528/TX003092-2-handout-F-Aquinas_Five_Proofs_for_the_Existence_of_God.pdf.

[217] Leo Baeck, T*he Essence of Judaism* (New York: Schocken Paperback, 1961). Baeck, a German Jewish rabbi who was raised in a traditional home and ordained in the Conservative rabbinic seminary, was the rabbi in Theresientstadt, a Nazi concentration camp in Hungary. He survived to become an eminent liberal theologian of the twentieth century who wrestled with the nature of divine being and the notion of ethical monotheism in the modern world. https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/leo-baeck.

presence who demands our obedience. And, even now, Oakes and Luhrmann seek to reconcile the two as they limn the dilemma of faith.

The belief that the Torah is divinely written, and its intricate system of rules and laws divinely prescribed, leaves little room for the moderation or modulation of the more progressive streams of Judaism from which almost all of the women in this study have come. They wrestle with the arbitrariness of divine decree and how to accept and actualize it in lives that have already spooled out over time. Some, as Benor observes, hyper-accommodate to its structures and strictures, exaggerating ritual or cultural practices, in an attempt to assert their membership in the newfound religious world.[218] Others, as discussed in Chapter Three, hew to a slower pace and progression of heightened religious obligation, picking and choosing new obligations to take on, and the degree of stringency to apply. Still, even those seriously considering or now following the path to stringent Orthodox observance, may succumb to doubt as other studies have shown, some taking on ritual observance while still wrestling with belief in divine existence and authority which is often harder to embrace. Doubt can enrich the process of transformation, inspiring serious thought and engagement with Judaism's fundamental beliefs.[219]

Hannah speaks poignantly of her difficulty in taking on the myriad obligations such a system of belief requires. "I'm not sure how I feel about God," she concedes, "I don't know if I believe in perfect faith, as they say. I don't know. But to me, it's all about challenging yourself and thinking about it and that's a sign of being a good Jew … being open to that conversation … and mulling it over. I really do think, not just as a Jew, but as a human being that when you've just decided something, and you're done, like you die in a way.

[218] Benor, *Becoming Frum*, 174-175. While Benor's primary emphasis is on hyper-accommodation in linguistic practices among BTs, she notes later in her book the phenomenon of "overzealous" observance of Orthodox law or custom to demonstrate knowledge and understanding.

[219] Davidman, in *Tradition*, describes the agnosticism encountered among the Lincoln Square cohort in her study and the effort by the rabbis teaching them to present religious teachings in practical and rational terms rather than spiritual ones, de-emphasizing the importance of faith in BT transformation. Rabbi Ephraim Buchwald, one of those teachers who developed the Lincoln Square outreach model, told Davidman in an interview, "We don't push God at Lincoln Square," 142.

"I think we should always be pushing ourselves to do a little more, that it's okay not to believe perfectly. But as long as you're thinking about it, that's a good thing.

"So my faith may not be as strong as others."[220]

She faults herself, a familiar meme, looking to God and His ways as inspiration and aspiration, not as reproach and recrimination. Her God, like the God of Ava, Rena, Carrie, Aileen, and the other women in this study, is a loving God, who, as Ava says, "only wants good for us" or as Rena believes "only wants us to be happy." He is not the wrathful God who is also found in the Torah, not the fearsome, vengeful God of old — Baeck's magisterial presence who demands obedience and metes out punishment to the transgressors.[221]

Kara, like Hannah, is also more deliberate in taking on enhanced obligations, while, at the same time, allowing her faith to grow and her religious transformation to unfold naturally, even as she wrestles with how her growing faith, and its obligations, impacts her daughters.

Yet the system is predicated on such faith, vesting it with compelling authority. And while the mature subjects of this study are more measured in committing to new or heightened religious obligations — more cognizant of their ramifications on familial, social or communal relationships

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[220] In an interview with Rabbi Buchwald as part of my fieldwork for this study, I asked about doubt. He said, "Judaism is enriched by questioning." He went on, "Doubt is the most important thing we can bring to the table when it comes to belief. It encourages learning, and encourages questions."

[221] Moshe Chaim Luzzatto, *The Path of the Just*, trans. Yosef Leibler (Jerusalem: Feldheim Publishers, 2004). *The Path of the Just*, considered one of the most important ethical texts written in the post-Middle Ages, was written and published in Amsterdam in 1738. Luzzatto, its author, was an Italian-born rabbi who used the book, framed as a dialogue between a wise man and a pious man, to discuss the perfection of character. Its first chapter on "Man's Duty in the World," explores the nature of God, urging his readers to seek both fear and love of the Eternal. While Luzzatto's connotation of fear could be construed as "awe," it is also clear that fear should inspire allegiance to divine imperative. He writes that the book seeks to move readers to "fear the Eternal, Our God, and we will not forget our duty toward Him. That which the material world seeks to remove from our hearts will be stimulated by reading and contemplation, and it will stir us to perform what we have been commanded to do," 7.

The Path of the Just is a widely suggested reading for those seeking to learn more about Orthodoxy or those who are contemplating following its path. The women in this study express a belief in a loving God, who only wants them to grow toward him to improve their lives. There is no mention of fear or punishment in their accounts, though the notion of awe may serve as inspiration for their growing belief in His Power and desire to follow His ways.

— and more self-confident in terms of determining the pace and progression of their religious transformation, there is still an inherent understanding that such a transformation is engendered, and sustained, by an unerring faith.[222] An underlying belief in the authority of the Torah informs their narratives, even as they wrestle, like Hannah and Kara, with accepting its precepts and learning how to follow them. The Torah is the "right way," says Leah with assurance. "It's what *Hashem* has passed down and asked us to accept." Yet while she exercises her own discretion on how she dresses or where she socializes, she makes clear that "the Torah is true," and its laws irrefutable, even if she is "not doing it all." At least not now, or at least, not yet.

The women in this study are drawn to an all-powerful God, his existence a comforting certainty, His love a source of strength and comfort. "When you're having difficulties, *Hashem* wants you to ask for help," says Leah. "I've always done it." Ava, too, speaks of how talking to God allayed her grief and loneliness after her sister died. Her resolve to take on heightened observance in her memory afforded some solace. "I wanted something to make sense out of the whole thing," she says of losing a sister so young. "So if you have rules to follow, then it'll make some sense of it."

Sarah was persuaded by her son-in-law's analogy of the Torah as a guidebook. "… [H]e told me, 'you wouldn't try and fix a washing machine without a manual, and you won't try to fix the world without a manual. And that manual is Torah.'" Sarah believes in a God that is always present and accessible, and a Torah that is His hand guiding our actions.

Lara, who frets that she is not progressing in becoming more observant as rapidly as she had hoped, says that her faith and trust in God sustain her. "Knowing that there is something

[222] Such a fundamental belief reinforces findings by both Kaufman and Davidman in previous studies of younger BT women. Davidman's data in *Tradition* evinced the appeal of observant Orthodoxy's "overarching belief system," 46, while Kaufman's subjects in *Rachel's Daughters* professed a "key attraction" to the certainty and inviolability of Jewish law, 21.

bigger than myself," shores her up, she says. As does an acute awareness that accessing that power and might depends on her as much as it does on God. "I have to do the work," she says, "we do our part, and God does his." Such reciprocity informs each of the stories in this study, as does a tacit acceptance of divine authority.

Ava admits to a predilection for rules and order.[223] The laws make her feel more in control of her life by establishing clear boundaries and affording comforting guideposts. Her understanding of Jewish law allows little room for modulation or change.

"The laws are there to be followed by the letter of the law," she says. "It's written."

The women in this study are drawn to an all-powerful God, his intricate system of laws a source of order and structure when much in their lives is spinning out of control. Yet they wrestle with feelings of inadequacy when they feel that they do not measure up.

Ava confides that sometimes she feels that she falls short, particularly when she is in the FFB world, with those who were born Orthodox and did not come to such a stringent level of observance later in life as she did.

"I feel self-conscious," she says. "I feel like a fraud."[224]

Hannah, Kara, and Lara use similar language. Dina sought a second Orthodox conversion, impelled by whispers at her son's community Jewish day school questioning his identity and her authenticity.

Yet for those with a fervent belief in God, even negative feelings can have positive consequences, for God's hand is always at work, they believe, and human endeavor is its partner.

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[223] Davidman in *Tradition* draws on anthropologist Clifford Geertz's *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 112 to aptly describe the appeal of a structured system "placing proximate details of our lives in the ultimate framework of significance." Such a system, posits Davidman, actualizes religion, or in Geertz's words, makes it "really real."

[224] Benor, *Becoming Frum*, 176-180.

God's Plan

Annie was searching. A divorce, the end of a subsequent long term relationship, and then another personal crisis, she felt alone and bereft. "I wasn't sure who I was and where I wanted to go for the rest of my life," she recalls. In the past, she had sought out secular self-help and more meaningful engagement at her Reform congregation. She became an adult *bat mitzvah* and joined the temple choir, but when her relationship unraveled, she felt completely unmoored. "I needed something more," she says now, "but I didn't know what." Then, seemingly serendipitously, a friend invited her to attend a class taught by a charismatic local rabbi. She begged off, telling the woman she just "wasn't ready." But her friend — "a real nudge" — persisted, and Annie finally gave in. It changed her life.

At the class at a local synagogue she met three women who may have sensed that she was looking for something. They steered her to a bookstand and pointed out three books. "They said to me, 'you need to go home and read these books.'" And she did, beginning with the first, *The Garden of Emuna*.[225] She was hooked.

Her search for answers, and her longing for a deeper Jewish connection, converged.

"Everything I had read in the last four or five years in this other spiritual enlightenment realm was making sense to me because it just was put into this perfect Jewish framework. And it just hit me in the face. That was what I was missing in my life."

And what was missing was God.

And the understanding that He is in control.

Annie closeted herself at home for three weekends and read *Emuna* and then the next two volumes in the series. She absorbed their three foundational principles, a belief that God is running the world, a belief that everything that He does has a purpose, and a belief that there are lessons learned from every purpose. She began attending Saturday morning *Shabbos* services

[225] Rabbi Shalom Arush, *The Garden of* Emuna*: A Practical Guide to Life*, trans. Rabbi Lazar Brody (Jerusalem: Chut Shel Chesed Institutions, 2009). The book, the first in a series of spiritual guidebooks, provides a framework for discovering life's essential truth (*emuna* is "truth" in Hebrew) and developing the tools for using it to improve one's life.

and found the rabbi's sermons inspiring, further reinforcing *Emuna*'s message. She began to cast aside the doubt that had plagued her, the regret and remorse that had dragged her down. She began to move towards a God who she loved and trusted, a God who helped her make sense of her life.

"So what I used to think were failures in my life, they were just lessons that I had to learn to become more spiritually evolved. There was a reason why I did those things, a purpose," she confides.

And once she moved into that mindset, says Annie, her life changed.

There was no more remorse.

"*Hashem* has a plan for us," she says simply, "you just have to listen."

The notion of *hashgachah pratis,* or divine providence or guidance, infuses Orthodox belief and practice. As Davidman explains, it is the sense that God controls a person's destiny, a phenomenon more loosely defined in the secular world without its religious valence, as coincidence or good fortune. Her respondents at Bais Chana ascribe *hashgachah pratis* with impelling them to pursue a more stringent belief and practice and bringing them to the program. "*Hashgachah pratis* and *bashert* [ordained by God] — it was meant I should come home and be Lubavitch," responds one of her respondents. Rena, like Annie, expresses a similar sentiment when speaking about the series of seeming coincidences that led her to sense God's presence and see His hand. She defines *hashgachah pratis* as "divine intervention." "It's like when you know that God is in your life because you make the effort, and things start happening," she says.

Carrie, too, speaks of sensing God's hand when she and her husband were looking for a house in an observant neighborhood, and a string of fortuitous coincidences — randomly picking up a flyer that their now-rabbi's daughter had distributed for the seller, stopping by the house and

meeting the owner, finding out his family had been righteous gentiles,[226] and making a handshake deal — led them to find their current residence and buy it. “When you strip away all the layers, and you get past the physicality, and you look at how we got in this house, in this neighborhood … there’s a plan that none of us can truly understand,” she says. “I’d say the awareness and the sensation of there being a Godly presence in our lives is just reinforced by these things.”

Others in this study relate a similar serendipity that inspires a belief in divine providence and acceptance of divine authority. Dina asserts that meeting her husband and becoming Jewish was one such occurrence, while Kara tells a charming story — if the shoe fits — of her family spending *Shabbos* at Rena’s home, rushing and leaving behind her husband’s clothing for the next day, then borrowing suit and shoes from Rena’s husband. Miraculously, both fit.

But, how much is fate, how much simply chance or good fortune? Legacy or destiny, choice or compulsion? Personal autonomy or divine authority?

The notion of God’s plan raises fundamental questions of faith that inform BT belief and transformation. It evinces the impact of social location, and its concomitant notions of autonomy and choice, on such transformation and its pace and progression. Both Davidman and Kaufman show a heightened embrace of *hashgafah protis* among women following a more stringently observant path — both earlier studies included a cohort of women in Hasidic communities that is more reflective of strict belief and practice — particularly among younger women and those whose lives are less stable or secure. These women more readily espouse the notion of divine providence than those who are older and are more fully engaged in the non-religious world.

There is a marked variance in Davidman’s study between her Bais Chana cohort and her Lincoln Square cohort, where the subjects are better educated and more accomplished, with

[226] Righteous gentiles are non-Jews who risked their lives to help save Jews during the Holocaust. Righteous gentiles are recognized at Yad Vashem, the Israeli Holocaust memorial and museum in Jerusalem.

greater involvement in the secular world than the Bais Chana cohort. Davidman observed in the Bais Chana group both an implicit belief in God and what she terms a "surrender of agency."[227] It is, she suggests, a reflection of how these women respond to a white, middle class American modernity that, as Robert Bellah and others delineated in *Habits of the Heart*, have found "a notion of the self as pure, undetermined choice, free of tradition, obligation and commitment."[228] Bellah and other's finding is echoed more recently by Cohen and Eisen in their study of contemporary Jews, where they found that the notion of the "sovereign self " predominated among Jews of the more progressive denominational streams from which many BTs come. There is in BTs' assertion of divine providence a rejection of such "undetermined choice" and an articulation of their yearnings for a system that provides them structure and purpose within the clearly defined bounds of tradition and community.

It is this communal rooting, a compelling desire for communal belonging, that impels the subjects in this study towards divine encounter and its concomitant demands. Their God is a conduit to something greater than themselves, to the connectivity they yearn for, to the meaning and purpose they crave. His structure and stricture are a means to an end.

The authority of such "Torah true" Judaism comes from on high, but its actualization is situated within its earthly purview. As Heilman observes, "Judaism's authority … remains determined by law and tradition … situated in the community … and rooted in obligations."[229]

But it is generational location that also inspires BT transformation. The earlier studies evince the impact of social location — age, education, experience, and engagement in the larger secular world — on both the outreach programs potential BTs choose and the process of their

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[227] Davidman, *Tradition*, 146.

[228] Robert N. Bellah, Richard Madsen, William M. Sullivan, Ann Swidler, and Steven M. Tipton, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1985), 152-153.

[229] Heilman, *Sliding to the Right*, 2.

religious transformation. They show that those who are older, better educated, more accomplished, and with more secular attachments are searching for an Orthodoxy that comports more with their past lifestyle and allows for more accommodation, a finding replicated in this study. Those who are younger, less educated and accomplished, and less rooted in the secular world are drawn towards more stringent observance and a heightened embrace of divine providence in their lives. In this study, those seeking a more modulated approach to stringent observance are well educated, working professionals, mothers, and wives. Two (Annie and Dina) are members of the local Sephardic congregation whose charismatic rabbi encourages, and inspires, their exploration of more stringent observance, but also counsels "baby steps," suggesting that they take on only one new obligation at a time and choose one that truly speaks to them.[230] A third subject (Lara) belongs to a non-denominational egalitarian congregation, which uses the Sephardic version of the Orthodox Artscroll prayer book with its more spiritual orientation. A fourth (Hannah) belongs both to this congregation and to a more stringently Orthodox one, as her family struggles to find its place on the continuum. She is the subject who most honestly speaks about doubt, and expresses her regret that there is no modern Orthodox alternative to choose in the area where she lives, raising the import of geographic location as a factor in BT transformation.[231] The others in the study belong to one of the more stringently Orthodox congregations in the city.

[230] While Annie professes a belief in a divine plan, she also makes clear that she believes in free will. Her seemingly contradictory beliefs are reflective of the older, more mature subjects in this study and underscore the impact of age and experience on the BT process and its singularity for each woman. It also points to the continuum of belief and practice in Orthodoxy, with Annie's rabbi being more open and accepting of her gradual progression towards a belief in divine power and authority and assuming the obligations of heightened observance than other rabbis might be.

[231] In contrast to earlier studies, this study is located in a large Southwest city that has a transient population that has increased exponentially over the past forty years. Still growing, and experiencing growing pains, it lacks the magnitude and multiplicity of Jewish communal institutions and services that are available in older, more densely populated areas of the country. The only modern Orthodox congregation is more centrist and traditional than more pluralistic and open modern Orthodox congregations in other parts of the country. Efforts to found such a synagogue several years ago floundered, and there is only a more liberal-leaning Orthodox rabbi who heads an educational institute that offers a wide spectrum of classes and programs, but he does not serve as the spiritual leader of a congregation.

Again, the maturity of the subjects in this study, the depth of their family relationships, and their wider experiences in the non-religious world,[232] impacts how they conceive of stringent Orthodoxy and incorporate it into their lives. Their disposition towards a divine plan is reflective of their more carefully considered and measured approach towards taking on more stringent religious obligations.[233] It also evidences the influence of secular notions of choice and individualism, and an effort to frame their decision to pursue a more traditional lifestyle as a conscious personal choice even if they also believe that their choosing may have been divinely inspired. Such a rationale is evocative of the thought process of Davidman's Lincoln Square cohort, who couched their decision to become stringently Orthodox as "one choice among many."[234]

But why this choice? It is a signal question that drives this study, and its answer is manifest in the responses of its subjects to such God-talk, as Luhrmann calls it. It may be, as some believe, their destiny, a fulfillment of divine providence, as prescribed in the Jewish metanarrative, to assure its continuance through their commitment to its laws and commandments. Davidman calls this explanation "the rhetoric of compulsion."[235] She contrasts this to the "rhetoric of choice"[236] articulated by her Lincoln Square cohort, which turns not on destiny but rather on legacy, choosing Judaism, and a more committed stream of Judaism, simply because it is theirs.[237] Cohen and Eisen evidence a similar phenomenon in their study of a broad cross section of American Jewry, where respondents ascribe their Jewishness to "a very precious

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[232] The impact of BT transformation on family, social, and communal relationships is explored more fully in Chapter Five, Belonging.

[233] I also posit, and the data in this study show, that belief in a divine plan emanates from devastating loss and its resultant desolation. Belief that all things happen for a reason shifts responsibility from human to divine action and is a source of comfort and succor to those who suffer.

[234] Davidman, *Tradition*, 197.

[235] Davidman, *Tradition*, 87.

[236] Davidman, *Tradition*, 82.

[237] Aviad, in *Return to Judaism*, made a similar finding in her study of male BTs.

birthright",[238] even as they vigorously assert their right to "voluntary obligation," picking and choosing which ritual practices to take on and re-conceptualizing them to fit their individual proclivities.[239]

Notions of destiny can be detected among the most fervent believers in this study, while others project a lesser embrace of the notion of legacy, with its compelling temporal schematic framework, connecting them to the past as they seek to forge the future. They are impelled by a pressing sense of responsibility both to preserve the precious legacy of the past while assuring its transmission to succeeding generations through their children. Lara poignantly speaks of wanting her children to know more, to do more, and of the heavy weight of obligation to her relatives who perished in the Holocaust to ensure that the tradition lives on.

She tells of reading a post by Allison Josephs on the popular website Jew in the City,[240] where Josephs asks, "'What if your ancestors gave up religion without asking you first? Without asking your permission?'"

The question was a wake up call.

"That's me," Lara says she realized, seeing the distinct possibility of her giving up her Jewish legacy and its inherent obligation to pass it on. So she strives to make real her birthright, for herself and her family, through heightened practice and belief.

Keva* and *Kavannah

God's presence, God's word, God's hand, God's plan; BTs struggle to take on a life informed by divine authority yet infused with its spiritual essence. Such a seeming duality — divine law and human spirituality — imbues observant Judaism with an appealing vibrancy, even

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[238] Cohen and Eisen, *The Jew Within*, 30.

[239] Cohen and Eisen, *The Jew Within*, 34.

[240] Allison Josephs is an observant Orthodox woman who is the creator of the website *Jew in the City*. She founded the website in 2007 to confront stereotypes about Orthodox Jews and promote understanding of their lifestyle. She is a popular blogger and speaks frequently to Jewish groups across the country about her own Jewish journey and her life as an observant Orthodox woman. http://jewinthecity.com/about

as it creates an innate tension among its followers. Yet such duality — and the stress it evokes — is rooted in Jewish tradition and serves to animate both practice and belief.

Among BTs, as this study shows, practice often precedes belief, and an adherence to the law often precedes divine awareness. Yet the significance of heavenly presence pervades Jewish thought, spirituality leavening the demands and obligations of Jewish law. It emanates from the initial response of the Jewish people at Sinai when the Torah was given — *na'aseh v'nishma*, or we shall do, we shall hear, where action is privileged but belief is avowed — both doing and hearing informing Judaism, one providing very real ways of enlivening its precepts while the other infusing it with powerful spiritual resonance. It is "the extraordinary qualities of the intimate divine," as Jewish educator Erica Brown describes this essence, which hones the call to action and makes it ever more compelling.[241]

Yet while Brown and others can trace the enduring duality through the development of Jewish history and thought,[242] it remains problematic for Orthodoxy, with its obligation to adhere to the intricate system of Jewish law, especially in the contemporary American religious milieu

[241] Erica S. Brown, "Orthodoxy and the Search for Spirituality in Jewish Adult Education," in *Jewish Spirituality and Divine Law*, eds. Adam Mintz, Lawrence Schiffman, Robert S. Hirt (New York: Yeshiva University Press, 2006), 278. Brown, a Jewish educator who currently serves as the Community Scholar for the Jewish Center of Manhattan, posits that divine law and spiritually are innately compatible in Orthodoxy and that study and ritual practice are spiritually transformative.

[242] Divine essence is embedded in Jewish belief and practice, Brown holds, and its ancient roots are evinced from early rabbinic literature that urges engagement of both "heart and mind" in the performance of Judaism's *mitzvot*, or obligations, to later teachings from the Mussar movement that encourage service to God with a "heart on fire." It inspired the beginnings of the Hasidic movement in tenth century Poland as its master. The *Ba'al Shem Tov* sought to reach the masses of illiterate Jews who could not find God through the study of the ancient texts or stringent observance, as promoted by the punctilious *mitnagdim,* but rather through affective experience. The *Besht*, as he was called, taught that God was present in the good deeds and acts of kindness performed in everyday life, and Jews could as readily encounter God and find spiritual exhilaration there as in the *yeshivah*, or study hall, "Orthodoxy," 278-280.

"The divine was immanent within all Jews and … accessible," writes Davidman in her book about those leaving observant Jewish life, asserting that a populist approach is what made Hasidism so compelling. Hasidism was reinvigorated in the mid-twentieth century by the vision of Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, the head of Chabad Lubavitch Hasidim, who sought to revive Jewish life that had been decimated by the Holocaust, sending *shuluchim, or* messengers or emissaries, around the globe to spark a Jewish renewal. This mission was also embraced by the *mitnagdim,* more recently known as *yeshivish,* because of their devotion to *yeshiva* learning, as spirituality came to be recognized as a means of retaining observant Jews and attracting non-Orthodox Jews to Orthodoxy, 6.

with its emphasis on a broadly conceived, and experienced, spirituality and a concomitant focus on individuality and personal meaning. Confronting the conundrum of reconciling Orthodoxy's commitment to *keva*, or structure and order, with *kavannah*, or intention or — more broadly — spiritual expression, former Yeshiva University President Norman Lamm suggests that one cannot exist without the other. "Without the body of the law, spirituality is a ghost," he writes. "Without the sweep of the soaring soul, the corpus of the law becomes a corpse."[243] Yet Lamm's adroit play on words belies an often intractable conflict that is ever more discernible today: how to reconcile Orthodoxy's fundamental belief in divine authority with personal autonomy, and how to reconcile Orthodoxy's emphasis on public acts with the decidedly private province of spiritual experience?

Orthodox rabbis, scholars and teachers wrestle with the problem,[244] even as those new to stringent Orthodoxy strive mightily to actualize the divine through their acts and their words.

Such a spiritual impetus in religious searching is reflective of a dynamic in contemporary religion today, as Benor suggests, and the BT movement can be understood through the lens of spiritual seeking.[245] Luhrmann detects such a yearning in her study of Christian evangelicals, a desire for a consuming spirituality that infuses their everyday lives with meaning and purpose. She lays out strategies for "attentional learning," ways to learn to acutely pay attention to those signs or suggestions of divine presence.[246] Rena, in this study of BT transformation, speaks of cultivating an awareness of "Hashem waving a flag at me." Carrie, in her recollection of her

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[243] Norman Lamm, *The Shema: Spirituality and Law in Judaism* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2000), 6.

[244] Adam Mintz, "Introduction." in *Jewish Spirituality and the Divine Law*i eds. Adam Mintz and Lawrence Schiffman (New York: Yeshiva University Press, 2007). Mintz, in the introduction to the collection of articles from the 2005 Orthodox forum convened by Yeshiva University to discuss the inherent tension between law and spirituality, raises both the "inherent risk" of an excess of spiritual fervor and the concomitant risk of a Judaism bereft of such essence — Lamm's corpse and ghost— and the need to find, in Lamm's words, "a delicate balance" of the two through "coexistence and integration," xvi-xviii.

[245] Benor, *Becoming Frum*, 20.

[246] Luhrmann, *When God Talks Back*, xxi.

experience looking for and finding a new home in a Jewish neighborhood, connects the dots among a series of random occurrences that assure her of God's hand. Luhrmann also observes a disposition of her subjects for absorption, the ability to, in her words, "experience what is not materially present."[247] Again, it is a reinforcement of divine presence that is expressed by women in this study, though with a decided variation in intensity.

Oakes, in her work looking at the phenomenon of the Nones and those who self-identify as spiritual but not religious,[248] observes a similar longing for a real spiritual presence, even as she detects the "struggle to believe without seeing,"[249] among the subjects in her study. But Oakes also uncovers a desire for a connection to the past among her cohort, an inchoate longing to be part of a community and connected to a religious tradition, even with its often-antiquated trappings and cumbersome imperatives. As she observes, "family ties run deep, as do social and cultural ones,"[250] whether one is running towards religion, or away from it. Yet another reformulation of the tension in Orthodoxy, between individuality and community, between inherited tradition — and its inherent obligations — and personal choice, the same issues that informed the stories of Davidman's subjects and that resonate in this study as well.

Spirituality, and its multiple variations, informs Judaism in all its varieties. Cohen and Eisen's study of contemporary American Jewry evinces its power, detecting "a shift from *keva* to *kavannah*," among their subjects who exhibit a heightened sense of self and seek a more personal path to spiritual fulfillment.[251] Yet, Jewish seekers who span Judaism's denominational

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[247] Luhrmann, *When God Talks Back*, xxii.

[248] Oakes' work, *The Nones Are Alright*, grew out of findings from the Pew 2013 study, which showed a growth of a segment of the American population that identified with no religious tradition and the growing segment of those who describe themselves as "spiritual but not religious."

[249] Oakes, *The Nones Are Alright*, 5.

[250] Oakes, *The Nones Are Alright*, 66.

[251] Cohen and Eisen, *The Jew Within*, 96.

spectrum[252] are abandoning neither law nor spirituality, say the researchers, but in their words, echoing Lamm, are striving to infuse traditional Jewish ritual and practice with a compelling divine quiddity, recasting an age-old system of belief and practice in new ways without losing its fundamental communal meaning.

The dynamics of spiritual search, and its individuation, are manifest in more traditional Judaism as Orthodoxy seeks to maintain its relevance and further infuse its stringent belief and practice with its spiritual essence. Spirituality and personal meaning are powerful forces in religious transformation, as the subjects in this study show, comporting with more recent research on Jewish spirituality. Cohen, this time working with Rabbi Lawrence A. Hoffman through the Synagogue 3000 initiative,[253] measured Jewish spirituality among American Jews and found that Orthodox respondents outscored non-Orthodox respondents on every measure of spirituality, including religion, prayer, engagement with God, spiritual mentorship, and spiritual experiences.[254] "Orthodoxy today has been shaped not just by the details of *halakhah* but the spiritual reasoning behind those details," they write, reinforcing the experiences of the subjects in this study and their desire not to just know how, but to know why and what and inform their experiences with personal meaning.

[252] Cohen and Eisen, *The Jew Within*, 220. Seven percent of the respondents in Cohen and Eisen's study identify as Orthodox, 34 percent identify as Reform, 37 percent identify as Conservative, and 2 percent identify as Reconstructionist. The remaining respondents do not identify with any of Judaism's streams, calling themselves Something else Jewish, Just Jewish, or Secular, portending the 2014 Pew study and Oakes's later work evincing the growth of a cohort who ascribe to no particular religious tradition, now known as the Nones.

[253] Steven C. Cohen and Lawrence A. Hoffman, "How Spiritual Are America's Jews?" *S3K Report: A Publication of the S3K Synagogue Studies Institute* no. 4 (March 2009). The report details findings from a 2008 study that addressed questions on spirituality in two simultaneous surveys of the American Jewish population, Jews and non-Jews, measuring responses on five scales: spiritual inclusion, spiritual mentorship, involvement with God, religion and prayer, and spiritual experience.

[254] Non-Orthodox respondents in the SK3 study on spirituality registered less interest in spirituality in terms of its more traditional manifestations, such as prayer, but evidenced a heightened desire for spiritual experience through communal or family engagement.

As Chapter Three showed, embodiment, through ritual performative acts and more everyday behaviors infused with spiritual valence, is fundamental to BT transformation. Doing precedes, and can spark, believing, as the data evince, from daily prayer, to the litany of everyday blessings, to the development of an acute awareness of godly beneficence in acts as simple as eating. "Every time I go to put food in my mouth, I think of *Hashem,*" says Dina. "I say a prayer of gratitude before I sit down and eat because it heightens the eating experience," says Annie. "And I say a prayer of gratitude after I'm done eating."

Yet, expressing consciousness of the divine is difficult for many BTs, especially those with little or no knowledge of Jewish prayer or its traditional language, Hebrew. They speak of the inadequacy of their vocabulary to express what seems to be inexpressible. Cohen and Hoffman found that it was difficult to measure the role of language in their study, expressly because of its elusive spirituality. This inability may be attributed to the underlying American Christology (based on Jesus and His teachings) of notions of faith that often inhibit its development or use. "It may be that (Jews) really lack the language to describe (spiritual) experience more than the experience itself,"[255] they suggest. Such experiences are often fleeting, without the words to talk about them and give them form and substance.

But language, like other social and cultural practices, even the language of spirituality, can be learned. Benor outlines the learning process for such practices and describes how those new to observant Orthodoxy gradually take on the trappings, and beliefs, of faith. Much of her discussion of language focuses on everyday speech and the changes in speech patterns as individuals advance on the continuum of enhanced belief and practice.[256] Language and identity acquisition have a spiritual valence, she posits, and language can serve as a means of realizing

[255] Cohen and Hoffman, "How Spiritual Are America's Jews?," 4-5.

[256] Benor, *Becoming Frum*, 126.

God's presence. As one of her study subjects shared, simply incorporating the Hebrew phrase, "*Baruch Hashem*," bless God, into her everyday speech helped to make God real for her.[257]

While words have the capacity to inscribe an awareness of divine presence, they also provide a means of connection with that presence in a meaningful way. Prayer, and its daily obligations, reinforces spiritual consciousness through rote recitations of words at prescribed times in communal settings and opens up the possibility for individual communion with God. Carrie speaks movingly of the role that prayer plays in her life in animating divine presence. "One has to really … physically put (oneself) in a place where it's conducive to connecting," she says. "I believe that prayer does that."

She laments the fact that Judaism, unlike Christianity, as Cohen and Hoffman point out, doesn't have the language for talking about God, "but it's the only language we've got. But I believe that if we make the time, the space, have the desire, *Hashem* is there for us."

Women, freed from the male obligations of ritual prayer three times a day in a communal setting,[258] must make the time during the day to pray, even if it is a rushed morning or evening *Sh'ma*,[259] or quick blessings, before or after eating. Particularly for observant women with large families, finding time for even a few whispered words is difficult, yet, for some, it becomes less a discretionary act than a necessary one for them. Rena, at our initial interview in her home, greets me grasping a *siddur*, or prayer book, in her hand, with a long handwritten sheet peeking from the cover. It is her prayer list. Scribbled on the paper is a list of names and requests: a man who wants to marry a Jewish woman; a woman who is looking for a Jewish husband; a daughter seeking comfort for her dying mother; a father asking for his son's recovery from a critical illness.

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[257] Benor, *Becoming Frum*, 135.

[258] Men are obligated to recite the *Amidah* prayer three times a day; women are absolved from time-bound commitments to prayer.

[259] The *Sh'ma* is the signal declaration of faith in Judaism expressing a belief in the oneness of God.

And she prays for them.

"I feel like this is the strength that *Hashem* gave me. It's what I'm good at," she says. "And people will come to me … and they say, will you pray for this, please, because I know that *Hashem* listens to you … and I've had so many prayers answered."

Rena says she prays continuously. "I talk to God all day, and I pray," she says. Her middle name derives from the Hebrew word *daven,* which means to pray. "Your name is your essence," she says. "My essence is prayer."

Kara, another study participant, is newer to observant Orthodoxy. Still, like Rena, she is making the transformation as a wife and mother, her husband and children learning and taking on new religious obligations along with her. She speaks honestly about the challenges, but most poignantly about her yearning to personally feel God's presence. She wants to develop a relationship with Him, she says, to communicate openly and freely.

"I don't *daven* everyday for sure," she says guiltily. "And I don't *daven* very well alone. I think about it … but I just need to do it, just like anything." She can read Hebrew, the language of the prayer book, but her comprehension is still rudimentary.[260]

She is particularly troubled by her inability to engage in petitional prayer. "One of the things that is extremely important to me, but I haven't been able to get to it yet, is to ask for things," she confides. She senses it is partly because as a writer, she is keenly attuned to choosing the right words. "I want to say it so beautifully and (I don't know how) to say it or what to

[260] The language of prayer, and the structure and order of the prayer services, has become much more accessible to those seeking to become more observant over the past twenty years. The founding of Artscroll Publications, providing attractive, easy-to-read editions of Orthodox prayer books with English translations of the Hebrew, interlinear texts, large print editions, and extensive introductory sections that explain the history of the rituals and their meaning in comprehensible terms, seems to have been tailor-made for those new to Orthodoxy and the exponential growth of programs to attract and educate them. Jeremy Stolow, in his book *Orthodox by Design*, traces its development, including its astute assessment of the growing market for religious tomes and texts, its appealing design, and its gradual growth to encompass a wide range of how-to books on a wide variety of topics to guide those new to observance. The prevalence of Artscroll prayer and other books in congregations and learning centers points to not only to the genius of its founders, but to the increasing interest in Orthodoxy and the need for authoritative, attractive, and accessible texts. Asked about sources for good information about Orthodoxy to suggest for those interested in learning more, the head of women's programming at the community *kollel* had just two words: Artscroll website.

say. So that's a big goal of mine … to be able to say what I'm thinking and what I'm feeling." And to feel, as Luhrmann puts it, not only that she is talking to God, but also that God is listening.

Luhrmann writes of the increasing human hunger for a relationship with the divine that is open 24/7 and is as up close and personal as speaking to a close friend.

A God who is present, kind, intimate, forgiving, and joyful.

A God we can talk to, she suggests, and one who talks back.

Magnifying and Sanctifying

The notion of divine covenant, and its implicit reciprocity, is fundamental to Judaism, not only in talking, and talking back, but also in doing and receiving. The women in this study express a keen awareness not only of God's power to guide their lives but also of the contingent obligation to adhere to His demands. It flows, as this study shows, from an incipient consciousness of divine presence to gratefulness for divine bounty to an embrace of divine authority and divine providence. And it grows expansively, from themselves, to others, and beyond.

Annie movingly describes the impact of taking on three *mitzvot*, or obligations, lighting *Shabbos* candles, separating milk from meat, and saying a blessing before eating. "It was just three little things," she says, "And then you start building on that." She began thanking the young man who pumped her gas, the woman who loaded her groceries in her car, and then taking time to call a friend who was ill, or dropping off a meal. She felt a heightened concern for others and a desire to, in her words, "make their lives a little bit easier today."

Such kindness is boundless, says Annie, each act precipitating another. "One thing leads to another and another to another until before you know it, you're creating divine presence around you all the time."

Or making everything holy, in Rena's words.

Or making ourselves holy. Ava heightened her observance in order to infuse her life with Godly presence. “I always wanted to be closer to God,” she says, and more rigorously hewing to His laws strengthens that relationship, she says. So she tries to become a better Jew, a better person, by doing more and becoming more holy, or more God-like or more like God would like her to be, more “*mikadesh shems hamayim*,” in the rabbi’s words, being more like the God from the heavens. “I think we all need to grow a little bit,” she says, echoing Hannah’s words about continually striving to challenge herself, and her faith. “I think the whole becoming more observant has made me a much kinder, more patient, a little bit less judgmental person. And I have always been wanting to be a better person.”

This aspiration to be a better person, to sanctify God’s name by infusing the world with more of His spiritual essence, resonates through the stories. The potential to magnify that presence through individual acts also informs their transformations.

Lamm’s “sweep of the soaring soul,” Wuthnow’s “roots and wings” take flight, first individually, then communally, and beyond. Like Broner’s great-grandmother’s hands moving in ever widening circles as she blesses the *Shabbos* lights, there is a belief that God is everywhere, and His presence can be made manifest through their actions, spreading *kiddush Hashem,* the holiness of God, from themselves to others and beyond.

CHAPTER FIVE: BELONGING

On Friday nights, Kara lights *Shabbos* candles, just as her mother did, and her grandmother before her, and, she hopes, her daughters after her.

She circles her hands three times over the flickering flames, bringing their light into her home, and into her family, whispering the ancient Hebrew blessing that sanctifies the act.

And she prays.

She now kindles more than the traditional pair of tapers, now five candles: one candle for each member of her immediate family. As the wicks burst into flame, she reflects on the relationships in her life, with her husband, three daughters, parents, siblings, and in-laws. And she asks herself, “How have I added light to each in the past week?”

It is not a simple question, nor is there a simple answer.

It’s not easy, she says wistfully, to sustain relationships, particularly as she and her husband have decided to become more observant and their parents and others in their extended families have not. While their marriage has grown richer and closer, and their family has flourished, as she and her husband guide their children to make their own way in the Orthodox world, they grapple with trying to preserve the precious bonds with their parents and siblings, as they are challenged in new and unforeseen ways.

Her parents are committed to sustaining their closeness with their daughter and her family, respecting their stringent Sabbath- and kosher-observance, while accommodating its requirements, even if they are not their own. Her husband’s parents, also more secular and less observant, are less accepting of the change, finding their children’s new lifestyle different and limiting. The joy of shared holidays and other happy occasions has dimmed, as some of the extended family has chosen to celebrate in their own way, rather than joining their newly observant members.

"It's sad," says Kara, quietly. "And hard."[261]

Yet Kara and her husband and three daughters revel in their new attachments, the place that *Hashem* now holds in their lives, and the warmth and welcome of the observant community who have, in her words, "taken them under their wing," and become "like family." Their new friends have values that more closely align with those that they now embrace. Old friends have drifted away.

Still, she laments what was lost, even as she cherishes what has been found.

"It's complicated," she says.

Beginning with an assertion that religion is a social phenomenon that situates us in the world, this chapter argues that that place in the world is manifest spiritually and materially. The spiritual location evolves from a belief in God's presence and a conscious effort to "let God in" or materialize his presence. It grows to encompass an understanding of peoplehood and an embrace of a shared metanarrative and the laws God prescribes. The material location, I hold, is manifest geographically, generationally, historically, culturally, and communally. It is also manifest humanly in social relationships with family and friends and within communities. As Kara's story suggests, and the data evince, finding one's place, and the sense of belonging it provides, is key to BT transformation, as the women in this study re-locate or re-configure their place in the world.

Finding One's Place

Life's fundamental messiness, and the tangled web of relationships that not only connects us to others but to ourselves, complicates the process of religious transformation. As

[261] Lilah Devra Shapiro, "Driven to Orthodoxy." Data in this study reflect the pervasiveness of Kara's experience in relationships between BTs and their extended families. Lilah Devra Shapiro explored this dynamic in her study of BT men and women and their families, in her dissertation. Shapiro, looking at both BT impetus and its impact, noted that the move to observant Orthodoxy does not come without "high cost" for individuals and their families. Her findings evince "considerable disruption to and sacrifice of the family and community of origin," 17. The data in this study further reinforce Shapiro's findings and those of previous studies of BT women.

social beings,[262] our ties to each other inform our identities, both collective and individual, providing a sense of meaningful belonging.[263] Those identities — the "we" and the "me," as Griel and Davidman so aptly call them[264]— comprise belonging, including religious belonging, their intersection engendering both points of confluence and conflict as Kara so painfully relates.

So where we are, and where we belong, becomes who we are. Charles Long, writing about religious orientation, described it as "finding one's place in the world,"[265] and, as my data show, it is.

Much of the impetus for BT transformation derives from a search for finding oneself as manifest in finding one's place. Place, as illuminated in the ever-widening circles, bringing in the Sabbath light, is more than a spatial dimension, a geographical coordinate, or a topographical point, more expansively conceptualized, but also more particularly located. To be located is to be oriented in time, in space, in narrative, and in memory, and also within a cultural system, a social structure, and a religious tradition.[266]

Each of the subjects of this study depicted themselves in terms of their relationships or orientations to those multiple dimensions. The longing for divine connection — as expressed in a

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[262] William James, *The Principles of Psychology* (New York: Holt Rinehart and Winston, 1890). James, a philosopher and psychologist, was one of the earliest thinkers to conceive of human beings as social selves. His writing influenced succeeding generations of scholars in a variety of disciplines, including the study of religion.

[263] Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, ed. Mark S. Cladis, trans. Carol Cosman (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008). Durkheim, a French sociologist writing at the end of the nineteenth century, conceived of religion as a social phenomenon. In his study of aboriginal groups in Australia, Durkheim posited that belonging is the motivating human force for religion, actualized in the shared beliefs, actions, and rituals of a religious system.

[264] Arthur L. Griel and Lynn Davidman, "Religion and Identity," in *The Sage Handbook of the Sociology of Religion*, eds. James A. Beckford and N.J. Demerath III (Los Angeles: Sage Publications, 2007) 553.

[265] Charles Long, *Significations: Signs, Symbols, and Images in the Interpretation of American Religion* (Aurora: Davies Group Publishers, 1996).

[266] Jonathan Z. Smith, *To Take Place: Toward Theory in Ritual* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).

search for meaning and purpose, and a desire for structure and order in their lives — echoes through their stories. So does the need for human connection, for companionship, for family, for friendship, for the shared history and the rootedness it engenders, and for finding one's place.

Spiritual Place

As explored in Chapter Four, religious orientation spools out over time and space, actualized and sacralized in a multitude of acts or occurrences that make God real. Simple acts, even a smile or a kind word, can evince the divine, or a seemingly random coincidence, its power. More formalized ritual and ceremony evoke divine presence through shared experiences that divide and differentiate time and space and infuse them with spiritual valance. For observant Jews, the course of the day, week, month, or year, and the orderly procession of holidays and holy days, marked with prescribed observance, places them in heavenly purview.[267] They aspire to *mikadesh shem shamayim*, or to sanctify the name of the heavens, to embody God's presence on earth through their actions.

Such an orientation — to conceive of the world in terms of its essential holiness — is endemic to being human.[268] It reflects an innate yearning for order and structure — as epitomized in Judaism's intricate system of law — and an essential connectedness, to the divine, and to one another.[269] Durkheim brilliantly keyed into religion's social character and society's essentially

[267] Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Sabbath* (New York: Farrar Straus and Giroux, 1951). Heschel's classic meditation on the Jewish Sabbath enshrines it as a sanctuary in time, a day of rest created by God. Heschel's work beautifully captures how Judaism's division and differentiation of time also delineates space, and opens it up to divine presence.

[268] Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, J. W. Harvey, trans. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1923). Otto conceptualized the idea of the holy as divine power, which he characterized as *sui generis* and irreducible. Writing of its essence as "*mysterium tremendum et fascinans*, a terrifying and fascinating mystery," he describes its duality: "The feeling of it may at times come like a gentle tide pervading the mind or may pass into a more set and lasting attitude of the soul, continuing as it were, thrillingly vibrant and resonant" 12-13. Mircea Eliade, the twentieth century historian of religion, writing in *The Sacred and the Profane* (New York: Harcourt and Brace, 1959), further limns the divine as a manifestation of a source of signification in the world that gives it structure, order, and meaning.

[269] Mintz, "Introduction." Mintz lays out Judaism's essential duality — spirituality and law — in his introduction to the collection of essays that seeks to reconcile the two.

spiritual character as conceptualized in location.[270] That orientation, location, and place come into being through the human endeavor that Smith characterizes as "bringing place into being."[271]

So the women in this study mark their place, and bring it into being through their acts, their doing preceding their believing, and their believing informing their belonging. It is framed within the Jewish metanarrative, the Torah, and its story of exodus and return, located in the Jewish holy land from which the Jewish people were dispersed, their displacement endemic to their identity. That signal dislocation, from the land, from the dwelling place of their God, informs the story of Jewish peoplehood, and the obligation to recover or remake that dwelling place in their lives informs BT transformation.[272]

The embrace of Jewish peoplehood resounds. As both legacy and destiny, the women in this study express a desire to preserve Judaism's precious past while ensuring its continuance through their embrace of its traditions.[273] Rena, raised with little or no Jewish background, in a home grounded in universal human values and experiences, hungers for the specialness of Jewish peoplehood. "We lived all over the world," she says of her childhood, "learning about people, celebrating different holidays. It was fun and cool, educational." Her parents replaced their lapsed Judaism with an appealing multiculturalism as their work took their family to faraway places. Yet she also recalls an incipient yearning for belonging that gradually grew into a burning desire to find her place. Early in her transformation, she delved further into her family history to

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[270] Durkheim, positing that religion is an essentially social phenomenon, cogently expressed the relationship between the two in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, "If religion has given birth to all that is essential in society," he writes, "it is because the idea of society is the soul of religion," 466.

[271] Smith, *To Take Place*, 28.

[272] David Kraemer, "Place and Space in Judaism," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*. 76, no. 3 (2008). In the introduction, Kraemer elucidates the importance of space as fundamental to religious impulse and its primacy in human understanding. "We shape our spaces," he writes, and they in turn "shape us," 2. Spaces are imbued with meaning because of what happens there, he writes, making them ours and inscribing them with memory. Such a place in Judaism, he suggests, is the ancient temple in Jerusalem, which, when destroyed, and the Israelites dispersed, left not only the Jewish people without a homeland but God also without a dwelling. Such dislocation continues to pain — and inspire — the Jewish people.

[273] Similar impulses are evinced in Davidman's and Kaufman's studies of BT women.

uncover her Jewish roots, to make real those connections between past, present, and future. She began serious Torah study to know both the narrative of peoplehood and its underlying imperatives. Now she works to assume her place on the continuum, reveling in Judaism's distinctiveness and its intricate system of laws that actualizes it. "I want my children to be different," she says. " I tell my kids, appreciate everything you have, appreciate the fact that you can be Jewish. We're so lucky, you know?"

Annie, with memories of the conflict in her childhood home between her more religiously observant Grandma and her more secular mother, espouses a growing consciousness of Jewish peoplehood, and her personal desire to make her place there. "I want to learn more, to do more," she says. For years, feeling that she was missing something, but not sure what, she was drawn to the innate connectedness spanning generations that more observant practice and belief inspires. "I like being Jewish," she says simply. "I like finding my roots again."

Carrie also revels in an enhanced sense of peoplehood, imbued with purpose and direction. Her sense of belonging came later in life by way of intensive Jewish study and several life-changing trips to Israel. "Israel was the next big — very big, I'd say — learning set of experiences." And Lara, who had visited Israel several times when she was young and single, speaks movingly of the experience of going to Israel more recently as a mother. "You think about things differently as a mother," she says. "… [I]t's the whole notion of having obligations to someone other than yourself." It was, she says, "another layer," which further deepened her understanding of Jewish peoplehood and its succession from one generation to the next.

Connecting with the arc of Jewish history and memory, as Yerushalmi so beautifully evokes,[274] is key to belonging, conflating divine enterprise with human endeavor, collective remembrance with individual remembering. The shared metanarrative of peoplehood, informed

[274] Yerushalmi, *Zakhor*.

by powerful Biblical storylines, with their cast of compelling characters and circumstances, makes the past vividly present, as Smith posits,[275] while the shared supra memory of those events creates a nurturing encompassing horizon, as Casey describes it,[276] or in Jeffrey Olick's words, "a nurturient environment" that affords a comforting sense of belonging over time and space.[277]

The data in this study illuminate the impact of the shared metanarrative on BT transformation and the concomitant commitment by BTs to write themselves into the story.[278] They become both object and subject,[279] accepting the story, and its divine authority, as their own, while accepting and acting on the compliance it demands. Yerushalmi reminds us that, while the Torah is a source of memory and identity, it is also a source of meaning, significance, and legitimacy that flows from on high. Describing the Jewish people as people with a purpose,[280] he describes them as people with a commitment to God's purpose;[281] for a God, as many of the women in the study describe, who is both omnipresent and omnipotent.[282]

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[275] Smith, *To Take Place*, 28. Smith echoes Yerushalmi's understanding that "memory flows through ritual and recital," as Yerushalmi recounts the power of remembering the giving of the Torah on Mt. Sinai to the Jewish people. Yerushalmi, *Zakhor*, 10-11.

[276] Edward Casey, *Remembering: A Phenomenological Study* (Bloomington Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1987), 259.

[277] Jeffrey Olick and Joyce Robbins, "Social Memory Studies: From 'Collective Memory' to the Historical Sociology of Mnemonic Practices," *Annual Review of Sociology* 24 (1998): 336-337.

[278] Griel and Davidman draw on a variety of theorists to unpack identity theory in their study of religion and identity, positing that identity results from the integration of multiple selves into a coherent whole or a cohesive narrative. They weave together a conversation among sociologists to make whole the notion of identity, and the synergy between identity and narrative, drawing on Nancy Ammerman, who describes narrative as identity, Dan McAdams, who conceives of identity as "a story we tell about ourselves," and Anthony Giddens, who perceptively perceives identity to be "the ability to keep the story going." Hence, the subjects in this study, by returning to a "Torah true" lifestyle, suppose that they are writing themselves into the Jewish story, "Religion and Identity," 555-556.

[279] Griel and Davidman make the distinction between the "I" and the "me," the subjective self and the objective self, drawing on George Herbert Mead's work on the self as malleable, a product of a continuous process of interaction with others, "Religion and Identity," 552.

[280] Yerushalmi, *Zakhor*, 21. "The rabbis [the *rabbunum* of the Talmudic period] … knew that history has a purpose, the establishment of the kingdom of God on earth, and that the Jewish people had a central role to play in the process."

[281] Davidman in *Tradition* evinces the conflation of God's purpose with human purpose among her Bais Chana cohort. As one of her subjects explains, "When you come to a crossroads, you have a choice. If [you choose] a Godly path you will have no obstacles in that path as you walk. And if you take an un-Godly

Earthly Place

Ava is clear that "God is everywhere," while Annie sees His presence in each *mitzvah* she takes on. Leah believes fervently that every word in the Torah is written in God's hand. Carrie tells of how her perspective of God was so much more limited — compartmentalized, is the word she used — growing up in a liberal Reform home. God resided in the temple, in the religious school, or in Jewish summer camp, perhaps, but his presence was not all encompassing. Now, she says, "God is wherever we let Him in," his presence expansive and pervasive.

The women in this study, as discussed Chapter Four, conceive of a God who is loving, a God who is a source of comfort and protection, and a God who only wants good for them. They do not speak of an angry God, a judgmental God, or a demanding God, and yet, considering the weight of Torah obligation, and the requirements of peoplehood, such a God must surely exist.[283] They struggle to reconcile divine demands with real life responsibility, further reinforcing the impact of stage-of-life on BT transformation. Women who no longer have children living at home, who are single, or who are making the transformation along with a willing spouse, find their religious transitions eased. Those still raising families, or with spouses with little interest in or who are resistant to becoming more observant, knowing God, or making room for Him in their homes

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path, you'll come to a dead end," 106. Such a stark illustration reflects a more extreme understanding, yet also expresses the inherent acceptance of divine purpose — and the aspiration to actualize it — among aspiring BTs. It is moderated among her Lincoln Square cohort, and is reflected in a continuum of belief among the women in this study.

[282] The young charismatic rabbi of the suburban, stringently Orthodox congregation, with a large number of older BTs, is clear that belief in God and acceptance of divine authority are absolute in Jewish belief. In an interview, he expresses the question directly, using an example of ritual and practice as evidence of divine omnipotence. "If He doesn't exist or didn't speak to us, then why fast on a rotating day in October?" he asks, referring to Yom Kippur, the day of atonement, the most holy day in the Jewish year, with its obligation to abstain from food and drink. He describes God as the "final arbiter," with final authority. "And if I am the final arbiter [not God], there's a theological problem," which he, and his followers, decline to consider.

[283] The God of the Hebrew Bible is both loving and demanding, capable of protecting and caring for His people and also capable of being angry and vengeful. However, the data in this study evince a loving God, one who only wants good for His people, and whose laws are the means to realizing that goodness. Ava tells of how hewing to God's laws makes her a better person; Leah tells of the comfort that comes from such adherence and the peace and contentment it engenders. Rena speaks of following God's laws as a source of joy.

and lives, is complicated, often agonizingly so.[284] This is a key finding in this study that was not as fully explored, or substantiated, in earlier ones.[285]

But making room for God — and letting Him in — is often induced by life experience. While becoming Orthodox augers a dramatic shift in social location, it is mediated by life course location, as the data in this study show. Being positioned further along the life continuum often triggers increased reflexivity and more conscious choices as life passes.[286] This phenomenon was observed among all of the subjects in this study. While certain behaviors have been inscribed over time, life experience, particularly trauma, as discussed in Chapter One, can inspire change, as older individuals seek to find new ways to reconcile loss, failure, disappointment, disillusion, or regret.[287] They draw on the past to recast the future, seeking to enhance meaning in their lives and to discover new purpose. While each of the women in this study is positioned at her own particular point on her life course — more than half are working outside the home,[288] fewer than half have children living at home, and almost all are currently married and living with a spouse — there is still a studied thoughtfulness borne of maturity and experience that pervades

[284] The impact of BT transformation on marital, maternal and familial relationships is more thoroughly explored in the later sections of this chapter. The brief reference to those relationships here is to illuminate how divine presence complicates them.

[285] Shapiro's study of younger BTs keys in on the difficulties of reconciling different modes of being Jewish among families and the resultant conflicts among the families of BTs, although her study cohort consists of both men and women and is decidedly younger than the one in this study. Neither Davidman nor Kaufman focuses substantively on this issue, perhaps a less pressing one among their cohorts, most of them younger, not married, and without children.

[286] Stephen J. Hunt, "Religion as a Factor in Life and Death through Life-Course," in *The Sage Handbook of the Sociology of Religion*, eds. James A. Beckford and N. J. Demerath (Los Angeles: Sage Publications, 2007), 608-629. Hunt looks at the changing nature of life course and the impact of life-course positionality on religious belief and practice. He notes in particular the relationship between increasing religiosity and adaptation to "mature adulthood," pertinent to this study. He suggests that mature adulthood can stimulate a new search for identity, similar to searches inspired by earlier life course transitions.

[287] The fervent rabbi at the small stringently observant synagogue, with a large number of members further along on the life course trajectory, observes this heightened reflexivity among his congregants, as they ponder the future. "They are confronting their own mortality," he says in an interview, "confronting questions of mission and purpose." He says that they are thinking about what will happen to their children and grandchildren when they are gone, and how they can impact their future now.

[288] Two of the subjects in this study were retired at the time they were interviewed. A third was in the midst of making that transition. Hunt's study, "Religion as a Factor," connects the loss of identity and self-worth retirement can engender with renewed interest and value in pursuing spiritual growth, 622.

each individual progression. And while some are more fervent believers than others, there is an underlying faith in divine presence that grounds them, and an equally fervent commitment to grow their relationship with God as well as with those they love.[289]

Generational location[290] is another factor in the social orientation of BTs, more clearly evinced in a comparison of the present study with those previously conducted.[291] While the range of ages[292] of the subjects in this study spans more than one generation — previous studies draw on a cohort from essentially the same generation — generational location in terms of formative Jewish development appears to be less a differentiating factor than might be supposed. While six of the subjects grew up in mid-twentieth century America, in a time of lesser acculturation and assimilation, and more separation between Jews and non-Jews, and another five grew up in the 1970s, a time of greater assimilation and acceptance of Jews, the data shows their remembered experiences of being Jewish are very similar in terms of an emphasis on familiar home-based practice and family togetherness.

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[289] Kaufman raises the question of how increased longevity for women — spending more time without husbands or children at home — will impact their perceptions of home and homebound responsibilities and roles. This study tangentially responds to that question in Chapter Six, Being, but more broadly asks how longevity impacts spiritual connectedness and religious belonging.

[290] Michele Dillon, "Age, Generation and Cohort in American Religion and Spirituality," in *The Sage Handbook of the Sociology of Religion* ed. James A. Beckford and N.J, Demerath III (Los Angeles: Sage Publications, 2007), 526-546. Dillon shows how age, generation and cohort impact religious understandings and practice. She emphasizes the importance of social and cultural contexts in understanding generational differences in religion.

[291] There is a greater similarity of age and generational location among the subjects in both Davidman's and Kaufman's studies and a greater differential in this study. The majority of the subjects in the earlier studies were born in the 1970s, with the majority in their twenties and thirties, spanning one generation, while those in this study were born in the1950s, 1960s and 1970s, ranging in age from forty-five to seventy, and spanning at least two generations.

[292] Griel and Davidman, "Religion and Identity." A survey of studies on the correlation of religion and age are inconclusive in showing that, as individuals age, their inclination towards religious belief or practice increases. A more compelling correlation —particularly today, as educational and professional paths are often circuitous, and marriage and family delayed — is life course positionality. This study reinforces this correlation.

The data shows a similar impulse towards heightened social consciousness among the women in this study, reflective of the resonant counterculturalism and social activism that characterized the period in which they lived, also transcending generational difference and more reflective of a broader historical and cultural change.[293]

Leah, who grew up in the tumultuous 1960s, was drawn to the movement to free Soviet Jewry and played an active role in the succeeding decades, traveling to Russia and aiding Jewish Refuseniks. Aileen, of the same generation, was impacted by the women's liberation movement — "I was a real feminist," she says — though her primary focus remained on her husband and family, even as she ventured into the workforce. Several of the women of this generation speak of rebelling against family or societal conventions during their college-age years, smoking and dating non-Jews; some moving further away from family. Rena, growing up in the 1980s and 1990s, evidenced a more consuming drive for professional accomplishment, a consequence of the women's liberation movement and heightened opportunities for women. The younger women in this study replicate Rena's educational and professional progression, taking full advantage of broadened prospects for women.[294] Gender, particularly in terms of women's education, marriage, family, and religious roles and responsibilities, is a key area where a generational shift among the cohort in this study can be seen. It is a key finding in previous studies of BT transformation and is more fully examined in Chapter Six, Being.

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[293] Sarna, *American Judaism*, 272-354. Sarna provides an insightful overview of mid-twentieth century American Judaism, tracking the growth and appeal of the Reform and Conservative movements in the 1950s and 1960s, and a more outward, universalistic focus on broad social issues such as war, peace, and civil rights. He suggests that, in the succeeding decades, social consciousness became more "particularistic," as Jews became more concerned about specifically Jewish issues, such as Leah's involvement in the Soviet Jewry movement, or support for Israel and Jewish continuity and renewal, a reflection of heightened assimilation and diminished distinctiveness. Chapter Six, Being, provides a fuller discussion of the impact of historical, social, cultural, and political context on BT transformation.

[294] Davidman's Lincoln Square cohort aligns with the younger women in this study, better educated and more professionally accomplished, impacted by the women's liberation movement and succeeding changes in gender roles and opportunities. However, many of Davidman's subjects are younger than those in this study, single and longing for marriage and family; their professional lives are often viewed as precursors to fuller, more fulfilling personal lives. The data in this study among the younger, professional women reflect divergent responses on working, with some women, such as Rena, privileging their personal lives over their professional lives, while others, such as Hannah, Lara, Dina, or Kara, working to seamlessly combine the two.

The data on BT transformation in this study evince similarity in terms of life course location rather than generational location. As they married and began families of their own, the majority initially aligned with the more liberal Reform and Conservative movements of their parents, only moving toward the stringency of Orthodoxy as they became disillusioned with the lesser degree of observance in which they were raised. Their shared disappointment led them to seek deeper, more meaningful connections and consciously choose to leave behind their prior affiliations and seek out a new one that better met their needs. A heightened consciousness of Jewish peoplehood and their responsibility as parents to sustain its continuity through their children also echoes through their stories.[295]

Historical and cultural context also impacts spiritual and social orientation, as previously discussed. The emphasis on personal autonomy, individualism, and free choice infuses modern day life. It has diminished order and structure and shaken moral grounding. Eisen and Cohen's work fleshes out the impact of these forces on Jewish affiliation and identity,[296] a prescient look at the more recent uptick of Jews who identity as having no religion and the growth of the SBNR, spiritual but not religious cohort, not only in Judaism but across the American religious landscape. There is also a concomitant rise in fundamentalism — the BT movement, the subject of this study, is just one manifestation of that trend — in response to the more open and liberal religious movements.[297] Today's growing economic disparity, the widening political divide, and the increasing polarization in terms of class, race, and religion creates a more fractured American

[295] Cohen and Eisen, *The Jew Within*, 43-72. Cohen and Eisen found the family, and familial experiences at home, as key factors in Jewish identity. "… [T]he link connecting grandparents, food and Jewishness continues into the present…," 49.

[296] Cohen and Eisen, *The Jew Within*.

[297] Luhrmann and Oakes explore the phenomenon of those identifying as "no religion" and the rise of the SBNRs, which has spawned a variety of independent, non-traditional modes for religious belonging.

populace and a weakened collective national identity.[298] The inherent social and cultural divisiveness heightens conflict and engenders deeper small group allegiance and stronger circumscribed group identity. This phenomenon further highlights the appeal of small religious communities, with their clear boundaries and bounded by stringent observance, such as BT enclaves. It highlights the heightened impact of the historical and cultural context on religious transformation, another key finding in this study, more clearly evinced here than in prior studies of BT women. But, as Dillon points out, such reshaping of religion in response to historical or cultural phenomena is what has sustained it over time. Its inherent flexibility and ability to respond to change has allowed it to endure.[299]

Thus, orientation is mapped by its divine and human dimensions, its generational, experiential, and historical dimensions, and its spatial and topographical dimensions. The geographical location where BT transformation takes place is a critical factor in the development of new religious belonging.[300]

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[298] Will Herberg's mid-twentieth century classic, *Protestant, Catholic and Jew*, made a case for a compelling American civil religion wrought from the universal values of the Judeo-Christian ethic that defined America's pluralistic impulse through its commonalities. That civil religion is less pervasive, and less powerful today, in a nation fraught by difference and a pluralism that is less informed by what is shared but more by what is not.

Richard D. Hecht, in his article "Active Versus Passive Pluralism: A Changing Style of Civil Religion?," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 612: *Religious Pluralism and Civil Society* (July 2007): 133-151, suggested that Herberg's pluralism was a more passive version, allowing for acknowledgment of religious difference but limited engagement, and that that pluralism has evolved into a more active model today. He sees one powered by particular interest in an increasingly diverse America.

Interestingly, Kevin M. Schultz, in his book *Tri-Faith America*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), explores how the pluralism of Herberg's tri-faith America, and Hecht's engaged pluralism, gradually weakened the notion of a Protestant America, replacing it with a more inclusive Judeo-Christian ethic, which diminished distinctiveness among America's religious traditions. He writes, "The cultural monism of previous decades no longer fit the image the country was striving to project," 12.

The current political climate, however, reflects an upsurge in a provocative Christian right and a disturbing white tribalism, contrary to Schultz's predictions a half-decade ago.

[299] Dillon, "Age, Generation and Cohort," 537.

[300] Benor notes the importance of geographic location on BT transformation. "Community size and location are also important dimensions of Orthodox demography," she writes, noting the wide variation of Orthodox communities and the impact of their geographic, demographic, and ideological location on the phenomenon of BT transformation, *Becoming Frum,* 11-15.

For BTs, the size and contours of the Jewish community where they reside, its age, its generational span, its denominational composition, its institutions, its neighborhoods, its surrounding religious and ethnic mix, and its resources, material, financial, and spiritual, impact individual BT transformation and the communal growth that inspires, supports, and sustains it.

This study, as well as past studies of BTs, points to the importance of this variable in orienting fieldwork and interpreting the data it yields. Aviad's groundbreaking study of BT men took place in Israel, within the environs of a *yeshiva* that attracted Americans, with subjects that were representative of a broad swath of the United States. Its perspectives on BT impetus, particularly its framing within the semantic context of home and homecoming was particularly salient to this and other studies, while the profile of its cohort, young, unmarried men, living in Israel in a *yeshiva*, particularized its data and its relevancy to future studies. Davidman's and Kaufman's broader work, located in the continental United States, and looking specifically at women within their social and generational context, offered much richer data to draw on for this study. So, did Benor's work, which was also located in a large city with a substantial Jewish and observant Orthodox population. All of these studies were situated in cities and their environs in the Northeast or Midwest, with dense Jewish populations extending over several generations. Such areas boast families like Carrie's, with roots spanning five generations, or Ava's, Annie's, Aileen's, Sarah's, and Lara's that can count at least three generations back, all with memories of living grandparents, an assortment of aunts, uncles, and cousins, and others in their everyday lives, which provided a comforting familiarity and stability. Such familial legacies provide precious human, social and religious capital, as Roberta Sands describes in her study of the social integration of BTs, to support and sustain the communities and those individuals who are seeking to join them.

This study, in a large Southwest city, sparsely populated until a post-World War II boom increased its size and spawned a burgeoning Jewish community, experienced exponential growth over the past 50 years, with an increasingly larger Jewish footprint. Its Orthodox community, and

outreach, has grown significantly over the past twenty years, but its resources are meager compared to older, wealthier, and more entrenched communities in major Jewish population centers, such as those where Davidman's, Kaufman's, and Benor's studies took place.[301] Local rabbis engaged in outreach see its profile as both a challenge and an opportunity. The financial viability of synagogues, schools, and other communal institutions remains an enduring concern. While the growth of the BT community has spawned a host of new institutions, as well as commercial enterprises, such as kosher markets and restaurants, to sustain observant life, many are struggling.[302] Education, in particular, is a preoccupation in a community that sees its children as its legacy, and its destiny dependent on their obligation to educate them.

Still, the rabbis appreciate the benefit of being a young community and the opportunities it affords for creativity and innovation. The lack of a long history, or an entrenched leadership, allows for both an appealing vibrancy and excitement that comes from building something new.

The eagerness of the newly observant, and their willingness to invest in their newly found communities, inspires the rabbis in their efforts to serve them.

The charismatic Sephardic rabbi, now in the throes of building a new congregational home for his followers, says the Southwest city was attractive specifically because of its newness and potential for growth. "You can build it," he says. "You can shape it, you can build it how you want." And, he notes that in building it together with his congregation, it becomes theirs. "What you build is yours," he says. "You feel the impact, the satisfaction is unparalleled."

While countenancing the age of the community and its lack of roots, he sees it less a liability than an opportunity to reach people in need of the roots they need to grow.

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[301] Extensive interviews with six local rabbis and numerous informal conversations with several other rabbis and communal leaders evidence both the immense opportunities a newer community offers as well as its challenges.

[302] Ferziger, in his work on Orthodox outreach, observes a concomitant increase in the number of Jewish communal institutions and commercial enterprises as the numbers of stringently Orthodox Jews rises.

Social Place: Community

But how can one grow a community and develop those roots? The rabbis suggest that it is one person, one family, and one home at a time.

Carrie and her husband left their Midwest roots behind and built their dream house in a scenic area north of the city where this study takes place. Retired educators, she a longtime public school teacher, he a university professor, they were drawn to the area's natural beauty, the serenity of its mountain vistas, and its spiritual aura. Already on the path to exploring their Jewish roots, the town's tiny Jewish community was yet another attraction for the couple.

They joined its non-denominational congregation, and became involved in building its permanent home.

They also sought out other opportunities for Jewish learning, traveling to the city often to take advantage of its wider offerings. They crossed paths with the charismatic, young Orthodox rabbi with "a magnetic personality," as Carrie describes him, who was shepherding a small but growing observant Orthodox congregation. They met members of the community, many, like themselves, now empty nesters, who welcomed them warmly, inviting them for *Shabbos* and holiday meals. Soon they were traveling back and forth — a two hour drive each way — from their mountain aerie to the neighborhood of modest ranch homes that for some were *Shabbos* houses, second homes acquired within walking distance of a synagogue in order to observe Sabbath and holiday prohibitions on driving. It was an intriguing notion, and the couple were fortunate — with God's help, they believe — to soon find a comfortable, light-filled *Shabbos* home for themselves across the street from the *shul,* keeping their mountain dream home as well, and shuttling back and forth between the two like many of their contemporaries.[303]

[303] Purchasing a second home, furnishing it and outfitting it appropriately for *kashrut* observance, requires a substantial financial investment. BTs further along on their life course with a depth of experience, including educational and professional accomplishment and material success, are often more able to comfortably afford such costs, as my fieldwork in this study shows.

"We saw something happening that seemed very positive in our lives," says Carrie, explaining the couple's decision to purchase a home within the observant community. "And we felt very grateful and blessed."

Stringent Orthodoxy's requisites of daily and weekly prayer, its synagogue-based rituals and observances, its strict laws prohibiting work on the Sabbath and holidays, inform small enclaves of observant Jews.[304] Once they choose, like Carrie and her husband, to take on those religious obligations that demand proximity to a synagogue, the move into such a community becomes less of a choice than an imperative. In this study, all but two of the subjects live in an observant enclave — one of whom moved there earlier as a requirement of the rabbi supervising her Orthodox conversion,[305] one already living there before she became more observant, and one moving into such a neighborhood during the duration of this study.

Hannah, her husband, and pre-teen daughter rented a home within walking distance of their Orthodox synagogue about a year after first experimenting with heightened Sabbath-observance in their prior home. Before that, Hannah was driving to the synagogue on Saturdays and guiltily parking around the corner, while her husband walked the three miles — or later rode his bike with the permission of his rabbi — with their daughter.

In her initial interview for this study, Hannah expressed both her understanding that to continue on the path to more stringent observance, the family would have to move but also her own ambivalence about doing so. She was conflicted, still, as she said they were, "trying Orthodoxy on for size." She and her husband were "looking for more," in their Judaism and were drawn to Orthodoxy's depth, but she questioned Orthodoxy's limitations on engagement in the

[304] Heilman, *Sliding to the Right,* 7.

[305] For Dina, another subject in this study, living within walking distance to a synagogue was a requirement for Orthodox conversion under the supervision of a local Chabad Lubavitch rabbi. Rather than move from her spacious home to satisfy this requirement, she and her husband helped a new fledgling Orthodox congregation to purchase a small building for their new synagogue within walking distance of their home.

larger world and its communal exclusivity, while being attracted to the surety of its beliefs and values, and the cohesiveness of the community it engenders.

Community is central to Jewish belief and practice, with much of its prayer and ritual collective and synagogue-based.[306] Being physically part of a community heightens the embrace of its normative practices and eases transformation. Yet Orthodoxy demands a higher level of exclusivity, or separation, from the secular world and, for many BTs, their transformation is informed by a discomforting sense of dislocation, as they move from one world to another. Benor describes this transitional place as a "borderland,"[307] as prospective BTs seek to cross boundaries from lesser or non-observance to the stringent embrace of Jewish law that Orthodoxy requires. Kaufman describes the early stages of transformation as being "on the periphery." Dina, a subject in this study, who converted from Christianity and initially underwent a Reform conversion to Judaism, then later an Orthodox conversion, recalls the discomfiting dislocation of being in the peripheral stage of religious transformation that Benor aptly calls "in-betweenness."

"It's having one foot in, and one foot out," is how Dina describes it.

"And it feels lousy," she says, the pain still echoing in her voice.

Roberta Sands, in her study of the social integration of BTs,[308] compares the transition from one religious community to another as similar to immigration from one country to another, where individuals progress through a variety of stages from migration to acculturation to assimilation.[309] This movement, from one social location to another, is stressful, as Dina admits,

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[306] Benor, *Becoming Frum,* 4.

[307] Benor, *Becoming Frum,* 1.

[308] Roberta A. Sands, "The Social Integration of *Baalei Teshuvah*", *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 48, no. 1 (2009): 86-102. Sands draws on Danzger to define social integration: "Social integration is defined as inclusion into the fabric of community life, and is the outcome of leaving one's former social group, learning the norms of the new group, and becoming part of the new community by conforming to its standards and achieving acceptance," 86.

[309] Sands, "The Social Integration," 88. While Sands offers a number of findings salient to BT transformation, the focus of her study is a comparison of social inclusion, or acceptance, of BTs in

and often gradual, as the data in this study show. Benor similarly distinguishes the stages of social integration of BTs ranging from interested to peripheral to communal to *yeshiva* seminary,[310] while noting, as do Davidman and Kaufman, that some prospective BTs remain at the interested or peripheral stages of transformation and may never choose or aspire to more punctilious observance or communal membership. In fact, early on, they may consciously hold on to certain behaviors and practices to assert their peripheral location. Hannah, in a preliminary informational conversation, qualified her position on the Orthodox spectrum, "I'm not card-carrying Orthodox," she confided, neither ready to assert her identity nor imply her acceptance among the newly Orthodox.

Exclusive learning environments, as well as bounded communities, hasten transformation, marking and maintaining boundaries that further reinforce religious separateness and distinctiveness. They also inspire a heightened religious practice — and quicken the progression, as for many of the women in this study — through role modeling, mentoring, and a subtle communal pressure to conform. Rena describes her family's decision to become Sabbath-observant, which unexpectedly came to include strict holiday-observance as well, reflecting her ignorance of stringent Orthodox practice and belief and the impact of positive communal experience and modeling. Kara tells of how her family's desire for a kosher kitchen inspired their

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communities comprised primarily of other BTs versus communities comprised primarily of those who are FFB, or *frum* from birth, born into stringently Orthodox families. This study does not examine this difference, beyond peripheral reference to it among subjects with children who have married into older, more established communities with a preponderance of FFB members, which has engendered their own feelings of inauthenticity.

[310] My research reflects a similar trajectory, although interestingly, and reflective of the life course positionality of my subjects, the *yeshiva*/seminary location does not apply to them, but rather to their children. While all of the women in this study continue to engage in serious Jewish study, none of them have done so within a *yeshiva*/seminary environment, except for short periods of time when visiting Israel. However, in many cases, their older or adult children are engaged in Jewish learning within such exclusive environments, some while living at home, others in residential settings that afford heightened religious immersion. Of the women in this study, over time, seven enrolled their children in Jewish day schools, six initially in more progressive community schools, with three later moving them to Orthodox day schools. Six have older children who studied in *yeshivot* or seminaries in Israel for a gap year following high school graduation, and five have adult children who have continued with intensive *yeshiva*/seminary study as adults.

move to a new home in an observant neighborhood — and how it resulted unwittingly in their becoming Sabbath-observant their very first weekend there. And Hannah, now in her new home in the same observant neighborhood, finds the community's closeness and shared commitment appealing, dispelling her previous doubts about its potential for cloying conformity.

Davidman explores such a dynamic in her work, looking at the modes of encapsulation that inform closed communities. She identifies three dynamics at play in the maintenance of group boundaries — physical, social, and ideological — all of which can be evinced in the closed communities where the majority of the women in this study reside.[311] The physical encapsulation is most clearly noted in the proximity of the synagogue — and the ability for men to fulfill their obligations for daily, Sabbath, and holiday prayer — and the proximity of neighbors who have taken on the demands of stringent Orthodoxy. It is manifest, geographically and spiritually, with the construction of an *eruv,*[312] a boundary that encloses observant neighborhoods, creating a space where Sabbath prohibitions on carrying and other daily activities are lifted.

The social and ideological encapsulations are subtler, a gradual moving toward communal norms and standards through everyday interactions with neighbors who soon often become friends. They are the ones who can help "keep you on the path," through adherence or

[311] Davidman, *Tradition*, 174-184.

[312] The construction of an *eruv* is an essential element in encapsulation, bounding the community physically and inscribing a functional space where the Sabbath prohibition of carrying or transferring between two domains is suspended. Constructed according to strict rabbinic specifications, using both natural and manmade boundaries, the *eruv* extends the bounds of private space from the home to the surrounding neighborhood, allowing the carrying of objects such as keys and prayer shawls as well as transferring, or transporting, children and others in strollers or wheelchairs within that space. The *eruv* allows for greater participation in the life of the synagogue, particularly among women with small children and those who are disabled and can only travel to the synagogue if pushed in a wheelchair. As such, the *eruv* is seen as having a far-reaching psychological impact in creating a sense of community.

admonition, as the fiery rabbi of the suburban congregation (with a preponderance of older BTs) puts it.[313]

Early in her transformation, perhaps when she was still in the interested or peripheral stages, Kara, then the mother of a newborn, became friendly with other women in the religiously observant community, as they pushed strollers through the neighborhood while their new little ones slept. There was an ease in the informal talk of babies and families, she relates now, and also the opportunity to get to know observant women as friends and to ask questions about their lives. It dispelled some of the strangeness that she, as an aspiring or newly observant BT, experienced. Rena describes similar experiences as the women in her new neighborhood took her under their wings and helped to propel her along in the process. They became her "soul family," as she describes them, affording knowledge, wisdom, and experience, as well as support and encouragement. "Everyone needs one," she says gratefully, now often returning the favor in kind to those new to the neighborhood or just taking the first steps towards exploring stringent Orthodoxy.

Prior studies of BT women note the significance of these relationships, while Ferziger, in his more recent work on Orthodox *kiruv,* or outreach, further underscores their importance.

Ferziger notes the need for constant reinforcement that such proximity and intimacy provides, and also the ripple effect of role models on the newly Orthodox.[314] Even for those not

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[313] *The Pirkei Avos, Ethics of the Fathers, Treasury, The Sages Guide to Living, with Anthologized Commentary and Anecdotes*. Rabbi Moshe Lieber, ed. Rabbi Nosson Scherman, overview. (New York: Mesorah Publications, 1995), Chapter 1, Mishnah 6. "Appoint a teacher for yourself: acquire a friend for yourself." The rabbi draws on the text to emphasize the necessity of both teachers and friends in BT transformation, stressing the primacy of friendship in reinforcing practice.

Teachers provide both inspiration and encouragement, he says, recalling his own teachers who reminded him "there are people like me who are doing this, and who are living up to it. And you become inspired yourself to continue doing it even in moments of challenge, to push forward."

While friends are necessary to perform many ritual obligations, due to the communal nature of Jewish practice, they also play an essential role for those new to observant Jewish practice, as a source of inspiration and encouragement.

"[You need a friend] to hold you accountable, to keep you on the path," says the rabbi, "to lift you up, to keep you from falling down." Such "keep[ing] you from falling down " and "lift[ing] you up" implies both exemplifying strict adherence to Jewish law and admonishing a friend when he or she is not manifesting such adherence.

living within the physical limits of an observant neighborhood, its social and ideological confines can still impact them. There is a sameness to the stories of the women who were just beginning to explore the observant lifestyle and were overwhelmed with the kindness and generosity of the community, of countless meals around their tables, of invitations to spend holidays or *Shabbos* in their homes, and of sharing their experiences as encouragement and support. Simple things, like helping Annie find her place in the *siddur* to follow the service, simplifying the arduous and daunting process of *kashering* a home for Kara, or explaining the seemingly mysterious practices of ritual purity to Hannah, were exceedingly meaningful encounters that served to reinforce religious behaviors and engender a compelling sense of belonging. Hannah, reaching out to two of the community's *rebbitzens* for guidance, as she prepared for her first visit to the *mikvah,* rapturously describes feeling like "a member of the sisterhood," as they detailed the monthly practice.

The community is there to share both times of joy and sorrow, Rena observes, and the outpouring of communal support at those critical life moments is exceedingly meaningful. *B'nai mitzvahs*, engagements, and weddings all warrant joyous celebration, with the entire community invited to participate.[315] The traditional greeting among guests at such events — an exuberant *mazel tov!* — captures the shared communal joy. So too is the extraordinary outpouring of consolation and concern when adversity strikes. Death and illness are met with a rapid response, home-cooked meals delivered to the door, help with young children and other family responsibilities provided, *shiva minyans* arranged, and hospital visits made.

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[314] Ferziger, *Beyond Sectarianism*, 175-185.

[315] During a visit to Rena's home, she proudly shows me a photo album from her oldest daughter's *bat mitzvah*, still marveling that a friend in the community had taken the photos and surprised her with the album as a precious keepsake. The women of the community rally to plan and organize such celebrations — helping with everything from designing invitations, to making centerpieces and favors, to shopping and cooking, to setting up and cleaning up — further reinforcing a sense of shared communal endeavor and belonging. They respond similarly at times of sadness and loss. This dynamic was observed repeatedly in my fieldwork. While men may assume some responsibilities, my observations suggest that marking such occasions are primarily a women's purview, strengthening the bonds of women-only friendships and elevating their role as keepers of house and home and its extended communal bounds. While men may help, my observations evince such occasions as a clearly feminine province.

Aileen, the attractive blonde interior designer, a tiny dynamo with seemingly limitless energy and creativity, who distinguishes herself with her handiwork — “it’s all in my hands,” as she confides in Chapter One — was in the “interested” stage of BT development, as she and her husband struggled to accept their son’s decision to become stringently Orthodox. Later, dealing with the loss of their parents, and in search of a place to say *kaddish*, they reached out to the local Orthodox rabbi they had met through their son. Her husband attended *minyan* during the months following his father’s death and an occasional Sabbath or holiday service; the couple was impressed with the rabbi’s responsiveness and the community’s kindness.

But it was couple of years later that they were its grateful recipients when Aileen’s husband suffered a massive heart attack on an airplane en route to Israel to meet their second grandchild. An emergency landing in London left Aileen alone and terrified, as her husband fought for his life in a local hospital. “There were no hotel rooms, we had no car. I didn’t have my passport. I had no local currency.” A call to their daughter in Phoenix, their exigent situation relayed to the local rabbi, who had family in London, resulted in an immediate surge of support. “That community turned out in such enormous force,” she recalls, “to people they didn’t even know. And it was in the middle of the night.”

Meals and housing were provided, along with prayers and emotional succor. “It was an unbelievable thing,” says Aileen, still astounded at their generosity. “I’d never seen anything like it in my life. And they took care of us. They saw us home.”

Describing the remarkable outpouring, Aileen depicts this part of the story in Biblical terms of peoplehood. “We were going to see the children in Israel,” she says with characteristic pithiness, “but the Children of Israel came to us.”

A year later, at home, Aileen was diagnosed with stage four terminal cancer and began a year of grueling treatment. The local community responded again.

The communities become, in Davidman and Griel's words, "social cocoons," which cosset those new to observant Orthodoxy as they make their way across its fraught borderlands.[316] Their members welcome the BTs, shore them up with understanding and confidence, listen to their concerns, answer their questions, and encourage them. And they provide comfort and concern; an antidote to a lonely world that at times has left the prospective BTs bereft and disillusioned.[317] Kara, and her husband and family, reeling from a devastating financial reversal, gradually recovered within the embrace of the Orthodox community. Friendships blossomed as the couple and their three daughters became valued members. Sarah, retiring when the school she had founded and nurtured for many years, lost its communal backing and was forced to close, made a host of new friends in the observant Jewish community and speaks glowingly of their inherent genuineness and loyalty. Aileen, who had early on retreated from non-Orthodox Jewish communal life, disappointed and disillusioned with its members, recalls the unexpected kindness of the Orthodox community — calling to check on her, driving her to doctor's appointments, and taking her out for ice cream — as she battled cancer, not once, but twice. It is a manifestation of the underlying dynamic at play that impels BT transformation: something lost, something found.[318]

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[316] Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000). Putnam examines the loss of community in America as the twenty-first century opens, examining community's intrinsic value and its decline, and proposing strategies for re-invigorating social connections. His data tracks community's many permutations, political, civic, and religious, and the role community plays in creating social capital, which provides the glue for communal belonging and civic engagement. The weakening of such ties, and the yearning to renew them, is one of the phenomena that heighten the appeal of small, religious enclaves — or social cocoons — that attract prospective BTs. They are a response to the breakdown of community and the resultant feelings of loneliness and anomie that some individuals encounter. Several of the rabbis interviewed for this study cite loneliness as a prime factor among those seeking out more a meaningful religious affiliation.

[317] Sarna, *American Judaism*, 64-65. Sarna describes the social, economic, and legal "push" factors that often stimulated Jewish immigration from Eastern Europe, and the concomitant "pull" factors of economic opportunity and religious freedom that attracted them to America.

The dynamic of "push, pull," often used to describe the counter forces at play in immigrant acculturation, is a manifestation of the continuing meme of "lost and found" in this study. The data in this study reveal a greater "push," a profound material loss such as a death, divorce, illness, or financial reversal, as well as a spiritual "loss" of religious bearings that might help to assuage the casualty, as the impetus for the lesser "pull" of heightened Orthodox belief and practice.

[318] Laura Levitt*, Jews and Feminism*. Levitt limns the innate conflict between personal freedom and communal responsibility that being Orthodox engenders. She writes of wrestling with the duality of her identity as an American Jewish woman, seeking to reconcile American Jewry's predilection for social

Particularly for those further along their life course — empty nesters, those retired or contemplating retirement, or those confronting illness or death — such communities provide new sources of friendship and companionship as older adults encounter fundamental life changes.[319] The small suburban congregation with the charismatic young rabbi — one such "social cocoon" — has attracted a significant number of congregants at this age and stage of life who find the closeness and cohesiveness of the community appealing. Its compelling connectedness — belonging to, or being a part of, something bigger — also engenders new meaning and purpose, which, for those confronting diminished professional or familial responsibilities, fulfills a basic human need and informs both collective and individual identity.[320]

The heightened communal identity, and both a commitment to its religious stringencies and a connection to its social perquisites, further inscribes communal bounds and weakens bonds with those outside its purview. While physical and social encapsulation orients BTs within stringent Orthodoxy, ideological encapsulation, the final stage on Davidman's trajectory, firmly orients them in its firmament. It is the slowest stage to develop, as observed in this and past studies, its outcomes perhaps more difficult to discern and to measure, but the most powerful location in BT transformation.[321]

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liberalism, and its emphasis on personal freedom and privacy, with the traditional Judaism of her grandparents that subjugated individual rights to the demands of Jewish law. She informs the notion of lost and found and the struggle it induces.

[319] Hunt, "Religion as a Factor," 622.

[320] Hunt, "Religion as a Factor," 622. Hunt's study suggests that older adults are more likely to embrace new forms of religion and become actively involved in religious organizations as a response to the social marginalization of retirement. He also finds that older adults seek opportunities for socialization and a sense of belonging. Data in this study, and my fieldwork observation, manifest a similar phenomenon.

[321] Davidman's study, with its dual cohorts, one in Bais Chana, a Chabad Lubavitch residential study center in Twin Cities, and the other at Lincoln Square Synagogue, a large modern Orthodox congregation in New York City's cosmopolitan Upper East Side, provides insights into ideological encapsulation. Residential facilities that geographically and socially encapsulate prospective BTs present more fertile ground for ideological encapsulation. The younger age of the Bais Chana cohort, and their lesser educational and professional accomplishment, was also a factor in the pace and progression of their transformations.

Key to communal belonging — and its ideological iteration — is a compelling reciprocity, inherent to Orthodoxy's demanding adherence to Jewish law, both its intricate system of obligations and responsibilities and the compelling sense of purpose and respect that such adherence elicits. Sands, limning social integration of BTs, writes of the variety of forms of capital — human, social, religious, and spiritual — that inform human belonging, and their accrual, individually and communally.[322] Individuals can bestow capital to the community, adding value to shared purposes or endeavors, while communities can further accumulate capital from them through shared knowledge, experiences, and resources. Lawyers, real estate brokers, and bankers can provide professional expertise to a congregation buying a piece of land, building a sanctuary, or hiring a rabbi. Community leaders can provide assistance in putting together a fundraising campaign or a cooperative communal initiative. Congregants with financial capacity can provide the necessary financial resources. Reciprocally, those who share their capital with the community, receive approbation, appreciation, and a heightened respect or status for their contributions. Sarah, the former school director, now heads the fundraising efforts of the local Orthodox girls' high school, while Ava, with experience as a volunteer in the non-Orthodox Jewish community, has served as board chair and more recently headed its capital campaign. Rena used her communication skills as the editor of a now-defunct glossy Jewish magazine keyed to the observant community, and more recently served as a speaker on a community-wide panel

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The Lincoln Square cohort transitioned at a much slower pace, absent the cloistered residential setting at Bais Chana, with its subjects still immersed in the secular world even as they moved toward a more Jewishly observant lifestyle. The ideological encapsulation was attempted through encounters with fervent rabbis and teachers, who used their positions to make compelling arguments for a stringently Orthodox life. At Lincoln Square, Davidman observed rabbis who emphasized Jewish distinctiveness with scathing criticism of the wider secular society. She suggests that such critiques were "boundary setting" devices. Such criticisms were encountered in interviews with local rabbis in this study, though their tone was much gentler and less censorious. They spoke in more compassionate terms of the collapse of the family, the insecurity and uncertainty of the world, and the loss of moral certitude. From the pulpit, however, their approach was much more intense, speaking with fervor, and, as one rabbi described his style, "on fire." An analysis of rabbinic teaching and preaching, and its impact on ideological encapsulation, would be a fertile subject for future research.

[322] Sands, "The Social Integration," 89. Sands defines human capital in terms of skills, education, and experience; social capital in terms of social networks and connections; religious capital in terms of religious understanding and knowledge; and spiritual capital in terms of the ability to access and actualize divine presence.

about women in Judaism. As the data in this study show, BTs possess valuable human capital that informs their own sense of self with meaningful purpose and hastens their sense of belonging, or, as Sands puts it, their social integration.

Benor limns a fourth category of capital, cultural capital, which includes language and other essential cultural practices that further inscribe identity.[323] The emphasis in her study of BT transformation focuses primarily on language, tracking the changes in linguistic usage among those new to Orthodoxy, looking at the inclusion of Hebrew and Yiddish phrases in everyday speech, as well as changes in pronunciation and other linguistic features. She identifies language as a key component of cultural capital, along with other such elements as dress, food, home decoration, and music. The women in this study manifest less embrace of linguistic markers, with minimal use of Yiddish and Hebrew words in their everyday speech, as observed in study interviews, than in prior studies. However, there is variation in this, as in most of the variables in studies of BT transformation, with two or three of the subjects incorporating more Yiddish or Hebrew words in their speech than others in the study. I attribute the lesser impact of speech as capital among this cohort to the particular profile of the community, with a preponderance of BTs and a much lesser number of FFBs, the relatively small size of the Jewish community and its age, and the small number of those identifying as stringently Orthodox, compared to the much larger, older, and more densely populated communities where prior studies were conducted. Age and life course position of the subjects in this study also impact speech acquisition, in some cases accelerating the process, as Benor has found, in others, slowing it, as adults find attempting to acquire new language skills later in life find it daunting or embarrassing.[324] Dress and food, as

[323] Benor, *Becoming Frum,* 79.

[324] Benor, *Becoming Frum,* 25-29, 190-195. Benor discusses the impact of age and life course on speech acquisition in her study. She finds that adults, often accomplished in other areas of their lives, manifest self-consciousness and embarrassment when learning a new way of speaking, particularly when compared to the language acquisition of children. The resulting "infantilization" of their efforts can spur heightened efforts to become proficient as they seek "authenticity," 190-191, while others continue to struggle with learning a new language later in life, 29. She also found that, while the process of speech acquisition often involves some formal education, informal interactions are often the most useful.

well as home decor, as discussed in Chapter Three, (Em)bodiment, are significant factors in enhancing capital, more readily assimilated to than language.

Social Place: Family

Becoming part of a community is a key factor in identity construction of BTs, informing both the "me" and the "we," in Griel and Davidman's words, as BTs adopt the normative behaviors and beliefs of the stringently Orthodox and assume their place within communities that reinforce them. Such a social location, as I argue and as the data in this study shows, yields reciprocal benefits for both the aspiring Orthodox women and the community they seek to join.

However, the dramatic shift in identity and social location, from less or non-observant Jews to stringently observant ones, augers often wrenching losses and gains, dislocation from other social networks, remaking existing relationships, ending some, and, as shown, spawning others. It is a painful process, especially for older adults, who often have longstanding familial or other personal or professional ties. Friendships wither, family ties weaken, supplanted by new relationships or friendships, as a new identity is constructed and the new community assumes primacy.[325]

Davidman, Kaufman, Benor, and Shapiro observed the impact on BTs as the newly stringently Orthodox struggle to reconcile the demands of the community with the requisites of family and social life. The data in this study show a clear impact of BT transformation on close relationships, more pronounced and more painful earlier in the process, but in many cases

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Her findings further reinforce the impact of social encapsulation on BT transformation and the impetus of ideological encapsulation on the accumulation of social capital.

"Adults learn new ways of speaking, dressing, and acting through a process of peripheral participation in a community of practice," Benor writes. "… [T]he lion's share of learning happens informally, as the learner gains increasing access to the roles and practices within the community," 195.

[325] Shapiro, in her study of adult BT transformation, writes of its "high cost," in terms of personal relationships as adherents "reinterpret … past relationships and sets of meaning." Her study of thirty-two BTs, men and women aged thirty-six to forty who were raised in affluent Chicago suburbs, differs from this one in terms of gender, age, life course, and geographic and social location. However, her findings on the disruption of longtime familial, collegial, and communal relationships reinforce the data in this study, which show that such disruptions are profound.

seeming to lessen the longer the BT establishes her identity in the observant community. As time passes, there appears to be acceptance of the transformation, and the lifestyle changes it requires, and various patterns can be evinced, as I show below, although relationships are predicated on other values or shared experiences than those that previously informed them.[326]

Family relationships are particularly fraught, as this study shows, often achingly so, particularly between parents and adult children. Leah, like Kara, recalls growing up within the embrace of a large and loving extended family, remaining in the same community after marrying and having children, and maintaining a close relationship with her parents until the end of their lives. She recalls warm childhood memories of holidays and other special occasions — the family, the food, the conviviality, and the intimacy — but also the hurt her parents felt as she and her former husband began to become more observant. Her father struck out at her, she remembers, alleging that her upbringing in their "traditional" home and their longtime membership in a Conservative congregation, was "not good enough" for their now more observant daughter. He and her mother were guilty of "not doing this, or not doing that," her father railed, and while proud of his more knowledgeable grandchildren, he was not proud of his daughter. He felt betrayed.[327] "It wasn't okay for me," Leah recalls, as she tells this story, sitting at the kitchen table in the cozy townhouse where she now lives in the heart of an observant neighborhood. Photos of her late parents and her bevy of observant grandchildren surround us.

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[326] Shapiro delves into the issues of family strife that result from BT transformation. Her study shows a gradual diminution in the degree of conflict, while arguing that its root cause is resistance to change. Delving into a conversation that has engaged numerous other scholars, including Cohen and Eisen, and more recently Kaufman and Bethany Horowitz, she posits that the families of her cohort of male and female BTs defined their Jewishness in terms of an ethnocultural identity, while the BTs came to define their Jewishness in terms of a religious identity. This divide is a continual source of conflict between parents, who feel that their children are rejecting them and their Jewishness, and children, who feel that they have discovered or recovered Judaism's compelling authenticity and authority. Data in this study point to a similar dynamic at play.

[327] Shapiro, "Driven to Orthodoxy," 211-215. Shapiro keys into a similar response of betrayal in her study, suggesting that it is the perceived "elitism," a hierarchical ordering of ways of being Jewish, and a rejection and delegitimization of the parents' ways of being Jewish, which is so devastating to parents of BTs. The conflict becomes "a battle for ownership and authenticity," she writes.

Leah ultimately responded to her father forthrightly and diffused his anger. “I told him, ‘this is not a slap in the face. We’re taking what you taught us as a foundation,’” she recalls telling him, “’just taking it a step further.’”

“And I asked him just to be proud of me.”[328]

Ultimately, her father grudgingly accepted her heightened observance along with its inherent limitations and restrictions. But the pain of the encounter echoes even now. It took several years for Leah to persuade her parents of the rightness of the decision for her and her family and gain their approval, or at least their tacit acceptance. I attribute her ability to diffuse a potentially explosive situation to her life experience and maturity; this study shows the significant impact of age and stage of life on BT transformation.

Others in this study relay similar conflicts over heightened observance, particularly in terms of holiday or lifecycle celebrations, family ruptures, and the eventual acceptance or accommodation that can result. Kara has experienced both, as her parents sought to respect their daughter’s religious practice. She tells of her parents picking up kosher take-out to bring for their first meal in their new home, of buying kosher meat, then ritually cleaning their outdoor grill for a barbecue at their home, of her mother later helping her *toivel* her dishes for her newly *kashered* kitchen, although at one point turning to her and asking plaintively, “How far are you going to go?”

Even Ava, raised in a Sabbath- and holiday-observant home, with a kosher kitchen, recalls a similar response as she heightened her ritual observance. “My father thought I was a

[328] Dorit Roer-Strier and Roberta G. Sands, “The Impact of Religious Intensification: Family Relations: A South African Example,” *Journal of Marriage and Family* 4 (Aug. 2001): 868-880. Roer-Strier and Sands studied fifteen adult daughters turning toward stringently observant Orthodoxy and their mothers, to investigate the mothers’ initial reactions, and their reactions over time, to their daughters’ religious transformations. They found, as did Sands in her more recent U.S. study, that initial negative reactions tend to lessen as time passes. They also found that a desire for family cohesion engendered efforts to allay conflict and inspire mutual respect. In some cases it led to the “pride” that Leah was seeking, as the mothers’ gradually came to admire their daughters’ heightened commitment to their shared Jewish belief and practice. It was, in Leah’s terms, just “taking it a step further.”

little crazy," she recalls now, "and my mother thought I was totally crazy." But their relationships remained unchanged, perhaps because the family was consumed with dealing with Ava's sister's illness and death and her parents' health issues. Lara's in-laws, who identify as Conservative Jews and are neither Sabbath- nor kosher-observant, were bewildered as she began moving toward heightened observance, with more stringent adherence to the dietary restrictions of *kashrut*. They, too, saw her new commitment to religious law as extreme, making holiday meals at their home exceedingly painful and uncomfortable for her. "What do you mean that you can't or you won't," they responded to her new religious prohibitions incredulously. "We've done this for the past thirty-five years." And Hannah, whose daughter had two *bat mitzvahs*, one in their then egalitarian non-denominational congregation where they had formerly belonged, and one in the stringently Orthodox congregation where they are now affiliated, recalls a similar response from her mother-in-law. She relates her discomfort at the wording on the invitation for both gatherings, requesting modest dress for the Orthodox one. "She was upset about what her friends would think," recalls Hannah. Her own parents were more accepting of her turn toward Orthodoxy, her mother applauding her desire to *kasher* her kitchen and respectful of her commitment. Lara's mother also, responded positively to the decision to keep a kosher home, only concerned that she punctiliously follow the laws in her daughter's home when visiting.[329]

Kara's family's large, boisterous holiday gatherings gradually gave way to smaller or separate celebrations, as her observance increased and her extended family's discomfort grew. She recalls her sister and her family abruptly leaving a Passover Seder, before dinner was

[329] Davidman, *Tradition*, 89-90. Hannah's mother left behind her Orthodox upbringing when she married Hannah's father, who was raised Reform. They compromised and decided to raise their children in a Conservative congregation. Lara was also raised in a Conservative congregation, though she has been moved to recover the Orthodox roots of her grandparents, who survived the *Shoah,* and the roots of those who had perished. Her mother supported her quest to become more observant. This phenomenon — the recovery of tradition by third generation Jews — has been observed by Davidman and others. Davidman refers to "Hansen's law of generational return," previously cited in Chapter Two, which predicts that the third generation of immigrant families will reinstate religious practices put aside by the second generation in their quest to assimilate. Davidman writes, "The women's belief that they were fulfilling the path laid out by their grandparents provided a sense of identity, a connection with a larger order and with their roots." The data in this study evince a similar dynamic at play.

served, impatient with the length of the service their more stringent observance required. “We’re going to go now,” she recalls her sister announcing as she and her family headed for the door.

Kara’s brother-in-law and his wife are similarly uncomfortable, declining invitations for *Shabbos* or holidays at their home. “They want nothing to do with *Shabbat*,” says Kara, “coming for lunch or anything.”

Her in-laws are also often missing from their Sabbath and holiday tables, more recently choosing not to attend their granddaughter’s high school graduation. They question the family’s decision to send their children to religious schools that further inscribe their observant lifestyle and resent the impact on their roles as grandparents. They feel deprived of experiences their friends enjoy, says Kara. “It is not what they thought,” says Kara of her daughter’s high school years. “They were excited to go buy prom dresses and hear about all the boyfriends and all of that. And they don’t get that.”[330]

The sadness is palpable in Kara’s voice, raised with two sets of loving grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins nearby, who were integral parts of her life. Yet she wisely intuits that the loss, and the hurt, is on both sides. As is the choice. “Everybody tries to kind of go, okay, this is your thing. You do your thing, but if it’s okay to do your thing, then it’s okay for me to do my thing. And that is the way everybody should be.”

And while she and her husband did not anticipate the separation from their families, they are resigned. “It is how it is,” she says quietly, “and it’s tough.”

Dina’s story is complicated, as much by her Christian upbringing as by her Jewish conversion, as much by its initial familial rupture as by its unanticipated consequences. While she tells of her family’s acceptance of her decision to convert to Judaism before marrying, she is clear

[330] Shapiro, “Driven to Orthodoxy,” 219. Shapiro finds “parental disappointment and embarrassment” among some of the parents of the subjects in her study at their children’s heightened level of observance, reflective of a similar response by some of the families in this study.

that the religion of her youth was a fundamental part of her identity, and her family's, and that her refutation of a deep Christian faith has clearly been hard for her parents. Their acceptance of her decision, and of her husband and family, still does not dissipate their pain even as they strive to preserve their relationship with their only daughter. "When I told my father I was converting, he cried," she recalls, the memory still fresh more than twenty years later.

Yet her parents accepted her choice, as well as her later decision to heighten her level of observance with an Orthodox conversion. She describes them as being respectful of her, and she is respectful of them; however, when they are together, she often feels as if she is walking literally on eggshells.

Weekend visits are especially difficult, with Jewish Sabbath and dietary proscriptions. "It's awkward for everyone," she says, now opting for weekday trips to their West coast home. Still, she relates, even a simple meal can be problematic, telling a poignant story of her mother wanting to feed her, offering to make her eggs for breakfast and her daughter having to demur.

"Oh, mom, I can't eat that," she recalls telling her mother regretfully.

"Oh, I'm just making you eggs," her mother replies.

"But it's been in your pan that's had meat. So I can't. We can't eat that," Dina explains.

"It's insulting to them," says Dina now, clearly saddened. And hard.

The hardest, she confides, was taking on a Hebrew name at her conversion. Like other Jewish converts, she became "*bat Sarah,*" a daughter of the Biblical matriarch Sarah, signifying her initiation into the Jewish people.

But how can she be *bat Sarah* if she will always be Dina, her parents' daughter?

"Look, she says," trying to explain her conflicted feelings, "the fifth commandment is to honor your mother and your father," she says. "Well, in some ways I feel like I didn't because I converted. It weighs heavily on me, because did I honor my mother and father if I'm now *bat Sarah*?"

She stops. "It's gonna make me cry."

Such issues continue to weigh heavy on those who take on the obligations of stringent Orthodox observance, although the pain seems to diminish as they become more confident of their choice to become religious and more fully integrated into the observant community.

As they come to accept their choice to be not only divinely inspired but also divinely ordained, the impact on their human relationships is also mitigated as they accept divine authority.

Dina's conundrum — how to honor one's parents while honoring one's God — raises the question of how to reconcile a tradition which reveres family with a tradition that privileges God. As Dina so poignantly shares, this question complicates family relationships and can rend them.

It arose with unexpected force, and emotion, in an informal phone conversation with Dina, early in this study. I called to follow up on an initial email to more fully explain the study's substance and ask her to consider participating. She responded with a resounding yes, and, in just a few minutes, hinting at the enormous difficulties BTs confront if they are married with children. "I want people to know how hard it is," I recall her saying, alluding to a more recent family conflict over her teenage son attending his high school prom, called for a Saturday evening. Driving with his friends to the event would be a violation of the Sabbath.

Later, when we meet, Dina speaks movingly of her commitment to Judaism, of her embrace of *kashrut* — "I think of *Hashem* every time I put food in my mouth" — of the innate beauty of the Sabbath as a day of rest. "You know how beautiful it is to sit down as a family every Friday night? To say, 'We're having dinner as a family. We're shutting everything off. We're gonna talk to each other. That it's family time, that everything stops.'"

But then life intervenes, as their children, who were just kids when she and her husband first embarked on their journey to becoming more stringently observant, are now teenagers who want to fit in with their friends, and who want to go to a school dance on a Saturday night.[331]

Dina was a cheerleader in high school, she tells me. Friday nights, she wore a short skirt and kicked her leg up on the football field. She can relate to how her children feel, now in public high school, with friends who do not hew to the same religious obligations as they do. Her older daughter complains about walking to *shul* on Saturdays. “It’s sweaty and hot,” she tells her mother, “and I want to be dressed like everybody else.” She also is getting old enough to resent missing out on dances and other social occasions that conflict with the Sabbath.

“I feel for them, because that’s not how I grew up,” says Dina. “There are challenges that break your heart.”

She’s learned over the past ten years or more, “It’s not just about you.

“It’s affecting your husband. It’s affecting your children, it’s affecting everybody.”

The conflict has roiled her relationship with her husband, raised with no Jewish education or observance, and who was initially challenged to explore his Judaism by Dina when the two began dating. She was shocked at his lack of religious grounding and his profound ignorance of the tradition into which he was born. She was on a spiritual search herself at the time, having moved away from the Christian faith of her youth, and looking for new roots. She converted to

[331] Dina’s two older children attended a non-Orthodox Jewish community day school in their early years, but transferred to public school for secondary education. There are limited Jewish options for high school in the community where this study takes place — one all girls high school, one all boys *yeshiva*, both stringently Orthodox, outgrowths of the community *Kollel*, both fairly new schools, with limited numbers of students and limited opportunities for socialization, reflective of the relative young age, limited size, and number of Jewish educational institutions, of the observant Jewish community where this study takes place. Some observant families choose to send their children out of state for high school, while a few opt for public school, like Dina and her husband, allowing their children exposure to non-Jewish students and alternate lifestyles and worldviews. This exposure can heighten parent/child conflict in the teen years, as Dina describes.

The older children of other subjects in this study attend the local Jewish high schools, where they find a ready peer group of Jewish teenagers. However, although the curriculum and underlying values of the Jewish schools reflect their stringently Orthodox grounding, the students reflect varying degrees of observance at home.

Judaism before they married, and he gradually began to recover his Judaism. Now, both identifying as Orthodox, they are struggling with how to deal with their teenage children and preserve the sanctity of their religious observance.

Dina describes her husband as more "black and white," than she is. "He's like, go giant or go home," she says,[332] afraid that if they ease their observance it may fall by the wayside.

He worries that accommodations, such as allowing their son to go to the prom, are a slippery slope to non-observance.

While Dina is sensitive to her husband's concerns, she is also sympathetic to her children.

She feels blindsided by the issues that erupted, as their children became teenagers, and the conflicts that ensued. "It was a surprise to me," she says. "I just hadn't gone that far. It's crazy, I didn't even think about it."

She cautions others to understand that there are challenges, as well as benefits, in taking on a religious lifestyle. "People don't think about how divisive it can be," she says now. Especially, she notes, when living in a community with a tiny observant Orthodox population.

"This is not Brooklyn," she says with dry understatement.

Like Dina and her husband, the experiences of other couples in this study evince differences in the pace and progression of religious transformation, and the understanding or awareness of the fundamental life changes it demands.

Rena and Hannah, as previously discussed, were both lagging behind their husbands' religious progressions. Rena describes a "resisting" stage, her husband ready to take on many of the obligations of their stringently observant lifestyle before she was, while Hannah's husband

[332] Benor, *Becoming Frum*, 30. Benor identifies several modes of "hyper-accommodation" among BTs who take on exaggerated behaviors or ritual practices as a means of further establishing their credibility and authenticity as stringently observant Jews. She also identifies "deliberate distinctiveness," another phenomenon of exaggerated difference to more clearly mark boundaries between BTs and less or non-religious Jews, or others.

was also moving at a faster pace than she was. Kara was the initiator in her family, gradually drawing her husband along, while Lara still laments her husband's slower pace. Ava, grieving after her sister's death, took on heightened obligations before her husband, who gradually followed her lead. Sarah relates a long process of trying out heightened observance, particularly *kashrut*, in her home, only now taking on more stringent observance as her grown children are no longer living there (a high-school-age niece remains in her care), with a husband who has no desire to follow her lead, but acquiesces to her observance. "It's working," Sarah says, when I ask about her marriage. "It's like, it's my thing, and if that's what you want to do…"

Carrie and her husband have found their shared religious transformation a mutually fulfilling new facet of their long married life, using their newfound leisure to further their spiritual search. The variety of ways that couples respond to growing religiosity points to the uniqueness of each story, and each couple, and the impact of life course position on their transformations. As the data evince, couples who are married for decades often can find ways to accommodate each other and chart their own progression. However, those with children at home often experience more strife and conflict, as Dina has described.

Social Place: Children

Those with younger children, rather than tween or teenage children, find it easier to incorporate heightened religious observance into their family life, particularly if they enroll their children in Orthodox day schools. Attendance at these schools hastens social integration, immersing the children in Orthodox practice and belief, and reinforcing normative behaviors while providing them a cohort of friends.[333] The children also participate in the day-to-day life of the

[333] Heilman, *Sliding to the Right* , 8. Heilman notes the current prevalence of Orthodox day schools and the overwhelming choice of day school for Orthodox children by their parents as "key to continuity."

Aside from providing both Judaic and secular education for their children, the schools provide a ready social group that reinforces communal norms and behaviors, among them and their families. Anecdotal evidence from my data reflects this dynamic.

Rena, who now covers her hair according to Orthodox belief, tells of being in her earlier "resisting stage" and having to respond to a question from her oldest daughter, then in day school, as to why she was not "like the other mommies who covered their hair." Hannah shared a similar story about questions as to why she was wearing makeup on *Shabbos*, from children in the stringently observant Orthodox congregation, where she and her husband sometimes attended Sabbath services. Many observant women do not use makeup on *Shabbos*, as it is among those behaviors proscribed by a stringent interpretation of

community, attending synagogue, spending *Shabbos* and holidays together, attending life cycle events, further strengthening communal cohesiveness and inscribing the community's, and their family's, values. Still, as with husbands and wives, each child is an individual and responds to changes in the family's life style differently. Kara's oldest daughter has been drawn to more stringent observance, more conscious of dressing modestly and making more conservative choices, as evident in the length of her skirts or her sleeves. Her younger sister, more fashion-conscious, loves short, flirty skirts on the weekends, while dressing appropriately for weekday classes at the Orthodox high school both daughters attend. She spends hours watching beauty videos, says Kara, who wrestles with balancing demands of religious life with her daughter's keen interests in fashion, beauty, and the allure of the internet.[334]

Adult children present their own challenges, as parents seek to sustain relationships with their children and grandchildren while taking on the heightened obligations of stringent Orthodoxy

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the laws of the Sabbath, prohibiting dying or smoothing. http://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/484236/jewish/Can-I-apply-make-up-on-Shabbat.htm.

[334] Neither Kaufman nor Davidman delve into the impact of BT transformation on children, as the majority of their subjects were not yet married or had children when the studies were conducted. Further, the issue of parent/child conflict has more recently been examined in a variety of mainstream accounts among those *leaving* observant Orthodoxy, rather than among those moving toward it.

Of particular note is Shulem Deen's book, *All Who Go Do Not Return*, a Memoir. (Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2015), which traces his transition from life as a stringently observant Orthodox Jew living in a stringently observant Orthodox enclave in New York State to life as a less observant Jew living alone in Manhattan. The book recounts the conflict with his former wife over visitation with his children — his wife was granted custody, as usually happens in such cases — and the difficulties in preserving relationships with his children as he moderated his level of religious observance and shed many of the trappings of religious life, including distinctive clothing and facial hair. In going OTD, off the *derekh*, or off the path of Jewish law, Deen was stigmatized by his family and community, his new lifestyle delegitimized and questioned by his children, some of whom opt out of visitations with him, while they strive to understand his decision to leave and preserve their relationship with him.

A recent video on Netflix, *One of Us*, offers another troubling account of three individuals, including a mother seeking divorce from an abusive husband and her five children, who seek to leave their closed Hasidic community, and the response of the community. https://www.netflix.com/title/80118101.

Davidman in her book, *Becoming Unorthodox*, treats the issue of parent/child conflict as peripheral, with a number of references to those being "disinherited or disowned" by parents for leaving Orthodoxy (Davidman was both disinherited and disowned by her father), 6-7, or other individuals fearing ostracism or stigmatization if they choose to leave, 142-143.

Both Deen's experience and those recounted by Davidman take place in stringently Orthodox Hasidic enclaves, within densely populated Jewish areas, with exceedingly strong communal pressure to conform. The community where this study takes place is located outside of heavily populated Jewish areas, with small Jewish neighborhoods integrated into larger swaths of residential areas where both Jews and non-Jews live.

themselves. The data in this study show an enormous sensitivity among those with adult children no longer living at home to maintain relationships with them through open and honest discussions of their own religious obligations. “Our children just want clarity,” Carrie says simply, explaining that they want to know how their parents observe Sabbath and holidays, and how they observe *kashrut*, so that they can accommodate new prescriptions or prohibitions. They can also make choices, as Dina has with her parents, about how best to spend time together that is mutually enjoyable, respectful, and less stressful.

In some cases, the dynamic is reversed, as adult children precede their parents in taking on the obligations of stringent Orthodoxy. Four of the subjects in this study have children who became more stringently Orthodox than they were, having to learn to accept and accommodate their children’s level of observance, and in some cases, follow their lead. Aileen’s son, who spent twelve years in Israel, studying at a *yeshiva* after college graduation, and his FFB wife, who he met there, introduced Aileen and her husband to Orthodoxy and inspired them to explore its teachings, and then later remodel and *kasher* their kitchen. Ava’s younger son moved toward heightened observance as a teenager, trying sensitively to raise the degree of *kashrut* observance in his parents’ home. Ava recalls him stealthily taking kitchen items to the *mikvah* to *toivel* with their local rabbi, and one evening cleaning out her pantry as she was sleeping, discarding items with a *hechsher* that did not pass muster. She laughs about it now, but recalls being upset then. That son, who spent several years studying in a *yeshiva,* is now married to a FFB woman with several children, while another son is also married with children and following an observant lifestyle. Her daughter, single and in a longtime relationship, is not observant. Again, the vast variation of observance among the women in this study, and their children, reflects the essential uniqueness of religious transformation among women with more life experience and more complex family relationships. Their social networks complicate the process of BT transformation, yet they provide useful illustrations of the challenges that a later in life change demands, and the responses it can inspire to preserve newly found religious obligation and *shalom bayit,* or family harmony.

Social Place: Friends

The one consistent casualty of BT transformation is friendships. Each of the subjects in this study speaks of the changes in social relationships that religious transformation engenders. Old friends are lost, and new ones are found, as the demands of stringent Orthodox observance gradually weaken the ties that had bound them in the past and replace the ties with new, more constricting and exclusive ones.

Carrie and her husband were delighted to find a burgeoning Jewish community in the small mountain town where they had built their dream home. They were welcomed by the community's sole Jewish congregation, with its more progressive orientation and appealing spiritual vibe, and became active members. They often hosted Friday night dinners, inviting the lively Reform rabbi, who served the congregation on a part time basis, as well as a variety of others. "We decided, somebody showed Shabbat to us, we'll show Shabbat to others," says Carrie, then further along on her religious journey. But for some of their friends, the convivial gatherings were "too religious." Gradually, Carrie and her husband realized that while they were looking for more, their friends might not be. And so they went looking for new ones.[335]

The essential difference in spiritual orientation — and resultant practice — is often the critical variable in preserving or rending friendships. The discomfort of Carrie's mountain friends echoes through the stories of each of the women in this study. For some of their friends, the heightened observance, or even enthusiasm for enhanced practice, is off-putting. It can be perceived as excessive or extreme, too Jewish, as one subject put it. It also can be perceived as too limiting, too exclusive. As Ava noted, some of her friends thought she had become "too good

[335] Carrie and her husband ultimately found a new group of friends, who shared their desire to become more ritually observant. They joined the small, observant congregation in the suburban enclave, purchasing a *Shabbos* home there. Their rabbi, young, fervent, and charismatic, had attracted many other BTs of similar life course position. In an interview for this study, he spoke openly of how many in his congregation replaced longtime friendships from the past with new ones more reflective of their current stringently Orthodox lifestyle. While it is one of many sacrifices the BTs make, such new friendships are critical factors in reinforcing their choice to become Orthodox and to take on its punctilious obligations.

for them."[336] Such discomfort, and its social consequences, has also been observed in previous studies of BTs.

Accepted patterns for socializing and maintaining friendships are also disrupted, as BTs take on stringent kosher-, Sabbath- and holiday-observance. Non-kosher restaurants are off-limits — although many prospective BTs often begin by eschewing pork, shellfish, and non-kosher meat while still patronizing such establishments. As their progression continues, many only eat out at kosher eateries. Many will no longer eat at their friends' homes unless they also subscribe to the laws of *kashrut,* a cause for hurt feelings, further widening the rift. Davidman found that dietary restrictions often were the initial reason for friendships with non-observant friends to wither.[337]

Time restrictions are also a factor; as BTs take on stringent *Shabbos*-observance, traditional weekend nights for socializing are constricted. Friday nights, *Shabbos* prohibitions against driving preclude dinner at friend's homes that are not within walking distance, and post-Sabbath socializing on Saturday is limited by the hour that the Sabbath ends — with it extending late into the evening as the days lengthen in the summer — often precluding dinner plans. Many of the more observant Jews also do not shower until after the Sabbath ends, adding additional time at home to freshen up and change clothes before going out to meet friends.[338]

Changing values also impact social relationships, as BTs become less interested in or attracted to secular forms of entertainment. They are more discriminating in the movies they see, the concerts they attend, and even the books and newspapers they read. Ava speaks of the

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[336] Shapiro received a similar response in her study.

[337] Davidman, *Tradition,* 185.

[338] My awareness of this phenomenon was heightened through socializing with friends who were becoming Sabbath-observant. While initially they eschewed socializing on Friday nights, when the twenty-five hours of Sabbath prohibitions begin, they later also began to decline social invitations for Saturday evenings, even after the Sabbath and its prohibitions ended.

widening divide between her and her secular friends as she became more stringently observant and less engaged in the non-religious world. She is less comfortable with the pervasive materialism in secular culture, less concerned or interested in taking a fancy vacation, eating at a trendy restaurant, or seeing the latest movie.[339]

Kara speaks candidly of how her friends have changed as her values have changed. She and her husband were consumed with material accomplishment as their family grew and their careers progressed. They wanted to have three cars, a bigger house, and more money to spend on vacations. Now, she says, she has a different focus. "It's to live our lives happily and closer to *Hashem* … in a more satisfied kind of way." She relishes spending time with her newfound friends in the observant community, savoring the ease that comes from relationships that are predicated on shared values and shared experiences.[340]

The majority of the subjects in this study express little disappointment at the loss of prior friendships, seeing their dissipation as a likely consequence of time passing with its inevitable changes and a gradual growing apart. Like Kara, they replaced those friendships with new, more fulfilling, ones that are more consonant with their lifestyle. As Rena describes it, her former friends gradually drifted away, as her life changed, and as did she. Ava, older with longer intimate friendships and more shared history with friends, is the only one who expresses the pain of losing friends and the loneliness she experienced as the relationships became more distant. The rending of those friendships was difficult for her, particularly as she was struggling to deal with her sister's illness and later death, as well as the critical health issues of her parents and then

[339] Shapiro uses three narratives of Jewish identity — family, intelligence, and accomplishment — as foils for understanding the impulse to move from less observant Jewish practice to the more stringent observance of Orthodoxy. Calling narrative a myth, and suggesting that the narratives may be just that, and therefore unattainable, she describes the myth of family as supportive, loving, and close; the myth of intelligence, of Jews who are bright; the myth of accomplishment, of Jews who are successful educationally and professionally, and by inference, materially. Such myths, particularly the last two, can be sources of anxiety and depression among younger Jews, Shapiro finds, often impelling a spiritual search and embrace of stringent Orthodoxy, which prides itself on spiritual piety, rather than economic prosperity.

[340] The data show less preoccupation with material success and greater preoccupation with spiritual growth among the subjects in this study.

their loss. “I was all alone,” she remembers, bereft and hurt. She speaks of the impact of heightened kosher observance as a constraint on socializing that weakens friendships. “Once you stop eating out in restaurants and eating at your friends’ houses, you lose all your friends. They’re insulted. They think you think you’re better than them. Which you don’t. Of course, I don’t think I am better than anybody.” She, like Kara, also alludes to the changes in value systems that widened the divide, particularly the emphasis in the secular world on material acquisition and consumption, which not only preoccupied her friends but also dominated their conversations. “My values are different, she says.”

Values, lifestyles, and relationships change as BT’s re-orient themselves within their essential social systems, seeking to actualize their identities as stringently Orthodox Jewish women. And while God is on high, there is still an echo of Davidman’s rhetoric of choice, a faint outline of Cohen and Eisen’s sovereign self as they gradually find their place within divine purview and remake their place within its earthly province. They are both subject and object, both acting and acted upon, both me and we, identities complicated by the intricate web of relationships that define them and bring them into being. They seek to realize God’s presence through their acts, to become more God-like through their doing, to infuse their relationships with His divine essence, as Kara so plaintively expresses as she kindles the *Shabbos* lights.

And in so doing, they hope to become better people, better daughters, better sisters, better wives, better mothers, and better friends, and imbue their lives with renewed meaning and purpose, as they find their place in the world. Their belonging brings them into being.

CHAPTER SIX: BEING

An Evite pops up in my inbox.

It's an invitation to a bridal shower, the details inked in soft coral script on a pure white ground, a spray of flowers blooming in the corner.

Oh my. Rachel is getting married — already.

A lively young woman, bright, articulate, and adventurous, with an irrepressible streak and a big smile to match, I had watched her grow into a lovely, confident young woman as her parents, Rena and Chad, gradually moved toward becoming stringently Orthodox. We had chatted while I was doing fieldwork, a conversation spanning her early memories of Orthodox preschool and day school, of her family's growing *kashrut*- and *Shabbos*-observance, of her own progression as a young girl, including her rebelliousness as a teenager, of her growing surety of her mission in life as a budding Orthodox woman. She filled me in on her new obsession with CrossFit and her plans for the future: a gap year in Israel after graduating from the local Orthodox girls high school, college, perhaps a career in health and wellness in the Jewish community, and marriage and family, God willing.

Still, she was now just twenty years old, giggling with her high school friends at her shower, giddy with excitement at becoming a bride as she mugged for the camera, playing dress up in a vintage gown and silk floral bouquet borrowed for the occasion.

Her wedding was just weeks away, her college career accelerated, with a degree in the offing. Her husband-to-be is also on the fast track, and already in the real world of work, and soon, marriage.

Such it often is in the religious world,[341] and I marvel as I recall meeting Rachel's parents before they had even considered becoming observant Jews, and watching them as they progressed in their observance.

[341] There is intense social pressure in such communities for young women to marry and start their families in their early twenties. Heilman, *Sliding to the Right*, 200-201.

And now their eldest daughter is getting married. Her mother's joy is as palpable as the warmth of her kitchen, with well-wishers crowded around a table laden with sweets, the noise level rising each time the door opens to welcome another woman into their midst.

For Rena, marrying off her daughter to an observant young man, brought up in the same world as she and her husband have chosen for themselves, is the ultimate fulfillment of being Orthodox — the promise of yet another generation being Orthodox as well.

The journey, both Rena's and Rachel's, is fraught with challenges, as they make their way. Rachel jokes that her youngest brother, born after her parents were well along on the path to becoming observant, is FFB, or *frum* from birth, and also VFB, vegan from birth, as the family also became vegan before he was born. But for those like Rachel and her mother, who were not born into stringently Orthodox families, where such ritual and observance is normative and transmitted seamlessly in everyday life, the construction of their identity is wrought along a continuum from beginning to becoming to embodying to believing to belonging to being. It wrests an amalgam of experiences, real, remembered, and re-imagined, of emotional responses, of intellectual insights, and of spiritual perceptions, into a compelling whole, creating a concordant story that coheres into a consonant sense of self. It is pieced of seemingly incongruent elements, material and spiritual, head and heart, human and divine, and me and we, into an affecting narrative of self: the story, as Griel and Davidman so aptly explain, "that we tell about ourselves."[342]

This chapter analyzes the variety of roles women play as daughters, mothers, wives, friends, and community members, and how those roles inform identity. It shows how these gender roles are constructed by life experience and societal expectation and are impacted by both familial obligation and individual choice. It demonstrates the significance of historical,

[342] Griel and Davidman, "Religion and Identity," 555. Griel and Davidman draw on Dan McAdams's work on identity as narrative.

cultural, and political contexts and the power of memory on identity construction. It examines the appeal of stringent Orthodoxy's elevation and validation of martial and maternal roles for women, while making room for their religious engagement. It shows how women take responsibility for their own interior lives, intellectually and spiritually, finding innovative ways to flourish within Orthodoxy's patriarchal structure. It shows how this structure enriches women's friendships and communal relationships and satisfies their need for meaning, purpose, and belonging. And it shows how BT women transcend time and space in the progression of their religious transformation, connecting with what came before and what is yet to come.

Identity, for the women in this study, is constructed in a variety of ways, by a variety of ways of being — human, gendered, spiritual, purposeful, meaningful, and aspirational — and is construed in a variety of theoretical frameworks. It is couched in gender, perceptions, and proclivities; situated in history, and its social, cultural, and religious systems; and embedded in memory, autobiographical, nostalgic, and retrospective. It is firmly located in divine province, while also just as clearly mediated by human endeavor and the rhetoric of human choice, embodied in acts, and tethered to faith. Rachel perceptively reflects on her mother's experience as a successful marketing professional, explaining that she had considered the field herself, but after spending a few days shadowing corporate executives, she realized that the demands of such a high-level position, with its substantial claims on her time and energies, were not consonant with the lifestyle she projected for herself as an observant Jewish woman. She wanted to marry and have children, create a Jewish home, and make a rich Jewish life for herself and her family, consonant with the ideals of observant Orthodoxy.[343] An executive position in the business world would preclude her having both, she feels. After all, she says, look at her mom. She made the choice to leave all that behind and devote herself to her family while finding other ways in the Jewish world to satisfy herself personally and professionally. That is her model.

[343] The prime responsibility for women in stringently Orthodox communities is marriage and family. Heilman, *Sliding to the Right,* 173

Indeed. The study of older BT women — and their mothers and daughters — is a case study in feminine identity construction. It limns its theoretical suppositions, notions of nature or nurture, genetic predisposition or environmental disposition, and its theological assumptions, notions of divine providence, or human proclivity. It delves into sociological theories on selfhood, both the "I", as Griel and Davidman name the subjective self, infused with human agency and the "me," the objective self, informed by the agency of others and places the two within the context of the social and cultural milieu.[344] The data in this study evince a composite identity of older BT women, making a case for William James's man (or woman) of "many social selves,"[345] as they seek to construct a coherent sense of self from a multiplicity of identities, past, present, and future, as they take on heightened religious observance.

(En)gendered: Our Mothers, Ourselves

What does it mean to be a mother and a daughter?

Rena is reflective in our initial interview, in her comfortable home. We are seated on the sofa in her family room, an overstuffed bookcase filled with Jewish texts in view, as an oversized soup pot bubbles on the stove in the adjacent kitchen. Sunshine floods the room from a large window looking out to her backyard. As she speaks, the light makes patterns on the floor.

Rena is explaining to me the nature of the Jewish soul, its innate duality, both the physical soul and the spiritual soul, one nourished by satisfying bodily needs and wants, the other nourished by satisfying innate desires for meaning, for pleasure, and for joy. "It's the higher part of ourselves," she explains, "it wants us to make a difference in the world, to have *naches* [happiness, pride] from our children." She likens awareness of the spiritual soul to "that goose

[344] Griel and Davidman, "Religion and Identity," 552. Griel and Davidman draw on Erving Goffman's work on identity and self.

[345] William James, *Principles of Psychology* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1890), 294.

bump feeling … like [knowing] that there must be meaning" in a particular experience or occurrence.

Later in the interview, she returns to the notion of the soul to explain her decision to leave behind her successful career in corporate marketing and become a stay-at-home mom. Her higher soul was "calling out to her," she says, "and it was calling out that I needed to live my female gender mission, which was to be a mother. I needed to do that." She adds, "I also needed to make a difference in the world. I didn't know exactly how."[346]

The notion of a "female gender mission" is an endemic value in traditional Jewish practice and belief. It expresses not only the basic human instinct to mate and procreate, but also the basic human instinct to protect and nurture offspring.[347] In Judaism, as in other religious

[346] Rabbi Avraham Weiss, *Women at Prayer: A Halakhic Analysis of Women's Prayer Groups*. (Hoboken: KTAV, 1990). Weiss, a modern Orthodox rabbi who is at the forefront of the movement for open Orthodoxy, which is committed to an increased inclusion of women, draws on an interpretation of the two creation stories in the book of Genesis in the Hebrew bible to posit the duality of women's roles. He suggests the first story, Genesis I, where Adam and Eve are both created on the sixth day in the image of God, affirms their innate human essence and potential to emulate God and aspire to His ways. Genesis II, where Adam is created first, then Eve is created from his rib, illuminates their complementary roles, Adam commanded to "subdue [the earth] with Eve as his helpmate. Weiss suggests that Eve has both an obligation as a woman to bear children and attend to their welfare, but also a second obligation as a human being to be Adam's partner and assuage his loneliness, their human relationship elementary in creating community. Weiss draws on the writing of his teacher, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, in *The Lonely Man of Faith* (New York: Doubleday, Three Leaves Press, 1965), "Man alone cannot not succeed … because a successful life is possible only within a communal framework."

Weiss' reading of the text is reflective of his modern Orthodox perspective — which in more recent years has come to be described as "open" Orthodox — and a more liberal interpretation of women's roles in Jewish life, particularly in terms of study, prayer, and leadership. He spearheaded the movement towards training and ordaining female rabbis, founding the first seminary for such an endeavor, Yeshiva Maharat in Riverdale, New York, choosing to use the term *maharat*, rather than rabbi, to designate female, spiritual, legal, and Torah leader.

His views, and the textual interpretations on which they are based, diverge from those of the stringently Orthodox and have been a subject of intense controversy. The Orthodox Rabbinical Council of America, an umbrella organization of Orthodox rabbis, considered expelling Weiss after the founding of Yeshivat Maharat in 2010; Weiss resigned from the RCA in 2015 protesting their refusal to hire graduates from the male Chovevei Torah Yeshiva, founded by Weiss in 2000, which trains and ordains modern, or open, Orthodox rabbis. RCA also does not recognize female rabbis. The cohort for this study hews to the more stringent orientation of Agudath Israel of America, an Orthodox rabbinical association founded in 1922, which also would not recognize female rabbis. The Orthodox rabbinical council of the community in which this study is situated does not extend membership to Chovevei Torah Yeshiva rabbis.

However, I allude to Soloveitchik's salient analysis of the two obligations of women because it informs the understandings of the women in this study who strive to conceive of their "female gender mission," in Rena's words, both within the family and within the broader context of community.

[347] Heilman, *Sliding to the Right,* 26.

traditions, it also implies an imperative for the transmission of religious being and belonging. For Jews, whose history is characterized by an often precarious existence, with threat of extinction — not to mention the contemporary threat of increasing intermarriage, assimilation, and lessened religious identity[348] — that imperative weighs heavy, with the responsibility passed on from generation to generation.[349] So there is immense joy, as Rena's daughter readies to marry, and as that marriage yields the promise of birthing yet another generation of Jews.[350]

Rena is a role model for her daughter, the choices she has made in realizing her "female gender mission" providing a template for Rachel to choose to emulate. The women in this study speak forthrightly about their own mothers, of the choices they made — or those that were foisted on them by convention or circumstance — which impact their own perceptions of gender and their own choices that inform their identity.

The majority of subjects in this study were raised in two-parent families, with two Jewish parents in long-term marriages. Almost all of them had natural siblings; only one was an only child — who later acquired two stepsisters and a half-brother — after her divorced mother remarried. And only one lost a parent as a young child, she and her sister later gaining a stepsister and a half-brother when their mother remarried.

Their parents' marriages were traditional, following the American middle class social convention of the time, with a clear delineation of gender roles. Their mothers were responsible

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[348] Pew Research Center, "Chapter 2: Intermarriage and Other Demographics," *A Portrait of American Jews*, October 2013. The Pew center report found that 44 percent of all currently married respondents are married to a non-Jewish spouse. For those married since 2005, 58 percent are married to a non-Jewish spouse.

[349] The Biblical commandment to "teach your children," Deut. 6: 5-9, is recited as part of the daily morning prayers among observant Jews and is a signal obligation of Jewish parents.

[350] The rabbi at the stringently Orthodox suburban congregation with a preponderance of older BTs observes a heightened sense of responsibility for raising Jewish grandchildren. There is a preoccupation with their legacy, he says of his congregants who are now moving toward more stringent belief and practice. "They want to know: how can I have an impact on my grandchildren?"

for working inside the home, keeping house and rearing the children, while their fathers were responsible for working outside the home, providing financial support and the material benefits it accrued. Most of the mothers stayed at home raising their children when they were young, a few working outside the home as their children grew and became more self-sufficient. Only one, Lara's mother, divorced and a single mother supporting her daughter and herself for several years, worked full time when Lara was young, before remarrying.

The conventional framework of traditional roles — separate spheres for men and women[351] — constrained opportunities for higher education and aspirations for professional development for women of their mothers' generation. Financial limitations often made the pursuit of advanced education and professional progression untenable for them. The gender separation also existed Jewishly, with men obliged to fulfill specific time-bound religious obligations of prayer and their wives responsible for the all-encompassing work of homemaking and caregiving, especially teaching their children about their faith and inculcating its values.[352]

The additional Jewish valence further reified traditional middle class roles.

Their mothers were afforded lesser opportunities for religious education, as well as academic education, again a manifestation of the specificity of gender roles. Boys received more Jewish education in preparation for their assuming responsibilities in the congregation as young

[351] Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood, 1820-1860," *American Quarterly* 18 (Summer 1966): 151-174. Welter conceived of the notion of separate spheres, one masculine, one feminine, delineated by biological difference derived from religious belief and reinforced by religious practice and social convention. Her "true woman" in nineteenth century America was a virtuous model, embodying piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity while her husband was the builder, the doer. Women dwelled at home, men dwelled in the larger world of work.

[352] Nancy Ammerman, *Bible Believers: Fundamentalists in the Modern World* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press), 134-137. These understandings of gender transverse religion and ethnicity, as readily manifest in Christian as well as Jewish households. Ammerman, in her study of fundamental Christians, examines a similar emphasis on marriage as normative and motherhood as the ideal, as well as a belief in the importance of the home in sustaining belief. Similar educational and occupational patterns are evinced among Jewish and Christian women of this generation, as well as similar divisions of labor in their households.

men. Girls not expected — or encouraged — to actively participate in the synagogue had less opportunity or encouragement to pursue Jewish learning beyond its most elementary level.[353]

Though raised with less formal Jewish education, and the majority raised in less observant homes, more than half of the mothers of the subjects in this study were raised with informal exposure to more stringent ritual observance through their parents or grandparents, many of them immigrants.[354] Several, as characteristic of their generation, were the products of "kitchen Judaism," a Judaism informed by food and family, mapped on the cycle of holidays in the Jewish year.[355] They learned how to make a brisket or a *kugel,* how to bake an apple cake or plum *kuchen*, and perhaps how to light candles for *Shabbos* or clean house for *Pesach*, but their Hebrew was rudimentary, their knowledge of Jewish text limited to Bible stories, their understanding of Jewish law limited to observation or experience — with little or no explanation — or their own trial and error, once they were married in their own homes.

Leah describes her mother as "learning by the seat of her pants," after marrying her more observant and learned husband and agreeing to keep a kosher home. Ava describes her mother's degree of kosher observance as wanting, simply emulating the practices of her own

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[353] Paula E. Hyman*, Gender and Assimilation in Modern Jewish History: The Roles and Representations of Women* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1995). Hyman suggests that, while women were vested with the responsibility of inculcating Jewish values at home, they historically were provided little Jewish education themselves. They learned basic Hebrew prayers and the fundamentals of how to run a Jewish home from their mothers, while their brothers were expected to master both the prayer book and Jewish law with serious *yeshiva* education. The mothers of the subjects in this study were more reflective of this historic pattern than of later changes, which increased both secular and religious educational opportunities for girls.

[354] Many were first generation Americans, caught between the push to assimilate and the pull to preserve their Jewish identity. They were also exposed to the lessening of observance among many Jewish immigrants to America during the two major waves of immigration, the first at the end of the nineteenth century, and the second in the early years of the twentieth century. Sabbath and holiday observance were often gradually diminished, or discarded, due to the exigencies of the workplace and the need to earn a living. Other practices fell by the wayside as well — distinctive dress or kosher observance — as the children of those immigrants (the mothers of the subjects in this study) assimilated into the broader non-Jewish culture and sought to be real Americans. Jonathan Sarna and Hasia Diner have written extensively on this phenomenon.

[355] Jenna Weissman Joselit and Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, *Getting Comfortable in New York: The American Jewish Home, 1880-1950* (New York: The Jewish Museum, 1990), 77-105.

mother, who had already moderated their dietary regime.[356] On marrying Ava's father, who had come from a home with more stringent kosher observance, her mother reluctantly agreed to his heightened practice, yet quietly accommodated it to fit her own predilections or those of her husband. Ava recalls her mother reheating soup for her husband on *Shabbos* — when such cooking is proscribed — because her husband liked his soup "hot."

"She didn't know," Ava says of her mother, "and nobody gave her any instructions, so she thought she was doing it just fine."

Hannah also recollects her mother as a product of "kitchen Judaism" with little substantive Jewish education and little interest in learning more. This was a familiar trope in the histories of women of that generation. "She kept kosher, she lit candles, but she didn't understand why. She says girls were not given an education in the Orthodox community where she grew up," Hannah says of her mother.

After marrying, Hannah's mother insisted on joining a Reform congregation because the services were conducted primarily in English, and she could not read or understand Hebrew, nor could she follow a Hebrew prayer service. She took great pride in her daughter's Hebrew facility and her growing Jewish knowledge.

For most of the subjects in this study, their Jewish educational experience emulated more that of their mothers than of succeeding generations, with clear distinctions of roles and responsibilities in the synagogue and the educational opportunities afforded. Leah speaks of the message she received in Hebrew school that "girls don't count," while Annie tells a story of her parents' decision to forego a *bar mitzvah* for her brother causing a huge rift between her mother

[356] A lessening of ritual practice among first generation American Jews was a common phenomenon as they acculturated.

and her grandmother, while *bat mitzvahs* for girls were not considered necessary or even desirable. Several of the women in this study, raised in Reform congregations in the 1950s, participated in Confirmation ceremonies, a more egalitarian ceremony for young men and women around the age of fifteen, often in lieu of a *bat mitzvah* for girls but rarely in lieu of *bar mitzvahs* for boys.

A number of the women in this study, while sympathetic towards their mothers' lack of Jewish knowledge, are also frustrated by their lack of initiative to increase it. Hannah is disappointed that her mother, while complaining about her ignorance of Hebrew and feelings of inadequacy in the synagogue, has not taken advantage of opportunities for adult learning.

Ava laments that her late mother, also a product of "kitchen Judaism," made little effort to increase her knowledge and understanding as her daughter's practice heightened. Instead, she fretted that her daughter was becoming "too Jewish," and diminishing their closeness.[357]

The mothers passed on their own ignorance to their daughters, showing them the "what" and "how' of Jewish ritual and practice but often not the "why."[358]

There is a generational difference between the subjects of this study, and their mothers, in terms of the desire to learn more, and do more, Jewishly, and taking the initiative themselves to grow in their knowledge and understanding as well as their practice.[359] The women in this study

[357] Shapiro, in her study of BT transformation, identifies the rejection or alienation some parents experience as their children cast aside the lesser observance of their parents for the more stringent observance of Orthodoxy. Ava's perception of her mother's fear that their relationship would change as her daughter became more observant typifies this dynamic. It also typifies the tension between the older and younger generations in terms of how they are perceived as both Americans and Jews. The older generation manifests a heightened desire to be American, while their children, prospective BTs, living at a time with less anti-Semitism and discrimination and greater acceptance, as well as pride in being Jewish, seeks to pronounce — or announce — their Jewish distinctiveness. Kara's conflict with her extended family typifies this dynamic also.

[358] Galonnier and de los Rios, in their study of religious conversion, examine the importance of teaching "know what" and "know how" among Muslim and Christian converts. The respondents in this study also evince a desire to "know why."

[359] This can be attributed in part to changing perceptions of women's roles religiously and spiritually, and increased resources and opportunities for Jewish learning for women.

articulate a clear sense of personal responsibility for their own religious growth and development, engendered by heightened self-esteem and self-confidence, perhaps inspired by the Women's Liberation movement.[360] The data suggest that their more advanced education — and heightened intellectual curiosity and more fully developed critical thinking skills — may have engendered their desire to understand the bases of ritual observance and belief and motivated them not only to ask "why" but to seek out answers.[361]

While earlier studies of BT women suggest that the women's movement might have fostered conflicted identities by elevating educational and professional accomplishment[362] and diminishing the marital and maternal roles, as well as the value of more traditional Jewish practice, this study, of more mature women, some nearly two generations older than Davidman's and Kaufman's subjects, evinces a clear validation of both — although the choices made, as in Rena and Rachel's stories, may be predicated on finding ways of attaining both.

The relationships between mothers and daughters are often fraught by generational differences. They are roiled by social and cultural change, by shifting expectations and expanded opportunities. Choices abound, as the subjects in this study seek to make lives that are both meaningful and purposeful, remaking their religious identity and recasting their roles, often

[360] The Lincoln Square subjects in Davidman's study and a cross-section of subjects in Kaufman's study articulate a rhetoric of choice, in terms of becoming more Jewishly knowledgeable and observant but without the echo of personal responsibility for making those choices, which resonates in the voices of the women in this study. Those in Davidman's Bais Chana cohort, younger, with less education and less family stability, express their turn toward Orthodoxy less in terms of personal choice and more in terms of divine providence, of realizing their preordained identity.

[361] Kaufman makes a similar observation about the women in her study, *Rachel's Daughters*. She suggests that the heightened level of secular education of her subjects causes them to approach Jewish learning with a similar curiosity, 163.

[362] Davidman's Lincoln Square cohort more closely resembles the educational and professional profile of the women in this study, who are highly educated and professionally accomplished. In Davidman's study, the younger age of the women, the majority of them single, evinced a distinct yearning for marriage and family and a conflicted sense of self in trying to reconcile their identity as working women with an identity as wives and mothers.

circling back to the past, as they lurch forward to the future, as daughters, wives, and then mothers themselves.

(En)gendered: Our Husbands, Ourselves

Hannah vividly captures the frenzied preparations for *Shabbos*: the shopping, cooking, and baking that needs to be done before the Sabbath begins when it is prohibited for the next twenty-five hours, until it concludes. The minutiae of preparations to ensure that their family does not violate the day's sanctity by doing any other proscribed work. She sets timers for lights, tears toilet paper for the bathroom, disconnects the light bulb in her refrigerator, and leaves her oven on warm. The family's initial attempt at keeping *Shabbos* is fun, its newness exciting; although, as her husband quickly warms to keeping it every week, she admits to feeling overwhelmed by the prospect.[363] Still, she says, her husband comes home early to help, their daughter also pitches in, and they teach themselves new songs to sing around the *Shabbos* table as they hurry to get ready.

Women like Hannah, bright, intellectually curious, academically accomplished, Jewishly educated, and hungry for more, are as seriously committed to being like their mothers — good wives, good mothers, and good Jews — as being different from them. Hannah, like many of the other women in this study, aspires to use her education and experience to do meaningful work, while meeting her marital and maternal responsibilities. They are also consciously attending to their own spiritual development.

[363] Sally Berkovic, *Straight Talk: My Dilemma as an Orthodox Woman* (Hoboken, New Jersey: KTAV, 1997), 68-69. Berkovic, raised in an observant Jewish home in Melbourne, Australia, embarks on a journey of self-discovery as a young university student after losing both her parents. Her intense Jewish study examines the roles of women in Judaism and limns notions of marriage, family, and domestic life. Her book, written after she marries and has children and commits to keeping an observant Jewish home, includes an honest description of the stress of preparation for the Sabbath and the anger and resentment the weekly practice can evoke. She describes the beautifully appointed table, the flickering candles in their ornate holders, the delectable meal, the scent of fresh baked challah and the mother who did it all, while caring for her young children, coming to the table "filled with rage."

Contemporary dilemmas of work/life balance inform earlier studies of BT women, even before the elusive equilibrium sought by working women — and now sought by more men — became a cultural meme. Davidman and Kaufman limn the fertile ground of gender, looking at women's roles, women's aspirations, and women's conceptions of self. Their studies are reflective of the times in which they were located, with fieldwork and data collection in the late 1970s and early 1980s, in the midst of the so-called cultural revolution, which upended many social conventions, and in the wake of the Women's Liberation movement, which sought new freedoms and opportunities for women, challenging sexual mores and, as noted, other, more traditional ways of being at home and at work.

Kaufman probes the seeming paradox between the resulting political feminism, a socio-cultural movement to expand rights and opportunities for women, and Orthodoxy's exaltation of women in more narrowly prescribed roles. She explores the secular perceptions of women as objects — the "me" — whose identities are constructed socially, culturally, and sexually by a gendered framework that privileges men. She finds many of her subjects increasingly discomfited by the newfound secular sexual liberation — without a concomitant empowering of women's autonomy, the "I" — and the resulting hook-up culture of multiple partners and casual couplings.[364] For many of the women in her study, Orthodoxy's sanctity of marriage, its reverence for women as wives and mothers, its rigid laws that prohibit sex outside of marriage and regulate it within through the laws of *niddah*[365] — was exceedingly attractive. As one woman, said, "For all

[364] Sally Keenan, *Affirmative Consent: Are Students Really Asking* (New York Times, July 28, 2015) https://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/02/education/edlife/affirmative-consent-are-students-really-asking.html?_r=0. The campus consensual sex movement — yes means yes, no means no —seeks to reinforce the sexual autonomy of women and more fully empower women's choice to engage in intimate relations and to determine the parameters of those relations. The New York Times has tracked the topic; the above story is an example of the coverage.

[365] The primacy of marriage in Judaism, and the sanctity of the marital relationship, as discussed above, is at the center of Jewish life. The laws of family purity, or *niddah*, structure the time when sexual intimacy is allowed and when it is not. A couple does not have relations while the wife is menstruating and for seven days after her menstrual flow ceases. At that time, the woman goes to the *mikvah*, ritual bath, and immerses herself, returning home to resume relations with her husband. According to Orthodox belief, the laws, and the distinct periods of intimacy and separation, enrich the marital relationship and imbue it with deeper meaning and heightened appreciation. http://www.aish.com/f/rf/48941961.html?s=srhot.

the sexual freedom I had in my late adolescence and early adult adulthood, I can tell you it was more like sexual exploitation. I felt that there were no longer any rules; on what grounds did you say no?" In Orthodoxy, she says now, "… the laws of ritual purity make so much sense … I am not a sex object to my husband; he respects me and my sexuality."[366]

In Davidman's study, with its two cohorts, one modern Orthodox, the other more stringently so, women in both groups also exalted the primacy of marriage and children and a longing for both. The Bais Chana cohort, stringently Orthodox, younger and less educated and professionally accomplished, was attracted to Orthodoxy's clear delineation of gender roles and its inherent respect for the roles women were destined to play.[367] The modern Orthodox cohort, more highly educated and professionally accomplished, lamented the secular emphasis on career and material success and was drawn to Orthodoxy precisely because of the heightened value placed on marriage and family. The rabbis teaching in the program also responded to the troubling "objectification of women" and suggested to the women that "not being seen as a sex object" is a manifestation of Orthodoxy's "totally pro woman attitude."[368]

The women in this study, some coming of age as the Women's Liberation movement emerged, others born as it gained momentum, were substantively impacted by the changing social and cultural milieu. All are college graduates, with half having earned advanced degrees. All have worked outside of their homes after marrying and having children, some taking time off when their children were young, some working full time, others part time, some following the same career path, others pursuing a new one, some motivated by professional accomplishment and intellectual stimulation, others by financial gain, some a combination of all three.

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[366] Kaufman, *Rachel's Daughters*, 9-10.

[367] The *Bais Chana* cohort articulated a belief in divine plan and that their roles as wives and mothers were divinely ordained.

[368] Davidman, *Traditions*, 158.

They differ from the cohorts in Davidman's and Kaufman's studies, where the women were younger, with less work experience, and less accomplishment or lower professional status or recognition, and the majority not married. Most of the women in the earlier studies were born before the women's liberation movement gained force, with more traditional modes of Jewish womanhood still entrenched and fewer opportunities or expectations for professional accomplishment or advancement. Marriage and family were the expectation, careers often considered preludes, and perhaps encores, after children were grown. The subjects in earlier studies of BT women, coming of age in the early years of the Women's Liberation movement, reflect this conventional life path. Examining the life course of the women in this study in the second decade of the twenty-first century through a gender lens provides a nuanced understanding of how religious transformation informs their identity as women, and as the traditional Orthodox women they aspire to be.

Kaufman uses gender theory to examine the traditional framework that informs stringent Orthodoxy and its innate delineation of gender roles. She describes what she calls its "patriarchal protofamilialism,"[369] with its emphasis on family and a power structure that clearly situates women inside their homes and men outside in the synagogue or the work place. Women are tasked with marital and maternal obligations, while men are tasked with ritual and material obligations, creating a rigid power structure informed by divine authority.[370] Even as women are cast as more

[369] Kaufman, *Rachel's Daughters*, 90-106.

[370] The notion of "separate spheres" for men and women flourished in nineteenth and early twentieth century Protestant America, with women relegated to domestic pursuits, as men pursued opportunities in the rapidly changing workplace, as industrialization opened up ever more rewarding possibilities. It was decidedly influenced by class and socioeconomic status, as many of the Jewish women who arrived in the United States during the two major periods of immigration were tasked with the traditional responsibilities of home and family and the additional obligations of supplementing the family income either doing piecework at home or working long hours in a family business or, later, in the sweatshops that sprang up on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. Joselit writes of the treadle sewing machine in the corner of the kitchen where the women spent long hours stitching at home. Even more women joined the workforce in the years during and after World War II, with men away at war, and women tasked with breadwinning, as well as cooking, cleaning, and taking care of the children. The postwar decades evidenced a more robust economy and a rise in prosperity, with women retreating to the confines of home and hearth, and leaving the earning to their husbands. This is manifest in Jewish homes as well in the mid-twentieth century, as families prospered, and the stereotypical *balabusta*, a woman dedicated to home and family, reigned at home and

innately spiritual, and their roles as keepers of the home and preservers of the faith exalted, their lives are circumscribed by the stricture and structure of Jewish law which clearly imbues men with heightened dominion infused with divine might. Laura Levitt, in her work on gender, tries to reconcile the incongruity of American feminism with Orthodox traditionalism, but ultimately finds such rapprochement untenable.[371] The subjects in Davidman's and Kaufman's studies struggle with this as well. But data from this study show a continuing renegotiation of gender roles within Orthodoxy, which is making room for more liminal boundaries and greater opportunities for Orthodox women outside the home,[372] and for Orthodox men taking on increased responsibilities inside the home, even as the traditional roles remain in ritual observance.[373]

Hannah is clear-eyed as she contemplates taking on *Shabbos*-observance. The romanticization of the rite, a meme in the stories of Davidman's and Kaufman's subjects, is absent from her desire to take on the responsibilities that she perceives as having real value for herself and her family.[374] She expects her husband and daughter to help get ready for *Shabbos*, and sees the sharing of responsibility in the same way she sees working in a new business in

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had an enhanced social status. Then, with the social and cultural overturning of the 1960s and 1970s, things changed yet again.

[371] Laura Levitt, *Jews and Feminism*.

[372] In the *frum*, or stringently observant world, women have worked outside the home, most often in communal settings, such as day school teachers or preschool directors, extending their obligation to teach their children to teaching the children of others. In more recent years, as women have become better educated, some observant women work in a variety of fields, although obligations to home and family remain a priority.

[373] http://www.yeshivatmaharat.org/mission-and-history. As noted previously, the renegotiation of women's roles in the synagogue has been particularly controversial. Rabbi Avi Weiss, who has spearheaded the more progressive open Orthodoxy, has also been in the forefront for educating women as teachers and developing them as spiritual leaders. He founded the Yeshivat Maharat in 2009 and ordained its first three graduates in 2013 giving them the title of *maharat,* female, spiritual legal and Torah leader. The Rabbinical Council of America has refused to recognize the ordination of women, a traditionally male designation.

Rabbi Weiss spoke about the role of women in the synagogue in an interview for this study at his Riverdale, New York, home in July 2016.

[374] Kaufman, *Rachel's Daughters*, 41. Kaufman's subjects speak of the intense spirituality of women's roles in preparing for *Shabbos*. "I bring divine presence into this household by preparing for *Shabbos*," says one of her subjects.

partnership with her spouse.[375] Kara emphasizes the importance of observing the Sabbath and holidays with her husband and daughters, setting aside her idealized notions of having her extended family with them around the table as an unfortunate casualty of their decision to become Orthodox. The joy that the family experiences in their newfound observance is genuine, and far outweighs the sacrifices they have had to make, she says. Their relationships have only gotten stronger as they have taken on enhanced observance together.

"It is amazing to us how far we have come," says Kara of their partnership. "But it has become natural for us. It's our lifestyle, it is what we have chosen," she says, still marveling at how she and her husband have changed. "Our priorities are different," says Kara. "There's just a deeper purpose … and it just feels right."

Carrie, who has come to more observant Orthodoxy later in life, as she and her husband confront the inherent challenges of aging in terms of loss of professional status and lessened physical vitality, is clear that their religious transformation has been enriched by their joint commitment to becoming more observant. "Doing it together," has clearly enhanced the experience for the couple and eased the changes in their everyday life and their relationships with their adult children and grandchildren, who are not pursuing the same path.

These expressions of shared endeavor echo through many of the stories of the women in this study. There is also a consciousness and appreciation of the weight of responsibility to maintain an observant home and family, and a willingness of their husbands to help.[376]

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[375] The couple designed and marketed an innovative medical examining table specifically for wheelchair-bound or other limited mobility patients.

[376] Earlier studies of BTs evince a similar trend towards more involvement of husbands in the domestic realm, helping with childcare and other day-to-day tasks such as shopping or carpooling. Kaufman suggests that, besides providing support and assistance for their wives, these actions demonstrate that "family values are publicly shared, respected and acted upon," elevating those values and the acts that actualize them, 35. The data in this study reinforce this.

Several women mention the relationships between many of the younger, stringently Orthodox rabbis and their wives, as models for their own marriages, as they watch the tenderness in which the rabbis care for their children and their readiness to pitch in with the household chores, further investing them with importance.[377]

This sense of marital partnership — and a shared commitment to home and family — has broadened the understanding of Rena's "female gender mission" and eased the way for more women to combine both commitment to homemaking and childrearing with other fulfilling work outside the home.[378]

Rena, who followed her husband's lead towards observant Orthodoxy by leaving her career as a highly paid marketing executive, lauds the sensitivity and wisdom of her early religious mentors, who sensed both her need for meaningful work outside her home and her valuable expertise in communications and marketing that could benefit the observant community.[379] Early on, she describes their encouragement in her pursuit of freelance writing about her experiences and later in providing opportunities to speak about her life as a working, observant woman.

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[377] However, for some of the women this study, their marital relationships have been informed by conflict over their commitment to heightened Jewish belief and practice. Leah was moving toward greater observance when she and her husband divorced; his lesser Sabbath and holiday observance — and their custody agreement that allowed their children to alternate *Shabbos* and holidays with their parents — strained their relationship. Lara, whose husband professes a desire to become more observant but is slower to follow the strictures of observance, is frustrated and disappointed. Dina, whose husband is the more stringent of the two, wrestles with raising teenage children and balancing their religious lifestyle with the choice the family has made to send their teenage children to public high school and the resultant social challenges it presents.

And Sarah, whose husband is not interested in following her path towards greater religious observance, says her husband simply allows her to "do her own thing" and does his. "I think it's working," she says.

[378] However, the issue of egalitarian sharing of household responsibilities still roils family life. Tracy Fessenden, in an article on this issue, and the enduring cultural expectation that women take on the lion's share of such responsibility, writes, "The cultural expectations that shape the experience of caring for homes and families, however the families are configured and however the work is shared, are deeply entrenched and enduring." Tracy Fessenden, "Gendering Religion," *Journal of Women's History* 14, no. 1 (2002): 163.

[379] This is an example of Shapiro's "human capital," both a valuable resource for the community and a valuable source of self-esteem, status and acceptance for those members who are imbued with such capital and use it for the community's betterment.

When the local *Kollel* began looking for new ways to reach women, its head rabbi reached out to Rena, floating the possibility of a start-up a publication to highlight observant living. For Rena, the opportunity to create what became a glossy magazine chockfull of breezy features on modesty, kosher eating, or Jewish home decor, became as much a challenging means to use her professional skills as a learning experience for her to broaden her exposure to stringently observant Jewish women and their world. “Who knew about kosher cruises?” she asks. “Or online wig shops? Or modest bathing suit vendors?” As publisher, she oversaw editorial coverage as well as advertising copy, her tenure spanning the seven-year life of the publication.

She remains amazed at her good fortune — which she also attributes to divine providence, God putting the right people in her path when she needed them — and at the rabbi’s intuitive understanding of her needs.

“He was so smart to connect with me on what I like to do and also connect me to the Jewish world.”

For Rena, the magazine filled her need for doing meaningful work, reinforcing her identity as a working woman as well as her identity as an observant Jewish wife and mother, allowing her to realize her “female gender mission,” as she conceived it.

Aileen and her husband, still not fully committed to a religious lifestyle, still hesitant about selling their impeccably designed and decorated home and moving to one in a religious neighborhood, have been thoughtfully plotting their progression to heightened observance and making subtle changes in their roles. While Aileen has worked for most of her married life, her earnings a necessary part of their family’s income, her commitment to home and family has always been paramount. She recalls how her successful educational consulting business, where she later partnered with her adult daughter, grew from her initial volunteer work advising college-bound students at her children’s public high school. Her design business grew from her own interest and aptitude in design — inherited from her father who was a manufacturer of corrugated boxes — and her acuity in seeing the world in three dimensions. The redesign of her own sleek kosher kitchen combined her design aesthetics with her growing observance, inspired as much

by her son's turn toward stringent Orthodoxy as by her own spiritual crisis after a series of serious health struggles.

Aileen, who was raised in a liberal Reform home in the suburbs of a large East coast city, was academically accomplished, intellectually curious, and independent. She struggled with a cloying mother and a close community, escaping to a prestigious Midwest university for college, later sacrificing her studies there when her father's business failed, and the family could not afford to send two children to college at the same time. "I was a good girl," is how she describes her decision to return home and go back to work to help, later finishing her degree at a local college and becoming a teacher, the profession of choice of many women of her generation. In the ensuing years, as the Women's Liberation movement gained force, as she married and moved to the Southwest, far away from family, she described herself as an ardent feminist, committed to expanding rights and opportunities for women. Now, though, she looks back on her life as a melding of both traditional dedication to marriage and family and a drive to contribute to her family's well being while also doing meaningful and fulfilling work.

More recently, emulating Rena's move from work outside of the Jewish community to a new professional identity inside, she embarked on designing a website that would provide home design expertise for observant Jewish families. It offered templates for creating workable kosher kitchens and attractive and efficient spaces for Sabbath and holiday entertaining. She also expanded the website to include creative menus and novel ideas for table décor, to further enhance holiday observance and make it more fun and engaging. Now, she looks back on her life as an amalgam of her varied experiences, personal and professional, and a continuing endeavor in identity construction.

The women in this study have re-imagined Rena's "female gender mission" into a broader conceptualization of women's roles that has allowed them to find meaningful endeavors to apply their education and experience as observant women — sharing their human capital and

gaining cultural capital — while at the same time meeting their obligations as wives and mothers. Particularly for those in this study who no longer have children at home, they have found purposeful ways to use their time and talents in ways consonant with their burgeoning religious identity.

(En)gendered: Our Sisters, Ourselves

While marriage and family are the center of traditional life, they are nurtured within the larger confines of community that inscribe the normative behaviors and beliefs that inform religious identity. As the data in this study show, community provides a ready support system of teachers, rabbis, friends, and others to mentor those who are seeking to become more religiously observant and guide them as they take on its precepts and practices. Rena calls community the "glue" of observant life, and her network of friends and mentors her "soul family." Kara speaks rapturously of her new circle of friends, who have enveloped her with support and encouragement. And Hannah speaks glowingly of now being a "member of the sisterhood," her induction, a visit to the community *mikvah*.

The hierarchical structure of the stringently Orthodox opens up space for meaningful relationships among women as they take on gendered behaviors that further inscribe their religious identity. Women form strong bonds as they take on the obligations of a religious life, dressing modestly, following the laws of family purity, maintaining kosher standards in their homes, and observing the Sabbath and holidays. Often those friends become "sisters," as the closeness of community and the many points of contact it creates inspires deep and abiding friendships, and as their belonging inspires their being within the gendered reality of the stringently Orthodox.

In the synagogue, men and women sit separately, a *mechitza*, a barrier fashioned from a variety of materials and in a variety of heights and degrees of transparency, depending on the

degree of stringency of the congregation, partitions the space.[380] The men's space is in proximity of the Torah ark, affording them ease in ascending to the *bimah*, or platform, where it is read. This honor is solely ascribed to men, as are other leadership roles in the synagogue service. The women sit together in a separate area, reading quietly through the prayer service, taking care not to raise their voices, as the sound of women's voices singing is prohibited. The practice, called *kol isha,*[381] a woman's voice, in Hebrew, is something that several of the women in this study find troubling. They miss singing, especially in the synagogue, and while respecting the practice of the community, they seek other opportunities to raise their voices in song. Saturday afternoon gatherings at a private home help satisfy their desire.[382] A local *rebbitzen* also responded to the need for such self-expression, producing women-only theatrical productions, allowing girls and young women to perform on stage for women-only audiences.

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[380] http://www.chabad.org/search/keyword_cdo/kid/11627/jewish/Mechitzah-separation-between-the-sexes.htm. A *mechitza* (separation of men and women) is a barrier that separates men from women seated in the synagogue. In the community where this study takes place, *mechitzas* are constructed from a variety of materials and in a variety of configurations reflective of the stringency of the congregation and the degree of separation required. In the course of this study, I observed *mechitzas* ranging from a row of potted plants, to wooden lattice panels, to heavy, non-transparent fabric hanging from ceiling to floor, to another where the women were seated separately in raised sections on either side of the men's seating. Each engenders a greater or lesser ability for women to see or hear the service, often an issue of greater concern in modern Orthodox synagogues, such as the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale and its Rabbi Avi Weiss, as noted in Chapter Five.

[381] Rabbi Mosheh Lichenstein, "*Kol Isha:* A Woman's Voice," *Tradition* 46, no. 1 (Rabbinical Council of America, 2013): 9-24. The prohibition against women singing among men is sourced in the Talmud, the written text of the oral law given to Moses on Mt. Sinai and the rabbinic discourse it engendered during the rabbinic period in the first and second centuries of the Common Era. The proscription is the third among the laws of modesty that require married women to cover their hair and dress fittingly so as not to appear inappropriately desirable to other men, protecting the sanctity and exclusivity of the marital relationship.

As women's roles have expanded within a changing historical, social, and cultural context, the principle of *kol isha* has been revisited by rabbis from a variety of Orthodox perspectives. Rabbi Mosheh Lichtenstein, Rosh Ha Yeshiva of Yeshivat Har Etzion in Israel, provides an insightful discussion of women's singing in which he differentiates between the inappropriateness of the voice and the inappropriateness of the context and concludes that women's singing is permitted if "the song does not arouse sexual desire [nor] emphasize femininity in a sexual manner," 23.

[382] Simcha Fishbane, "In Any Case There Are No Sinful Thoughts: The Role and Status of Women in Jewish Law," *Judaism* 23 (1993): 492-503. Fishbane's examination of the writings of Rabbi Yehiel Mekhel Epstein, whose Arukh Ha Schulchan, written in the late nineteenth century in Europe interpreting four parts of Rabbi Joseph Karo's sixteenth century codification of Jewish law, the Shulchan Aruch, reflects a sensitivity towards women and an understanding of the liberalizing tendencies of the progressive movements in Europe at that time. Fishbane's analysis points to the ongoing discussion of women's roles, and behaviors, such as *kol isha*, which continue to inspire rabbinic discussion and provide a variety of readings on their leniency or stringency reflective of the broad continuum of Orthodoxy.

Davidman and Kaufman write of both "resistance" and "accommodation" in response to such gendered separations.[383] The data in this study evince both an acceptance of the strictures of Jewish law regarding gender and responses to mediate or moderate its limits. While neither patently resistance nor accommodation, the response is more a subtle renegotiation of boundaries and opening up of gendered space.[384]

There is also innovation at *simchas*, or celebratory occasions, such as weddings, where mixed dancing between men and women is prohibited.[385] While the dance floor is again partitioned by a *mechitza*, the women dance together on the other side as fast and furiously as the men, often having taught each other new circle or line dances in preparation for the joyous celebration.[386]

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[383] Davidman suggests that Orthodox communities are divided along the lines of accommodation and resistance to modernity. Modern Orthodoxy accommodates pluralism and structural differentiation in society, its members effectively having a foot in both the religious and the secular worlds, while the more stringently observant Orthodoxy resists accommodating to pluralism and differentiation, rejecting modernity and withdrawing from the non-religious world, *Tradition*, 38-39.

Kaufman uses the terms to distinguish between the ways that women respond to observant Orthodoxy's patriarchal belief system, concomitantly ignoring systems that establish male patriarchy and preserving their own systems of meaning, *Rachel's Daughters*, 158. Kaufman also suggests that contemporary BT women, better educated, more intellectually inquisitive, and more self-confident, might gradually lessen what she perceives as the difference between "what Orthodoxy preaches and what it practices," 162.

[384] David G. Hackett, "Gender and Religion in American Culture, 1870-1930," *Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation* 5, no. 2 (1995): 127-157. This negotiation of boundaries that opens up space for heightened women's activity is evinced not only within stringent Jewish Orthodoxy but also within Protestantism. David G. Hackett examines how public activism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century provided a means for Protestant women to expand their caregiving roles beyond the confines of home and family into the larger communal world. This phenomenon has given rise to other practices, where constructions of gender and religion emerge through a "dialectical process of discord and innovation," 142.

Rena's work editing a Jewish women's magazine highlighting observant practice and belief and Aileen's work creating a website highlighting the design of Jewish homes to better accommodate an observant lifestyle emerge in a new space for meaningful work within the gendered limits of community.

[385] Depending on the degree of stringency of the community, some also separate men and women for dining and dancing, while some have mixed seating for meals.

[386] There are distinctive dance styles for men and women, although both are infused with joy for the bride and groom and exultation for their marriage.

In prayer, women also carve out sacred space for themselves and share meaningful experiences. A *tehillim*, or psalms, group attracts women from a variety of Orthodox congregations. They meet informally once a month in a private home to read through the traditional songs and hymns that are recited to comfort those in need. Their whispered murmurings fill the room, the quiet power of the sacred words said to evoke divine province.

Similar gendered innovations are evinced in other faith communities, reinforcing the power of women-only religious experiences. The *tehillim* group resembles the Christian women's prayer circles studied by J. Marie Griffith, where women gather for prayer and Bible study, giving testimony of their own trials and tribulations as well as their faith.[387] Such groups inspire deep friendships, as the women share their most intimate thoughts with each other and find a well of support and closeness from the others in the group, as well as from God.[388]

Women-only study groups, holiday programs, and speakers serve to further strengthen ties among women and reinforce their religious identity. A women's *rosh chodesh* group meets monthly at a local coffee shop to welcome the new moon with Jewish study and conversation. Speakers on modesty, marriage, and parenting fill hotel banquet rooms to overflowing for the

[387] J. Marie Griffith, *God's Daughters, Evangelical Women and the Power of Submission (*Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1997). Griffith's incisive study of evangelical Christian women in the Aglow Fellowship reveals the power of women's devotional groups in engendering "intimacy, healing and transformation," 5.

[388] Rivka Neriya-Ben Shahar, *"*'At Amen Meals, It's Me and God,' Religion and Gender: A New Jewish Women's Ritual*." Contemporary Jewry* 35, no. 2 (2015):153-172. The magnification of spiritual resonance within gendered spaces has engendered new rituals to release the power of women's prayer. Rivka Neriya-Ben Shahar, in her study of "amen meals," in Israel provides insights into innovative practices that create ritual space for women's prayer. Shahar writes of the growing popularity of these "amen meals," whose goal is to increase the number of "amens" recited and strengthen divine connection. In both public and private settings, women gather around a table to share a variety of foods, reciting the appropriate blessing before eating each and ending with "amen." The blessings, like the *tehillim* readings, may be dedicated to a particular woman in need, on occasion evoking the telling of a moving personal story that elicits a compassionate response from the women in the circle. The ritual has no *halachic* basis, writes Shahar, but is traced to a *midrash* that teaches the obligation to recite one hundred blessings a day. However, the "amen meals" and other innovative all-women prayer groups are an accommodation to the prevailing male province of religious practice, further reifying "what Orthodoxy preaches," in Kaufman's words, rather than resisting or challenging it.

women-only events. Women-only holiday programs, cooking demonstrations, and craft nights provide opportunities for women to get together, to learn, to develop and deepen friendships.[389]

The national Jewish Women's Renaissance Program, the brainchild of a dynamic BT who sensed the powerful spiritual resonance of women coming together,[390] takes hundreds of Jewish women to Israel each year for a weeklong experience to connect them with their heritage and expose them to observant Jewish life. The program is sponsored by the Ner L'Elef, the women's outreach arm of the network of community *kollelim*.[391]

Outreach efforts by the community *kollel* and Chabad Lubavitch center evince a heightened emphasis on women's learning and a proliferation of educational opportunities. This phenomenon reflects a gradual change in perceptions of women's roles among the stringently Orthodox, as its institutions seek to respond to the more fluid gendered reality of the secular world — including increased educational and professional prospects for women — within the bounds of the highly gendered religious world.[392] It also reflects recognition of the impact of knowledgeable and committed women as role models and mentors for prospective BTs who are

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[389] The appeal of women-only programming crosses denominational — and interreligious bounds — with a preponderance of women's classes, events, speakers, and weekend retreats, sponsored by a variety of Jewish and non-Jewish organizations. However, those events are single-sex by choice, while in the Orthodox community, Jewish law or communal convention requires gender separation and would preclude including both women and men.

[390] http://www.jwrp.org/about. Jewish Women's Renaissance Program, founded in 2008, has taken 13,000 women from 26 countries to Israel since its inception. Its mission is to "inspire and empower women with the rich beauty of their heritage." The women's director of the community *Kollel* in the city where this study is situated led the community's first JWRP trip in 2015. Three of the women in this study were among the participants on that trip; all of them considered it life-changing.

[391] http://www.nerleelef.com/index.htm. As noted previously, Ner LeElef, founded in 1998 in response to growing rates of Jewish assimilation and intermarriage, is dedicated to developing a cadre of leaders who can increase the level of Jewish identity and observance in communities, strengthening them and infusing them with dynamism. Its women's division has spawned programs, such as the Jewish Women's Renaissance Program, specifically to engage women.

[392] Adam S. Ferziger, *Beyond Sectarianism: The Realignment of American Orthodox Judaism* (Detroit: Wayne University Press, 2015). Ferziger traces the growth of women's leadership in outreach efforts in both the *kollel* and Chabad movements. He writes of the growing role of women in the more stringently observant world, as "an effective fusion of women's empowerment within Orthodox outreach," 203.

seeking both intellectual and spiritual understanding of religious precepts, increasing their cultural capital and their acceptance in the observant community.

Being, referring to construction of a coherent identity as a stringently Orthodox Jewish woman, is predicated on both subscribing to communal beliefs and practices and achieving communal acceptance. Lara discerns the subtle differences in expectations when a woman is just beginning to learn about observant Jewish life and when she seeks recognition as a community member. Hannah intuits the heightened expectations for observance once her family moves into a stringently Orthodox neighborhood. Aileen is aware of such expectations and has not yet decided to take that step. Even within communities where a majority of the members are BTs, or newer to Orthodoxy, identity is constructed individually and also communally as the arbiter of membership. Hannah wonders, as she continues her journey, “How far do I have to go to really be considered a member of the community?”

Benor’s work on language and other cultural constructs elucidates the value of this cultural capital in communal acceptance. She studies adult language socialization, analyzing patterns for incorporation of Hebrew or Yiddish words in everyday speech and subtle changes in intonation, speech rate, word choice and usage, among other factors in conversation. These linguistic changes help to socialize the prospective BT in the observant community and further inscribe communal membership. Dress, hair coverings, and other physical manifestations communicate the community’s distinctiveness, as food, music, home decor, and other cultural artifacts further inscribe communal membership.

Benor’s keen insights on the pace and progression of the accrual of necessary capital — and achieving communal acceptance — identifies this phenomenon as “selective accommodation” of such cultural practices and “hyper-accommodation,” exaggerated cultural

practice.[393] The subjects in this study, older, more mature, and the majority married with children, hew more towards selective accommodation, choosing practices that comport with their own sense of self and their family's lifestyle, or modifying practices to more genuinely express their own religious understandings. They manifest both an astute assessment of their own capacity for change, and a sensitivity towards their spouses, children, and extended family in terms of the limitations heightened observance places on them.[394] They also manifest awareness that such choices may impact communal acceptance or their own sense of authenticity. Ava confides that she is "not proud" of her decision to eschew skirts for work while dressing modestly elsewhere, and even though she has continued to increase the stringency of her observance for more than two decades, she still feels less than, compared to those who are FFB. "I feel like a fraud," she says bluntly.

The standards for observance and practice reflect the profile of the community, including the size of its observant population and its stringency.[395] This study, located in a newer, less densely populated Jewish area of the country, with a relatively small Orthodox community, and an even smaller number of FFBs, is more welcoming to the growing number of BTs. In particular, several congregations boast a preponderance of BTs, where members are committed to shepherding those newer to observant practice and willingly take on roles as mentors and role

[393] Benor, *Becoming Frum*, 3.

[394] Griel and Davidman, in their study of religion and identity, find that religious identity has become more voluntary and reflexive over time, and suggest that the social construction of identity emphasizes both agency and the influences of social structure, "Religion and Identity," 560-561. I posit that religious identity can remain malleable as we age and progress further long our life course, and, in fact, that aging and life experience inspire and inform religious transformation and identity. Erik H. Erikson in his classic work on the life cycle of human psychosocial development, with additions by his wife, Joan M. Erikson, *The Life Cycle Completed, Extended Version* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1997), further reinforces this finding. He writes of identity formation as a process of "evolving configuration," 74, suggesting that while the outline of identity is inscribed during young adulthood, the possibility for change, moderation, or modulation exists along the life course and into the later stages of life.

[395] Benor, *Becoming Frum*, 11-12.

models. The data in this study evince this phenomenon, especially among the women who form deep and abiding relationships.[396]

(En)gendered: Our Daughters, Ourselves

The roles of daughters, wives, and sisters inscribe the innately feminine identity of BT women. But it is in the deepest and most intimate recesses of their being — the womb — that the innate meaning and purpose of being is realized. The notions of legacy and destiny echo through their stories. There is a deep reverence for their legacy, their shared history, as it spools out in the Jewish metanarrative, the Torah, and their shared memory, the emotional resonances of divine encounters and the covenantal relationship that ensues. There is a deep sense of obligation to their destiny, to ensuring the continuance of Jewish peoplehood, and to birthing and raising the next generation of Jews. So it is as mothers that the women in this study express a powerful sense of being.

I observe Dina at her synagogue on *Tisha B'av,* sitting on the floor, as is the custom for the traditional day of mourning. She is dressed in a stylish ankle-length black knit skirt and top with manicured toes peeking out from her fashionable black booties. Her two daughters are stretched languidly at their mother's side, their shiny, wheat colored hair, and bright, open faces as much an obvious family resemblance as their modest, yet modish, dress.

Dina speaks honestly about the challenges of raising children as they approach young adulthood, particularly in her family's case, where they attempt to live in both the secular and religious worlds. The family belongs to an Orthodox congregation, where only two or three other families are as stringently observant as they are, and she and her husband have chosen not to

[396] While this study focuses on BT women, fieldwork evinces a similar dynamic at play among male BTs. One woman described the attraction of men-only prayer for her husband, "He likes sitting on the men's side," she says, noting the appeal of the palpable testosterone. As the rabbi of the stringently observant suburban congregation noted, "There is a need for companionship."

send their older children to Jewish schools that reinforce religious values.[397] While she is sensitive to her children's angst as they become teenagers and want to fit in, she takes seriously her role as their mother to model appropriate behavior that further inscribes their identity.

"It's hard seeing my daughter cry, feeling for her. But this is who we are," she says.

Kara sees her three daughters looking to her as a role model. Particularly as they reach the teenage years, even in the Orthodox girls high school, where her oldest daughter is a graduate and her second daughter now in her second year, their embrace of modest dress has been markedly different. The older daughter has taken to long skirts, covered legs and long sleeves; the middle daughter is enamored of more trendy fashion. Kara works hard to respect their choices while assuming her responsibility as a mother to guide them. It is not easy, yet she is impelled by an overriding sense of obligation.

"We live by a different set to rules than most people in the world," says Kara of the observant Orthodox lifestyle she and her husband have chosen, "so [our kids] know we're not going to compromise that. And so they look up to us … I mean, being a mother is an important role … we're parents, and we take our role very seriously … we're trying to build the future."

Hannah speaks glowingly of the benefits of the observant lifestyle and of the positive values it imparts to her daughter. She is pleased with the closeness of the community, of its caring and compassion for others, and of its positive messages of modesty and motherhood and she wants to transmit these to her daughter, even as she struggles with what those values may

[397] My data has shown seemingly incongruous choices made by women, such as Dina, who professes a commitment to modeling Jewish behaviors for her children, yet also decides not to send them to Jewish schools that would further reinforce those behaviors. Others face similar situations, and make choices, such as Lara, who desires to be Sabbath-observant, but does not want to give up her beautiful new home that is not within walking distance of the synagogue, or Kara, who eats at her parents' home, even though their attempts to provide kosher meals do not meet the same standards she and her husband follow in their own home. Such accommodations, or choices, are reflective of the age and life course positionality of the subjects of this study, their lives, and their choices, complicated by relationships and other circumstances.

preclude. Still, she wants to pass on the beauty and wisdom of the Torah, as both legacy and destiny.

"The Torah is a beautiful thing," she says, "there is tremendous wisdom there … and there's a reason why people have lived successfully with these rules for thousands of years, that the Jewish people have survived with these rules in place. I love that sense of tradition," she says, "and knowing that's where my lineage, my heritage, comes from, that 2000 years ago someone just like me was lighting candles…"

And knowing that 2000 years from now, someone just like her, or her daughter, will be lighting candles too.

In this Time, In this Place

But for the women in this study, it is the now that informs their identity, the particular historical, social, cultural, and religious moment in which they were first daughters, then wives, and then mothers and friends.[398] They grew up on the cusp of cataclysmic change, as first the cultural revolution, and then the women's revolution, shook the traditional social order of the 1950s, upending convention, convulsing norms, and blurring rules, roles, and responsibilities. They were products of the times, of social upheaval, of religious change, and of shifting values and moral uncertainty. Their lives spool out over four, five, and six decades, providing a rich portrait of changing Jewish women's lives, informed by traditional expectations, infused with newfound opportunity, confounded by change.[399]

[398] Michelle Dillon, "Age, Generation, and Cohort in American Religion and Spirituality," in *Sage Handbook of the Sociology of Religion*, eds. James A. Beckford and N.J. Demerath (Los Angeles: Sage Publications, 2007). Dillon posits the significance of age, generation, and cohort in studying religious development and change. "Generational frames are particularly valuable for the sociology of religion because they offer discrete, historically meaningful time frames by which to track and tap into the multiple ways in which religion may vary from one social and historical context to another," 527.

[399] Dillon notes the significance of age on impact and perception of historical moment. Age, she writes, "is a signifier of how much history and cultural memory the individual has already acquired, and is intertwined with generational expectations and social roles whose obligations and experiences also shape how the individual sees and makes sense of the world," 527.

They became wives and mothers, the marital and maternal expectations of their mothers still intact,[400] even as they were better educated, more accomplished, and freer to choose a spouse or a job. Hannah, now in her late forties, tells of her mother's preoccupation with her marrying, and marrying well and Jewishly, at one point suggesting that she volunteer at the local hospital where she might meet "a nice Jewish doctor."[401] Later, a relationship with a non-Jewish beau moved her mother to call a religious cousin to ask him to pray that Hannah might meet a Jewish man — which in fact she did — and marry him. Kara tells a similar story of her parents' displeasure when she dated a non-Jew, and the unspoken but clear message that she marry Jewish.

The parents of the subjects in this study grew up in a time when anti-Semitism was still real, when in-marriage was the rule, and when intermarriage was rare and outside the bounds of communal acceptance.[402] Jewish discrimination in employment, education, and housing, was still a reality, attested in stories of aunts, uncles, grandparents, and parents denied admission to professional schools, denied jobs, and denied housing.[403] As immigrants or first generation Jews, they lived in inner city Jewish neighborhoods, moving to more affluent suburbs, where they re-created Jewish enclaves anew.[404] Carrie, Aileen, Ava, Hannah, Sarah, Annie, Kara, Lara, and

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[400] Cohen and Eisen, in their study to contemporary Jewish identity, find the continuing influence of parents a key factor in formation of adult identity, 204.

[401] Shapiro examines the narratives that inform Jewish ethnocultural identity, including the mythology of Jewish educational achievement, professional accomplishment, and socio-economic success. She suggests that these mythic expectations, and the pressures they exert, can precipitate a rejection of those values and inspire heightened religiosity, where self-worth is measured less in material success and more in spiritual growth, 13.

[402] Sarna, in *American Judaism*, notes the religious taboo against intermarriage existing historically in America and the infrequency of intermarriage in the early decades of the twentieth century. Estimates of intermarriage then ranged from 1.7 percent to below 7 percent, he reports, 222.

[403] Sarna, in his comprehensive history of American Jewry, highlights the intense anti-Semitism in the early twentieth century, including immigration restrictions, educational quotas, restrictive covenants, and occupational discrimination, and the vestiges of persistent anti-Semitic discrimination that remained until well into the second half of the century and beyond, *American Judaism*, 214-221.

[404] Sarna tracks the migration of Jews from the cities to the suburbs in the 1950s and 1960s, a visible sign of their material success. Studies estimate that America's suburban Jewish population doubled

Leah, while raised in different parts of the country, tell similar stories of going to school in predominantly Jewish suburban areas, of having mostly Jewish friends, and of lives centered around extended family.[405] Leah tells of her tight-knit group of high school buddies, of their social life centered on BBYO, a Jewish youth organization, and of Sundays with their families at the local Jewish community center for swimming and bagels and lox. Kara tells of an idyllic childhood hanging out with cousins, as close as siblings, and spending boisterous holidays with her large extended family. Carrie says she didn't know anyone not Jewish when growing up in her predominantly Jewish suburb, while Aileen, who grew up in a very close-knit Jewish community, still has painful childhood memories of a zoning dispute that sought to ban the building of a new synagogue nearby.

Yet, gradually, things were changing, particularly after the Civil Rights Act of 1964, as more Jews were allowed more opportunities, and as they gradually assimilated and even achieved some acceptance in the non-Jewish world. The pluralism of the 1950s and 1960s, Will Herberg's ideal of a shared Judeo-Christian ethic,[406] helped to lessen differences or, at the very least, inequities, which little by little were denied legal protections. Jewishly traditional ritual and practice was gradually moderated and modulated, as the old ways gave way to new ways of being Jewish. The more progressive streams of Judaism, more congruent with predominant Protestant ideals, gained appeal, ultimately engendering a Judaism defined more by its ethnicity and culture than by religious practice and belief.[407]

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in the 1950s, with four times more Jews than non-Jews making the move from the inner city to newer, more affluent environs, *American Judaism*, 282

[405] Sarna describes numerous Jewish enclaves, replete with new synagogues, schools, and even country clubs, which sprung up in the suburbs during this time, allowing for Jews to live, worship, and socialize together, re-imagining the closeness of the old Jewish neighborhoods in the newer, more affluent outlying communities. Suburbia became the symbol of success, he writes, a sign of money and prestige, *American Judaism*, 282-283.

[406] Will Herberg, *Protestant, Catholic, Jew*..

[407] Sarna, *American Judaism*, 284-293.

At the same time, the peace and prosperity of mid-twentieth century America gave rise to a growing consumerism and materialism. The stay-at-home mother became the consummate homemaker,[408] imbuing housekeeping with new social status. Jenna Joselit writes of the mother as the "queen of home" with its renewed emphasis on cleanliness and order, emulating the Protestant model of the times, and later, the Jewish Home Beautiful movement, with its emphasis on elaborate home decor and design, reflecting the growing material preoccupation and consumption among American Jews.[409]

Yet, as the fruits of the women's movement were realized, in the 1970s, 1980s, and beyond, as women gained a toehold in the marketplace, as working women superseded their roles as wives and mothers, and as marriage and motherhood were often delayed — or put on hold — for careers, choices proliferated. As gender roles blurred, as newfound freedoms birthed in the women's liberation movement took hold, women gradually found themselves unmoored, overwhelmed by the lessened hold of social, cultural, and religious precepts, and overcome by the plethora of possibilities. Kaufman and Davidman key in on this dynamic at play in the 1970s and 1980s; this study examines its more far-reaching consequences, as women age and move further along their life course, and as there is a growing unease with a social, cultural, and religious landscape that is neither neatly bounded nor clearly marked.

It is observed in the more recent resurgence of Orthodoxy reported by the Pew studies, in the heightened interest in stringent Orthodoxy, and in more organized efforts at outreach to those disaffected by the ethnocultural Judaism of the past.[410]

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[408] Sarna, *American Judaism*, 286. Sarna reports that almost 80 percent of Jewish women between the ages of twenty-five and thirty-four were stay-at-home mothers in the 1950s.

[409] Jenna Weissman Joselit, *Wonders of America* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1994).

[410] The recent Pew Center on Religion's study of American Judaism evinces a growth in Orthodoxy and a decline in Judaism's more progressive streams.

The women in this study evince a desire for more traditional roles as wives and mothers, for communities informed by a shared respect for those roles ,and for an underlying commitment to the sanctity of marriage and family. They seek, in Rena's words, to realize their "female gender mission," within a religious community that not only respects them but also validates their role. They reject the political/social movement that marginalizes this mission and assert their "choice" in embracing a more observant Orthodoxy.[411]

The women in this study yearn for Orthodoxy's clear moral boundaries, for order and structure in their lives, for a social system that provides a how-to manual to guide them, and for a system that is girded by belief in a spiritual being. They reflect a return to traditional religious systems, even as there is a broadening of religion today to encompass myriad varieties and versions across the American religious spectrum.[412] The response of the women in this study to take on the stringent belief and practice of observant Orthodoxy is clearly a reaction to the lack of moral certainty in the more contemporary religious permutations, and, particularly in Judaism, to a perceived dilution of belief and practice as an accommodation to the ambiguity of the larger social and cultural terrain.

The women in this study evince a clear rejection of the ethnocultural Judaism of their parents; they express a desire for more substance, for more authenticity, for rules and responsibilities, and for laws, and for the order and structure they provide.[413]

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[411] Davidman, *Tradition*, 82-87.

[412] Kaya Oakes explores the growing American phenomenon of the Nones, those who do not identify with a particular religious tradition, or the SBNRs, those who identify as spiritual but not religious, who turn away from traditional religion and towards alternative ways of being religious. The movement has engendered innovation and a multitude of new ways of being religious.

[413] Shapiro limns the rejection of ethnocultural Judaism, and its emphasis on educational achievement, professional accomplishment, and material success, and the embrace of religious Judaism among younger BTs, with its emphasis on substantive Jewish practice and belief, "Driven to Orthodoxy," 12.

They also express a disdain for society's embrace of materialism, for Shapiro's myth of success predicated on material accomplishment. Rena trades her beautiful "dream" home for a comfortable ranch house in a suburban subdivision, as her values change and as her commitment to a religious lifestyle deepens. Its simplicity and its authenticity, with its Jewish artwork, display of ritual items, and overstuffed bookshelves with religious tomes, reflects her values now. Kara let go of her conception of success, the big house, three luxury cars, and vacations, for a simpler version of the life of her dreams.[414] Now, she is content with what she has, more concerned with the quality of her life than with the quantity of her possessions.

Theses transformations evince a new way of being in the world, a new construction of identity that is wrought by a response to the perceived moral vacuity, religious inauthenticity, and selfishness wrought from an emphasis on personal autonomy at the expense of communal responsibility. It is also an expression of their independence and self-confidence, as women and as Jews.

The women in this study are transforming themselves as stringently observant Orthodox Jewish women consonant with their new way of being.

Remembering, Experiencing, Being

The particular moment of time during which they live is the crucible where a new self comes into being. Shaped by memory, embodied in experience, deepened by emotional expression, informed with intellectual understanding, elevated by spiritual consciousness, and strengthened by community, it grows from an innate emptiness and a yearning to fill it. It can spring from a profound loss, the death of a parent or a sibling, a failed marriage, an upended career, a financial reversal, a life-threatening illness, or a sense of being lost, of being alone, or of being bereft. It grows from an unsettling rootlessness, a discomfiting emptiness, and a disquieting

[414] Shapiro notes the inherent pressures in the culture of material success and suggests that such pressures can impel BT transformation, "Driven to Orthodoxy," 12.

purposelessness, which is allayed as the new identity, or the new way of being, takes form. “A tear in the heart,” is how Rena poignantly describes that rending of self, and a reconnection with the Jewish self, a way of repairing it.

The women in this study tell their stories, each turning on something lost, and now, something found. They glance to the past, even as they grasp the present, and seek a glimpse of the future. Their lives, like Zerubavel’s time maps,[415] are plotted one memory and one experience at a time, transcending temporal boundaries, as they create new identities that link them as firmly to what came before as to what is yet to come. Like van Dijck’s jumble of random photos in a shoebox,[416] they sift through the pile, keeping some and discarding others, reshuffling them as they reorder their lives. The photos, like Connerton’s memory objects,[417] are viewed in a new light, some fading into shadows and others gaining increased resonance, re-imagined in new memory frames. Autobiographical memory recalled retrospectively becomes personal recollection, a selective process of remembering, and forgetting, as they seek coherence.[418] Sarah’s searing memory of her little sister’s death has not dimmed, while Carrie’s remembrances of her childhood remain shadowed by death; she apologizes for having little recall of the difficult time after her father’s untimely passing. Lara is still grieving the rending of her relationship with her birth father after her parents’ divorce.

Nostalgic memory adds a rosy hue, as Leah speaks as if she can almost taste the chocolate cake her mother baked for each *Shabbos* dinner, as Ava sentimentally recalls sitting in

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[415] Zerubavel, *Time Maps*.

[416] van Dijck, *Mediated Memories*, xi.

[417] Connerton, *How Societies Remember*, 6.

[418] Marita Sturken, *Tangled Memories, The Vietnam War, the AIDS Epidemic, and the Politics of Remembering* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1997). Sturken aptly captures the notion of memory as narrative. She writes, “memory is a narrative rather than replica of experience that can be retrieved and relived … what we remember is highly selective, and how we retrieve it says as much about desire and denial as it does about remembrance,” 7.

shul with her father as a little girl, as Kara remembers her grandmother's rubber bands, wound once, twice, three times, or more, tightly around the doorknobs of cabinets containing the verboten *chametz* on Passover, the embodiment of memory and its emotional dimensions. Boym's perceptions of nostalgia capture its power, the intense longing for the past, and the desire to restore, or recreate, it.[419] Although, as Hirsch and Spitzer[420] find, the past is evanescent, evoked only in the inner recesses of our minds, in the inner reaches of our emotions. Idealized memories inscribe identity with a compelling valence, connecting past to present and presaging the future. They inspire the return to the lost religiosity of the generations past, as both legacy and destiny, instilling an obligation to recover what was lost or put aside and investing it with renewed significance of what is yet to come.

Retrospective memory plays its games with van Dijck's photos, shadowing, illuminating, obscuring, and investing them with new meaning to create a resonant narrative that validates a new way of being. Carrie remembers her mother's stately brass candlesticks standing guard over the dining room, but not their flames flickering on Friday nights to welcome the Sabbath. Rena recalls the Reform rabbi who officiated at her wedding, encircling bride and groom in a span of soft woven cloth, but insists it was not a traditional *talit*. Aileen remembers her years at Reform religious school, with its historical approach to Judaism but no mention of Judaism's spiritual underpinnings. It is in these perceptions of the prevailing ethnocultural Judaism of their youth, the authenticity of observant practice and belief missing, that retrospective memory is at play. While careful not to outwardly express disdain, there is an underlying disappointment at — or, even, perhaps, disparagement of — the lessened stringency of Jewish belief and practice of their youth, and a smugness, or self-satisfaction, at having now rediscovered and embraced a perceived authentic Judaism.

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[419] Boym, *Nostalgia*.

[420] Hirsch and Spitzer, *Ghosts of Home*.

Memory informs identity, and lived experience inscribes it, literally incorporating it into the body. The critical embodiment of religious acts, discussed in Chapter Three, makes it real and resonant. Kneading and braiding traditional loaves of challah for *Shabbos* powerfully creates connections between the material and spiritual, individual and communal, and past, present, and future, as the women repetitively work the eggy dough with their hands. “I have a connection with kneading the bread,” says Dina, who bakes challah every Friday, even if the rest of the Sabbath meal is kosher take-out. “It’s a physical thing, it makes you feel closer to *Hashem,*” the very physical act manifesting the spiritual. That feeling is magnified when she does it with her daughters, she says. “It’s a nice feeling of tradition when you teach your daughters.” Lighting the Sabbath candles, putting match to wick and watching them burst into flame, creates those same connections. Immersing in the waters of the *mikvah* elevates sexual intimacy and infuses it with holiness. It is in the doing that sacredness comes into being, and, it is in the doing, that being becomes sacred.

The identity construction of the women in this study, and their path towards stringently observant Orthodoxy, is both process and progression, as Chapter Two evinces, its pace as varied as its seekers. But its movement is insistently forward, a dynamic that continues to push them towards not only heightened observance but heightened awareness of God’s presence, and heightened meaning and purpose. There is a desire for rational understanding, as well as emotional exhilaration, a desire to know the what, how, and why of observance and belief, but also to feel it. It resides, as Lara describes it, in “the *kishkes*,” or as Rena says more colloquially, “in the gut.”

There is a compulsion to keep going, a propulsion that is informed as much by a push from the past, whether it is to be part of the Torah’s metanarrative of peoplehood, or a familial link to generations past, as by a push towards the future. It is captured in the immediacy of the present and in the insistency of the search for meaning, for making lives that are purposeful, for belonging, for being part of something bigger, for being connected, and for being responsible. It is

evoked in the search for the divine, for countenancing the wonder of His creation, for taking on the obligations to protect and preserve it. It is evoked in the search to be better, to strive, to aspire, and to move continually upward, closer to God, and in that way, closer to realizing His presence on earth. Be *mekadesh shem shamayim,* be like the holy one in heaven*,* is how the rabbi exhorts his children, be like God, sanctifying His heavenly name.

Be *kiddush Hashem.*[421]

[421] There is inherent in the use of this phrase the notion of self-improvement, of moving closer to God to become better Jews. There is less the notion of *tikkum olam,* or repairing the world, which has become a meme in non-Orthodox streams of Judaism, with a call for social justice and more self-help. Another rabbi in the community urges, "change yourself," he exhorts, and in that way, you can "change the world." Such a linguistic switch is reflective of the power of language in BT transformation and orientation. Benor richly limned the potency of such a sociolinguistic change.

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APPENDIX I

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

As stated in Chapter One, this study plumbs the desire to reclaim the past and renew it with meaning and resonance for the future. It examines the impulse to turn back to the Jewish national story and recover the structure and stricture of divine obligation it demands. Those who turn, or return, to heightened Jewish practice and belief, are called *ba'alei teshuvah*, masters of return, taking on enhanced obligations that require substantive changes in their lives.

As previously discussed, the phenomenon of return typifies one of two responses to modernity, manifest across the contemporary religious landscape and more specifically within Judaism. It is emblematic of a resurgence of fundamentalism and a reinvigoration of institutional religion, countering a second more liberal response to modernity, which has engendered a profusion of new ways of being religious and expressing religiosity and its innate spirituality.[422] The BT movement is also a response to a perceived erosion of moral values and a concomitant, and unsettling, decline of order in the world, as well as growing secularization.[423]

The movement toward more fundamental Jewish belief and practice — defined in this study as stringently observant Orthodoxy — is rooted in the countercultural movement of the 1960s, where the dialectic of enhanced spiritual experience and renewed interest in traditional religion typified the underlying contradictions of the Age of Aquarius.[424] Earlier studies of the return to more stringently observant Judaism evinced an incipient desire among some hippies professing peace and love and exploring alternative lifestyles and spiritual paths to return home to the religious traditions of their parents or grandparents. This study uncovers yet another iteration of the dynamic, a replay so to speak, of the rejection of a nebulous spirituality and an amorphous social and cultural milieu in favor of an omnipotent and omnipresent God and a bounded community inscribed by His laws and prescribed normative behaviors.

Earlier studies of BTs, one by Danzger in 1981 in New York City, as part of a larger Jewish Federation-sponsored population study, and a second by Aviad in 1983, in a Jerusalem *yeshivah* that attracted prospective BTs, studied both men and women, and skewed toward younger cohorts. More recent studies by Kaufman and Davidman, published a decade later, focused only on women living in densely populated Jewish communities in the United States — in these cases the Midwest or along the Eastern seaboard, also with decidedly younger subjects. Benor's more narrowly focused study of the acquisition of language and other cultural practices among men and women BTs in the early 2000s is also situated in a large Jewish community on the East coast. There has been no study that focuses exclusively on women further along their life course trajectories, nor one situated in a relatively newer, smaller, and growing Jewish community in the Sunbelt.

This study examines a cohort of mature women, aged mid-forties to early seventies, living in a major Southwest metropolitan area, who have already made significant lifestyle choices in terms of marriage, family, and Jewish identity and affiliation prior to becoming BTs, and are now drawn toward stringent Jewish observance. It seeks to answer three questions: what is the impulse that inspires such a fundamental life change; what is the process for making such a change; and how does this change impact the sense of self, as individuals, as well as within families and communities?

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[422] Oakes and Luhrmann both explore the dual dynamics in American religion today in their work.

[423] Davidman, *Tradition*, 90-91.

[424] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Age_of_Aquarius. The Age of Aquarius is an astrological term that has come to signify a time of spiritual illumination. It was popularized in 1967, at the height of the countercultural revolution, in a medley of songs, *Aquarius/Let the Sunshine In*, from the rock musical "Hair."

Theory and Method

This is an ethnographic study, defined by Benor as a "study of people, their culture, and their social organization through participant-observation and interviews and the subsequent written presentation of selected aspects to an audience."[425] It is a qualitative study, its data collected via extensive fieldwork, including observations over a three-year period and in-depth interviews with a carefully curated cohort of subjects.[426] This study draws on anthropologist Clifford Geertz's conception of ethnography as "thick description,"[427] data infused with interpretation, or as he calls it, "signification." Ethnographic study thus becomes an essentially interactive process, the collected data culled from field observation and participant interviews enriched by "sorting out its signification," or as Geertz describes it, its "social ground and import."[428]

Davidman, whose work provided a template for my own, observes that contemporary ethnography is a "process of interpretation rather than explanation," elevating the role of the researcher as a partner in the scholarly process, as she seeks to discern the "significations" that her data evinces.[429]

Geertz distinguishes between the mechanics of data collection and the intellectual process of data analysis, while making clear the inherent synergism between the two. "What we call our data are really our own constructions of other people's constructions,"[430] he intuited, foreshadowing the growing use of grounded theory across a wide variety of scholarly disciplines and the recognition of its value.[431]

Grounded theory derives from the proposition that data drive the suppositions, that the research process is inductive. It seeks to replace assumptions with hunches, encouraging the researcher to set aside his or her own presumptions in order to understand people from their own

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[425] Benor, *Becoming Frum*, 31.

[426] Steven J. Taylor and Robert Bogdan, *Introduction to Qualitative Research Methods: A Guidebook and Resource*, 3rd ed. (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1998). Methodology is defined more broadly as how we approach problems and seek answers, and more narrowly in scholarly endeavors as how research is conducted. Choosing a particular methodology is determined by "our assumptions, interests and purposes," as Taylor and Bogdan describe the rationale for using a particular methodology. They describe two different perspectives that determine methodological choice: positivism, which seeks to find facts or causes for social phenomena through quantitative studies that yield measurable statistical data, and phenomenology, which seeks to understand internal ideas, feelings and motives through qualitative studies that yield descriptive data, 3. This study is qualitative and follows a phenomenological approach, with an emphasis on collecting descriptive data that yield understandings.

[427] Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 6.

[428] Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 9.

[429] Davidman, *Tradition*, 46.

[430] Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*.

[431] Kathy Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory*, 2nd ed. (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2014), 5-21. Charmaz charts the development of grounded theory and its growing popularity in social science research, from Barney G. Glaser and Anselm Straus's groundbreaking study, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research*, 3rd ed. (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2008), which countered the mid-twentieth century preference for measurable quantitative research with a method that provided systematic strategies for qualitative research. She charts both its positivist and phenomenological approaches — positivist relying on data that could be measured empirically and phenomenological relying on descriptive data to enhance human understandings — and the more recent constructivist turn, which highlights the flexibility of the method and the role of the researcher in the process of constructing a narrative.

place. The goal, write Svend Brinkmann and Steinar Kvale, in their guide to qualitative research, is to "understand people from their own frames of reference, to unfold the meaning of their experiences, to uncover their lived world prior to scientific explanations."[432]

It requires, as grounded theorist Kathy Charmaz advises, "continuous interaction with the data," ongoing reflection on both the process and the data it is producing.[433]

This continuous interaction requires a delicate balance of objectivity and reflexivity, to distance oneself from what is being observed, while at the same time drawing closer in order to fully absorb and unpack the experience. Being there, as Marie-Louise Paulesc posits in her study of the residue of Communist identity in post-Communist Romania,[434] requires being "in situ," and reinforces the value of on-site field study and in person interviews, but being there has a broader implication of being fully engaged. "Be present," counsels Professor Sarah Amira de la Garza in a lecture on grounded theory, but also, she admonishes, be "self aware."[435]

In reflection papers written for de la Garza's course,[436] I described grounded theory as "counterintuitive." I had struggled to narrowly refine and parse my research questions, tying them to my theoretical assumptions, and now I was being asked to set aside my assumptions, or presumptions, and trade them in for Charmaz's "sensitizing concepts,"[437] which I conceive as "hunches" without the constraints of theoretical premises or research questions. "I found it difficult, painful actually," I wrote, "to set them free."

But set them free I did, or attempted to, buying into the openness of grounded theory methodology, viewing the endeavor as a work in progress, a process that pairs continuous data collection along with ongoing thought and analysis, as well as self-monitoring and reflection, and invests it with a compelling dynamism. I heeded Charmaz's cautionary advice to view those hunches that we all have if we've read the literature and are familiar with prior studies as "a place to start inquiry, not to end it,"[438] a goad to use them as springboards for inquiry, not barriers.

I embraced Charmaz's charge to balance the interviewees' interests with my research objectives, later restating it as "hearing the participant's story in its fullness [and] searching for the analytic properties and implications."[439] An earlier analogy Charmaz shares — between using a wide-angle lens on a camera for a panoramic view or a telephoto lens for up close and personal shots more graphically — captures the underlying challenge to present a fuller, more accurate picture.[440] Or, as Geertz incisively states, "Small facts speak to large issues."[441]

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[432] Svend Brinkmann and Steinar Kvale, *InterViews*, 3.

[433] Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory*, 1.

[434] Marie-Louise Paulesc, "Living Relationships with the Past: Remembering Communism in Romania" (PhD diss., Arizona State University, 2013).

[435] I audited Dr. Sarah Amira de la Garza's graduate course *Introduction to Qualitative Research Methods* in Fall 2014, to more fully develop the methodology for my study. De la Garza is an Associate Professor in the Hugh Downs School of Human Communication at Arizona State University.

[436] My dissertation proposal was approved by my committee in Spring 2014, and I was in the midst of submitting my application for acquiring IRB approval the next fall when I took de la Garza's course to further refine my methodology. Both the proposal and application demanded careful parsing of research questions, hence my preoccupation, and reflection.

[437] Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory*, 30.

[438] Charmaz. *Constructing Grounded Theory*, 30.

[439] Charmaz. *Constructing Grounded Theory,* 86.

[440] Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory*, 26.

[441] Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 23.

My training as a journalist — and more than thirty years working in the field — honed my interviewing and writing skills, and proved over and over again the truth of Geertz's observation. A good story often turned on discovering small facts that made it resonate for its readers, that amplified its meaning beyond its particulars to the bigger story it could help to tell. Putting a face on a story was the byword; making it real, and making it relevant, was what drove the journalistic process. These skills and experiences were surely a good starting point for undertaking a research study, but being a journalist is not being a scholar, and my introduction to grounded theory, and initial tentative forays into the process, demanded learning new ways of researching and writing. It forced me to put aside my quest for the certainty that lies between quotation marks, the pithy remark or incisive insight, to slow down, to watch more intently, to listen more carefully, to be attuned not only to the words but to their larger context, and to see not only the small frame, but perceive its wide angle view, its fullness, as Charmaz urges.

Qualitative ethnographic studies using the grounded theory method are driven by a quest to describe an experience — in this case, how women, who have already made significant life choices and have had significant life experiences, can choose to upend their lives by becoming stringently observant Jews — and describe how individuals make sense of it. Such a quest, and such questions, drove me to undertake this study and drove me to choose its methodology. But the interactive nature of the methodology I chose required the constant reflexivity its practitioners urged, knowing that I am driven not only by my questions but by my own background and experiences, which I consciously or unconsciously brought to bear on the endeavor. As Sharlene Nagy Hesse-Biber and Patrice Leavy state, in their guide to qualitative research, the knowledge and understanding this methodology engenders "is grounded in both the social location and the social biography of the observer and the observed."[442]

It is the very dynamism of the process, and the role of the researcher in powering it, that brought me to choose qualitative grounded theory methodology and seek to make it my own. The inherent responsibility to be both present and self-aware informed the day-to-day process of data collection, analysis, and inscription, and invested the enterprise with heightened meaning. Charmaz's emphasis on the integrity of both the endeavor and its principle served to inspire me, and the need for hard work, patience, and reflection spurred me on. Her advice to learn "what constitutes excellence rather than adequacy" provided a standard I could only humbly hope to aspire to.[443]

Situating the Study — Situating Myself

I conceived of my project from powerful personal experience. I watched as women and families I had known for years traded their "mainstream" American Jewish identity and their progressive Reform or Conservative affiliations for a more stringent observant Orthodoxy that reverted back to an older, more traditional way of being Jewish. These were women and families whose prior belief and practice grew from a conflated secular and religious identity, making room for Judaism's particularism within America's expansive pluralism. Jewish Americans and American Jews, they nimbly navigated the hyphen, in Sylvia Barack-Fishman's words,[444] in ever more individualistic ways.[445] So I was baffled by their decision to shed the inherent duality of their

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[442] Sharlene Nagy Hesse-Biber and Patricia Leavy, *The Practice of Qualitative Research*, 2nd ed. (Los Angeles: Sage Publications, 2011), 38-39.

[443] Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory*, 108.

[444] Sylvia Barack Fishman*, Negotiating Both Sides of the Hyphen: Coalescence, Compartmentalization, and American-Jewish Values* (Cincinnati, Ohio: Judaic Studies Program, University of Cincinnati, 1996).

[445] The notion of individual sovereignty pervades Cohen and Eisen's comprehensive survey of contemporary American Jewish identity. The singularity, and autonomy, of the individual that was reflected

identity for a newfound fervor that privileges religious traditionalism over secular liberalism and assumes a lifestyle of heightened Jewish practice and belief. I needed to learn more.

While my "formal" fieldwork took place over a recent three-year period, my informal investigation began almost two decades earlier, with my exposure to stringently observant Orthodoxy through its newly found proselytes. It began with invitations for *Shabbos* and holiday dinners and to weddings, *b'nai mitzvah,* and other life-cycle events. It proceeded in informal conversation and discussion, and progressed to more formal study and participation in synagogue settings. It was inspired by longtime friends and an attempt to understand their religious transformations and what precipitated it, and grew to what I would describe as "flirting" with the lure of the observant lifestyle with its emphasis on home, family, and traditional values. Ultimately, while the exposure enhanced my appreciation of this way of life, it also reinforced my personal choice for a more open lifestyle, one that is rich in a variety of perspectives and experiences, and not so narrowly defined or constrained. Still the insistent question as to why people move in a more traditional direction continued to vex me, and ultimately led to this study.

The experiences that preceded my formal fieldwork served to familiarize me with observant Orthodoxy and were valuable prelude to embarking on my research. They shortened the learning curve, exposing me to a variety of rituals and practices that I had not previously experienced nor understood, having been raised Reform and raising my own children as Conservative. I had faint recollections of my Orthodox grandparents, my grandpa's recitation of the Passover Seder in Hebrew at warp speed, my cousins misbehaving at the table as Grandpa droned on, the mumbled blessings over the bread and wine on *Shabbos,* a rushed nod to tradition as stomachs grumbled, and the tiny neighborhood *shteibel* where my grandparents worshipped, with its stale odor on Yom Kippur. But around my friends' beautifully appointed tables, in spacious, artfully designed homes, I heard the *kiddush* recited in its entirety and with renewed *kavannah*. I learned why there were two *challot* on the table under a snow white cover, why a small cut was made in one before reciting the blessing, and why salt was sprinkled on the slices of eggy dough. I learned about ritually washing hands before eating, and the custom of not speaking until the blessing over the bread was recited. I attended an Orthodox seder that stretched into the night. I learned about prescriptions for how much *matzah* to eat, and how much wine to drink. I attended services at an Orthodox synagogue, gradually becoming more familiar with the order of the service, with the separate seating of men and women, and of the prescribed roles for each.

I learned what a *shaitel* was, what the prescribed length for a skirt was, and what the dip of a neckline was acceptable according to laws of modesty. I learned what a *bedecken* was, the order of a wedding ceremony, the meaning of a *chuppah*, and the recitation of the seven blessings.

Thus, I went into the field with a store of knowledge and experiences and a comfort that comes from familiarity, even a superficial one. I also went into the field with an acquaintance of many key informants, rabbis, teachers, and community members, some new to observant Orthodoxy, others born to the tradition, many who helped ease my way as I began my formal fieldwork.

Embarking on a research study in the community where I live, worked as a journalist at the Jewish newspaper, and volunteered, presented both benefits and challenges. My longtime participation afforded me an understanding of the broader Jewish community and acquaintance with its leaders, as well as credibility as a member. While I had played dual roles of both observer and participant for many years, taking on a new role as a researcher necessitated a recalibration of those roles, to situate myself as both insider and outsider and carefully monitor my behavior,

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in their work in the early years of the twentieth century continues to inform Jewish American identity into the twenty-first century.

as I sought to locate myself in a space between the two, leveraging my identity as an insider while safeguarding my role as an outsider.[446]

I preceded my fieldwork with a series of informational interviews with rabbis and others in the community. I spoke with nearly a dozen individuals, many of whom I had known for years, to apprise them of my work and gain their trust. I sought to elicit their support, seeking their help in deepening my understanding of the dynamics of the community and identifying prospective subjects and other key informants. The interviews proved exceedingly useful in reinforcing the value of my study and the richness of the data it would yield, as well as garnering their confidence and help.

The Southwest city where this study is situated is a fast growing Sunbelt community of more than 100,000 Jews.[447] It has a wealth of Jewish resources, including synagogues and temples, community centers, day schools, and other social service organizations providing a full range of services from senior housing, to behavioral health counseling, to *kashrut* supervision, to summer camps, to lifelong learning classes, and other cultural offerings, including an annual film festival, an annual music festival, theater productions, and two Jewish history museums. It also provides a host of institutions and programs to serve its growing stringently observant Orthodox population, including two day schools, a boys *yeshiva*, a girls high school, several kosher eateries, two *mikvahs*, with another in the process of being built, a burial society, and four Jewish cemeteries.

However, its location in a growing region of the country, and its population comprised of many newcomers, there is neither the rootedness, nor generational support, that characterizes older, more established Jewish communities. Thus, resources are limited, particularly since the 2008 economic downturn that decimated the region's real estate market, a primary industry. The community remains in a rebuilding mode, even as models for communal organization are changing. Rabbis and leaders in the community bemoan the lack of resources, while capitalizing on the "can-do" frontier attitude that pervades the community's culture and the increased openness to creativity and innovation that has powered its initiatives, particularly in education and fundraising, in recent years. The BT movement, which is the focus of this study, has burgeoned in this fertile climate, with both Chabad Lubavitch, now celebrating its fortieth year here, and the Community *Kollel*, its fifteenth, continuing to inspire interest in more traditional practice and belief and attract a growing cadre of followers. This community provided an apt snapshot of the BT movement, and an inside look at innovative programs to attract and serve those interested in exploring stringently observant Orthodoxy.

Collecting Data: Watching

My fieldwork was comprised of dozens of formal and informal observations in the observant community over the course of four years. They ranged from community events, such as the Challah Bake, described in Chapter Two, to Rachel's bridal shower in her parents' modest home, described in Chapter Six. They were as unplanned as a quick conversation about Passover cleaning and cooking in the local kosher market, as a double take in a parking lot as a newly Orthodox friend, now sporting a new blonde wig instead of her natural auburn tresses, waved me down; or as a chance encounter with the daughter-in-law of a now observant family wading into a local swimming pool in her skirt, as I arrived in my Speedo to swim laps.

It included a raft of lifecycle events, including the *bris* alluded to in Chapter One, where the grandparents of the new baby spoke of this being the first traditional *bris* in their family in

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[446] Benor, *Becoming Frum*. Benor provides keen insights on situating oneself in a community as both insider and outsider, and the "not quite either" status of the researcher, as she "negotiate[s] [her] self representation to find a balance between access and honesty," 36.

[447] As noted earlier, the last major demographic study took place in 2002, but in the ensuing decades, the city has continued to attract new residents, and the Jewish population has kept pace. Current estimates suggest that it is now in excess of 120,000.

three generations, the *bat mitzvah* described in Chapter Two, where the mother of the *bat mitzvah* put together a PowerPoint tracing three generations of women in the family, to weddings with frenzied single-sex dancing, exultant greetings of *mazel tov* among the guests, frequent *l'chayims*, and shots of Scotch, as described in Chapter Two. I had the opportunity to observe dress, food, and social and ritual practice. I could see the expression on the grandfather's face at the *bris*, watch the bride's father as the groom lowered his daughter's veil before the wedding, and glimpse a mother's beaming face as the *bat mitzvah* gave her *d'var Torah* on her special day.

Fieldwork also included classes and lectures, fundraisers at local hotels, and Sabbath and holiday services at a variety of Orthodox synagogues. During this initial stage of research, I wrestled with my insider/outsider status: was I a guest or a researcher, a participant or observer, or both? Did I need to divulge my role, or roles, or simply quietly observe, as I danced with the bride or tossed candy at the *bar mitzvah* boy after he completed his Torah portion, then file my observations away for future reflection? Honesty was at issue, as well as credibility, and, always, respect for the participants and the community who were welcoming me in.

Authenticity troubled me: how to dress, how to act, and how to comport respectfully with communal conventions while maintaining my own identity. I chose to dress modestly when in the stringently Orthodox environment, though within my own comfort level, taking care not to play dress-up, while being sufficiently modest as not to offend. I chose skirts or dresses that covered the knees, often adding sheer hose and eschewing the bare legs that fashion often called for. I added a cardigan or jean jacket over my T-shirt, to cover my arms, and was careful to avoid any dipping necklines. I did not cover my hair, as it is not something I have ever done, and adding a hat or kerchief to my dress seemed to be inauthentic or dishonest. For the most part, I was comfortable and did not feel as if I was offending the members of the community. I did, however, receive a few sly comments on the length of my skirt on occasion, and also a couple of discomfiting once-overs from head to toe, when I entered the women's section of the synagogue.[448] I also made a few mistakes early on, for example, when I extended my hand to a gentleman at a social gathering only to find it hanging in midair, not realizing that he was observant and did not shake women's hands. I also made the mistake of speaking to other guests at a *Shabbos* table between hand washing and the blessing of the challah, forgetting the prohibition on speech during that interval. I soon remembered, and did not forget again.

Note taking at social occasions was inappropriate, potentially off-putting to others, and made me feel as if I was exploiting the hospitality of the hosts or worse, being dishonest. It also interfered with de la Graza's exhortation to be fully present at such occasions, having the opportunity to fully experience an event, as Taylor and Bogdan counsel, from "the frames of reference" of my subjects. Field notes became essential, written as soon after the events as possible, and were often stream of consciousness recollections of the food, dancing, revelry, and palpable emotion. Snippets of conversation, a few words recalled from the rabbi, a toast by the father of the bride, an image of a father cradling an infant, or a mother with a squirmy toddler on her lap were jotted down as best as I could recall.

I also used field notes for reflections, inserting my thoughts or questions into the text as I wrote, later going back to read them, as I sought to process what I had seen, what I heard, and what I had felt.

I also became a more acute listener, and a more studied watcher. Without the reporter's notepad or tape recorder, I had to train my mind to look for both Geertz's "small facts" and also discern his "large issues." I gradually found myself freed from a reporter's job to get "just the facts, ma'am,"[449] and allowed myself to more fully immerse myself in the experience and allowed both the details and the larger social implications to take form.

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[448] Benor refers to such "shaming" that can take place in a stringently observant community where dress is construed as immodest or not meeting communal standards, *Becoming Frum*, 34.

[449] A catch-phrase attributed to Jack Webb, the no-nonsense detective of the popular 1950s television series Dragnet, which has since been traced to writer Stan Freberg's parody of the series. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Joe_Friday.

In other settings, a lecture, a class, or a large, public program, I availed myself of "jottings," quick observations jotted down unobtrusively on a small pad. De la Garza's class introduced me to the skill and afforded me several opportunities to hone it. I completed two assignments for the class, sitting in public places, one on the steps of the public library in New York City, a second on the steps of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, just watching and jotting down an occasional sighting in a few words, amazed at how much more I noticed when not tied to pencil and paper, nor parsing thoughts in complete sentences or even more than a single word, a color, an object, a gesture, or a sound. Sometimes the jottings were later recast as field notes, and sometimes they remained as standalone reflections, where my memory had to fill in the blanks to reconstruct a scene. The process was exceedingly useful as I continued with data collection in the more formalized interview setting, and later as I began to analyze my data.

Collecting Data: Listening

"It works," is how Barney Glaser describes the value of grounded theory methodology. Although he is quick to acknowledge that its efficacy derives from careful implementation of the method from data gathering, to analysis, to theoretical supposition. "It does not take a genius to generate a theory," he writes in his classic tome on the subject, written with Anselm Strauss. "It does take a method."[450]

Assiduously following it, through field study to generate the rich data that grounds the process and generates theory, and selectively choosing vantage points for field observation and subjects for intensive interviews that would yield rich data to mine is important. The better the data, the better the theories that arise, as de la Garza continuously emphasized. "Garbage in, garbage out," is her pithy warning.

I had been keeping a list of potential subjects, names suggested by rabbis and others in my preliminary informational interviews — and later, suggestions from interviewees themselves — a sampling practice called snowballing:[451] one source leading to another, adding further heft and feel to my data, like a snowball gaining speed and mass as it rolls down a hill. Snowballing proved to be invaluable in meeting other potential subjects and gaining their trust. It opened doors and eased initial conversations, enhancing my credibility and the importance of my work, and helping to persuade prospective subjects to say yes. Especially when names were suggested by multiple individuals, it further reinforced their potential value to the study and guided my choices.

I also used modified purposive sampling,[452] a more focused sampling technique, to construct a cohort more representative of the complex profile of BT women. As my understanding of the community deepened through field study, I discerned variation within the Orthodox community, the variety of congregations with varying degrees of stringency in practice and belief, and sought subjects reflective of that continuum. Two women in the study belonged to a non-denominational egalitarian congregation with Conservative-ordained rabbis who followed Orthodox liturgy in their prayer services. One, coincidentally, belonged to a more stringently Orthodox congregation — and hosted not one, but two, *bat mitzvah* ceremonies for her daughter, one in each congregation, as recounted in Chapter Five. The other continued her membership in the non-denominational congregation while occasionally attending services in the stringently Orthodox synagogue as her transformation progressed. During the course of my research, I observed her in both, noting the scarf she chose for covering her hair more tightly bound — with less of her abundant curly tresses escaping its hold — in the more stringently Orthodox congregation. In the egalitarian synagogue, she sat with her husband and two sons; in the more observant congregation, she sat with a couple of girlfriends on the women's side of the *mehitza*.

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[450] Glaser and Straus, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory*, 11.

[451] Hesse-Biber and Leavy, *The Practice of Qualitative Research*, 47.

[452] Hesse-Biber and Leavy, *The Practice of Qualitative Research*, 47.

Both images embodied the innate in-betweenness of BT transformation, and perhaps the woman's own ambivalence, both issues to be explored.

Four women belonged to the stringently Orthodox congregation that grew from the community *Kollel* in the city's older Jewish neighborhood, and another four, by study's end, belonged to the suburban stringently Orthodox congregation it spawned. Two belonged to the more open Sephardic congregation also in the city's environs. While synagogue affiliation is a necessary element in Orthodox identity, with its obligations for prayer and worship, the particular community it engenders a significant factor in their transformation, and acceptance, the women were impacted by a wide variety of experiences in many congregations or learning centers. One woman in this study began her transformation at Chabad[453] before joining the Sephardic congregation. Others mentioned attending programs or events there, or were observed in the audience at events. The one modern Orthodox congregation, the oldest Orthodox congregation in the city, attracted women to its outreach programs and community-wide events, such as its kosher fair or *Purim* carnival, its urban location perhaps a deterrent for those who live in the city's outskirts. However, in an area with a relatively small Orthodox population, and fewer resources, large events tend to attract women from a variety of congregations and neighborhoods.

Beyond synagogue affiliation, I sought to curate a sample that reflected difference in age, life course, education, work experience, marital and family status, and socioeconomic position to more fully flesh out the sample profile. Again, snowballing, receiving suggestions from study subjects and others, helped to add to my list of prospective subjects. I often weighed my choices purposively, seeking to construct a sample that I subjectively perceived reflected the diversity of my target group, as I had not formally investigated the range of BTs.

The process for initially reaching out to prospective subjects was simple and straightforward. I contacted the women by email, introducing myself, and, if applicable, mentioning the name of the person who had suggested their names, and explaining in a sentence or two my interest in BT transformation and asking if they might like to hear more. If so, we made a date to meet, often in a local coffee shop, where I introduced myself, giving a brief overview of my background and my interest in the subject, and then a fuller explanation of my study and the interview process, including time commitment and interview format and possible location. I also assured them of the confidential nature of the study and my commitment to protecting their privacy.

Meeting in person, I also gained useful information about the potential subject that helped me determine if she would be a valuable source. I asked general questions about her background, as well as more focused ones about her past religious affiliation and current one. I sought women who were both thoughtful and articulate, and who could further my understanding of the BT phenomenon and enhance my ability to describe it. If the subject expressed interest — and I determined that she would be a good interview prospect — I then followed up to set a time and place for an interview.

Only three of the women I initially identified as potential subjects did not participate in the study. One did not respond to my initial email. A second responded and asked that I reach out again when her workload lessened; I followed up, but she did not get back to me. A third expressed interest; however, after meeting and speaking with her, I felt that her unsettled background and home life would detract from her credibility, and so I did not ask her to participate.

I preferred interviewing participants in their own homes. From my experience as a journalist, I knew that being able to observe their personal surroundings — the van in the driveway, the books on the shelves, or the scent of soup bubbling on the stove — added to my fuller understanding of the person I was interviewing, and that it sometimes opened up new lines of discussion. Interviewing Kara at her dining room table, as she called back and forth to her

[453] As discussed earlier, Chabad Lubavitch is a significant purveyor of accessible classes and programs, and its website is a go-to for basic information.

daughter in the kitchen on how to prepare her lunch, added an unexpected look at their relationship and opened up a fuller discussion of Kara's role as a mother and its importance.

I also preferred home environments for the privacy they afforded, as well as the quiet that allowed for enhanced audio quality as I taped each interview. In some cases, the subjects were either not comfortable meeting at their homes or it was less convenient for them, and so we met in my home. Interviews with rabbis and other teachers or community leaders were held in synagogues or at the local Jewish community center, public spaces that still afforded quiet places to meet.

I began each interview asking study subjects for their consent and explaining my commitment to ensuring confidentiality and privacy. I also explained that I would be using pseudonyms in the written document of my work. I neglected to ask the subjects to choose pseudonyms themselves, later wishing that I had done this so the names chosen might capture their own conception of self; instead, I chose the pseudonyms myself. I kept several copies of their real names and pseudonyms on my desk, referring to them often as I wrote, until they were inscribed on my memory.

I dressed modestly for the interviews, although some of the women seemed to have consciously chosen an outfit to wear to project a certain image and others simply came as they were, straight from work or heading out to drive a carpool. One, Annie, appeared to have given a great deal of thought to the demure black skirt of modest length and black sweater she wore with proper hose and black flats; another, Lara, rushed in between appointments from work, in jeans and a T-shirt. Clothing was a quick marker of BT progression, and inner ambivalence. Kara, who arrived wearing a modest length skirt, T-shirt and jean jacket, explained how she felt uncomfortable bare-armed now — even in the heat of the summer — especially if she ran into a member of the Orthodox community, raising the issue of communal standards of conformity and acceptance. Yet, she also confided that she wanted to dress attractively and modishly. "Cute," is the word she used. Again, this is a suggestion of borderland status or in-betweenness.

I began each interview with a fuller introduction of myself and the focus of my study, and then proceeded to follow an interview roadmap of questions that I had put together as a guide to cover key points. It served only as a roadmap, which I might glance at to keep the conversation going at different junctures, as I generally allowed the flow of the conversation to proceed more naturally with my questions eliciting a response, which then elicited follow-up questions. I also took notes — partially out of habit as a reporter — and partially because I wanted to make sure I had back up should the tape recorder malfunction, leaving me with an incomplete recording of the conversation, or worse. However, I made a conscious effort to be fully present during the interview, my eyes trained on my subject, only glancing at my notebook to make a quick jotting every so often, noting not only what she said but her facial expression and body language, and writing up field notes after the interview, describing both the subject and the environment, as well as the most salient points of the conversation that I recalled. I allowed the subjects to decide where they would like to sit, some choosing the dining room table; others, a sofa or chairs in a sitting area. Seven of the interviews were conducted in the subjects' homes, two in my home, when the subjects preferred not to meet at their homes, either for convenience or other reasons, and two in business offices.

I sought to use interview techniques recommended in resources such as Benor's overview of interviewing strategies in her study of language acquisition of BTs [454] and Charmaz, who provides a detailed list of dos and don'ts for intensive interviewing. Some of this list mirrors good journalistic technique — phrase questions that elicit responses, "tell me about…" or "can you tell me more?" or "how did…"; ask the interviewee to elaborate, clarify, or give examples of her views; follow unanticipated issues that come up; and, most important, listen, listen, listen. And some of it shifts the balance from the interviewer to interviewee. The goal, says Charmaz, is for

[454] Benor, *Becoming Frum*.

interviewees to “tell their stories and give them a coherent frame.” Make the interviewees “the experts,” she urges, allow them “to choose what to tell and how to tell it.”[455]

I attempted to follow Charmaz’s advice, although sometimes found my self interrupting — a no-no — or using my own experience as context to be empathetic and gain trust. I also often restated responses as a means of clarifying the words of the interviewee, when I should have simply waited patiently for them to continue speaking, rephrasing for clarity on their own. Reading the transcripts of interviews, I felt all too often that I needed a good editor to pare down my speech, and worked, as the process unfolded, to speak less, to be more patient, and, as Charmaz says, to listen more.

The average length of the interview was sixty to ninety minutes, including time to get acquainted and to close and depart. I kept an eye on my watch and sought to be respectful of the subjects’ time constraints. As I readied to end, I would ask subjects if there was anything I had not asked that they would like to add; I also asked if they had suggestions for other study participants. I also asked if I might follow up to clarify a response or ask an additional question or two that might surface after reading through the transcript; in some cases, I requested a second interview. I also encouraged them to get back to me if they had any additional thoughts after the interview; two subjects emailed me lengthy messages after reflecting upon the content of our conversation and later thoughts that came to them. One also sent me a letter that she had written to the leaders of the JWRP Israel trip, describing its impact on her, and another shared the text of a speech she and her husband had given when they were honored by the local Orthodox girls high school.

I conducted follow-up interviews with seven of the subjects, delving more fully into some of the areas we had touched on initially, or asking about subjects that we had missed. In particular, I circled back to ask about their experiences with the laws of ritual purity, a subject that I initially waited for the women to raise themselves, with gentle prompting from me on key ritual practices of BT identity. If they did not, I let it go, realizing later that it was a missing piece in the discussion of embodied practice. I also realized that it was my own reserve, and discomfort, that prevented me from delving into such intimate issues of marital relations, which I viewed as innately private — most likely a generational difference from my subjects still of childbearing age, who spoke openly about the subject.

I also interviewed two spouses, as I initially wanted to confirm the stories I was hearing from their wives about their progression as a couple. It was fascinating to get a male perspective, although in terms of the substance of the couple’s BT transformation, much of it was the same, which reinforced the validity of the women’s accounts and/or the joint nature of the transformation, and a shared narrative conceived to inform it. Still, it was insightful, and it would be a facet to pursue in future studies. I also interviewed one adult child, to hear the story from her point of view. Again, fascinating, surely a possibility for future research, but beyond the scope of this study to pursue.

I conducted seven formal interviews with rabbis or other Jewish educators involved in BT outreach in the local community, and three with other rabbis or leaders involved in outreach on a national level. These conversations provided valuable context for the experiences related by my study subjects and enriched my data and my understanding, but also suggested another possibility for future study. In particular, my lengthy conversation with the local open Orthodox rabbi who is engaged in fostering lifelong education, inspiring insightful conversation, and motivating social action, provided a counterpoint to the viewpoints of his more stringently Orthodox colleagues, in terms of American pluralism and Jewish inclusiveness or exclusiveness. He sought to extol Jewish particularity, as did they, though within the context of enabling personal growth and doing good for others in the larger world.

[455] Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory*, 56-82.

Analyzing Data: Coding, Categorizing, Connecting

According to Charmaz, grounded theory methods "consist of systematic, yet flexible guidelines for collecting and analyzing qualitative data to construct theories from the data themselves."[456] I was new to the method — and this is my first comprehensive research study — but drawn to the underlying theoretical premise that data drives the study and that implications will arise from careful analysis of them. I wanted to "understand the world from [my] subjects' point of view," as Brinkmann and Kvalve describe, "to unfold the meaning of their experiences."[457] Grounded theory provides an orderly process to do this, although its flexibility would allow me to make it my own.

As mentioned, I completed two coding exercises as part of my classwork before embarking on my own. I read the literature and listened to class lectures, electing to do the process by hand, coding each field observation and interview manually and then sorting the codes to identify categories that were then mapped on paper to elicit connections. There are a number of computer programs that can help sort and analyze data, but the manual mode appealed to me (and was the choice of de la Garza and Paulesc), and I found reading and processing the field observations and interviews — asking, what is happening here? — choosing the words to capture an action, behavior, thought, or experience — the code — and writing it down in my own handwriting — inscribing it — very meaningful. I opted to use gerunds, one of the suggested formats for coding, the very active nature of a gerund giving each of the codes an underlying energy and the process a compelling dynamism of discovery. So I wrote, "bringing in the light," "working the dough," "being like *Hashem*," "asking what's it for," or "being hard," scribbling the notes in pencil in the margin on each line of the transcript. I initially intended to write each code on a note card, a method preferred by many — the better to spread out over a table or the floor and then sort — but ultimately modified the laborious process by going back over my codes and highlighting those codes that resonated and that began to form categories that I could see.

I then re-read each coded transcript, analyzing the codes and identifying critical issues, as I called them, and also key biographical insights. I created a new document from each transcript with the key points that I used in the subsequent phases of the analysis, often going back to read the full text of the transcript when in need of context to enhance my understanding.

The categories arose from the coded data, and the connections evolved from the groupings: the theme of lost and found, the traumatic events that may have precipitated the stirrings of religious transformation, the experiences that gave them shape and form, the memories that infused them with both connections to the past and yearning for the future, the embodied acts that made them real, the beliefs that began to emerge, the relationships, some lost, some found, the communal belonging that became so essential, the individual longing that impelled the process, the personal aspiration that powered it, the overarching transcendence of time, past, present, and future, and space, locating the women in the grand sweep of the Jewish story while embedding them in the minutiae of everyday life. Each of these gave rise to connections or patterns,[458] each nugget of data adding heft to the category and its value. I repeatedly circled back as I moved forward, reconsidering each code, each category, weighing its intrinsic worth in capturing those "crucial insights," as Glaser and Straus call them,[459] which would enhance the understanding of the dynamics at play. I then mapped them out on pages and pages

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[456] Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory*, 1.

[457] Brinkmann and Kvale, *InterViews*, 3.

[458] Hesse-Biber and Leavy, *The Practice of Qualitative Research*, 95. Hesse-Buber and Leavy write of the patterns that emerge from in-depth interviews, and the words that capture the kaleidoscopic emergence of themes.

[459] Glaser and Strauss, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory*, 252.

of yellow legal pads, rearranging elements as I rethought them, listing categories, and adding additional ones in bubbles, indicating relationships with arrows, or scratching out first hunches only to later go back and rethink them and perhaps rewrite my first connection. I wrote notes to myself on the maps, outlines, and lists, reflections and insights, of new questions that arose. I reflected on my place in the process, considering what I observed, what I heard, and how I weighed its value, and considered its usefulness.[460]

Hesse-Biber and Leavy liken the grounded theory process to a dance. "Researchers move back and forth in the steps of the research as if they are doing a dynamic dance routine," they write. And, they counsel, "there is no one right dance and no set routine to follow; one must be open to discovery."

Writing

And then capture that discovery in words.

Geertz writes of the role of the ethnographer in "inscribing" social discourse, writing down that "which exists only in its moment of occurrence" and capturing it "into an account, which exists in its inscriptions and can be reconsulted."[461]

And reconstituted, I might add, as it hopefully inspires new questions and new scholarly inquiry.

The seriousness of the enterprise of transforming codes, categories, and incipient connections, often mere hunches, into a coherent narrative, grounded in the data that has been analyzed to engender theoretical suppositions, and then inscribing them for others to consider, is overwhelming and humbling. Yet the process of data collecting and analysis, which spanned a three year period, also is empowering, as I gained facility with the method and familiarity with the data and the phenomenon it unpacked, gradually becoming more attuned to observing, to listening, to reflecting, and to making critical connections that evince a clearer picture of what is happening and enhancing my ability to capture that through my writing.

I was guided by Emerson, Fretz and Shaw's insights on writing field notes, transferring their salience to the even more intimidating process of writing a dissertation. They simplify the process to "how an observer or researcher sits down and turns a piece of her lived experience into a bit of written text."[462] Bird by bird, as essayist Annie Lamott might describe it,[463] or word by word, breaking the process down into manageable bits and pieces. The elevation of the role of the researcher in grounded theory methodology, of the interaction between researcher and her data as essential to the process — the dance — furthered my confidence in my connections, in my ability to analyze the jumble of conversations and observations of my data and produce a coherent whole that captured the social reality I sought to understand and communicate to my readers.

It was a heady, ambitious endeavor to contemplate, and to accomplish.

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[460] As Charmaz has noted, the grounded theory method is a dynamic process evolving from the data collected and analyzed, the researcher plotting her next step from day-to-day as the research process unfolds. It retains an inherent flexibility, and, as I construed, an openness to modulation by the researcher in terms of the scope of the study, the modes of data collection, and personal style. I chose to moderate the method, streamlining analytical procedures and developing a less structured process for evincing codes, categories, and connections. Charmaz outlines a more complex model — a progression from open coding, to focused coding, to axial coding — to suggest categories that evince themes or patterns. I chose to condense the process to elicit three groupings: codes, categories, and connections.

[461] Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 19.

[462] Robert M. Emerson, Rachel I. Fretz and Linda L. Shaw, *Writing Ethnographer Fieldnotes* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), vii.

[463] Anne Lamott, *Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1994).

I began, as I often do when writing, envisioning the flow of the narrative, by going back to my research questions — why are women becoming BTs, how are they doing it, and how does it impact them as individuals and within families and communities — and the takeaways from my data that were manifest in my analysis. I evinced the phenomenon as both process and progression, a fluid course from beginning, to becoming, to (em)bodying, to believing, to being. These six chapters, and their names, captured the dynamism of the phenomenon and the fundamental phases of its development. During the writing process I further refined my understandings of each phase, as I continued to mine my data and distill its meanings; however, my initial vision of the process of BT transformation did not change. In fact, as I wrote, word by word, chapter by chapter, I became ever more persuaded of its accuracy.

I began writing, as I often do, sketching out an outline of each chapter, the key takeaways from my data becoming the scaffolding, and the anecdotal evidence culled from my data its grounding, the scholarly precepts I used to gird each claim. I found as I wrote more, my confidence grew, and the easiest, and often the best, sections to my dissertation were when I put aside my outline — and my journalistic instincts that tied me more tightly to my notes — and wrote in a stream of consciousness, allowing my mind to guide the process. It was similar to the experience I described as I learned to observe and listen in the field without pencil and paper in hand, trusting my mind's eye to capture what was unfolding in front of me. I was untethered, freed to allow my mind to rove, and was often surprised at the connections it inspired and words to more precisely describe them. Of course, such strokes of creativity did not inform every page I wrote, and some proved to be more nettlesome than others to write, but those that flowed naturally served to buoy my spirits, boost my confidence, and keep me going.

I sought to create a picture, using Geertz's small details, and describe the experiences of my subjects from within their frame of reference. I sought to situate them within the larger, big picture issues that the research had revealed, the data illuminating those theoretical suppositions that they suggested. The theories evinced a profound sense of loss that inspired incipient spiritual stirrings. Rena's description of the rending of the heart, captured the phenomenon, as did Carrie's description of how such tears create a space for God to come in. Memory, autobiographical, collective, and retrospective, informed my understandings. Nostalgic memory served as a backdrop, its rosy-hued images reflecting a longing for the past, although these women were driven more by the desire for a meaningful future. Autobiographical memory — Aileen's recollection of her father building an ark for their temple's sacred scrolls, Carrie remembering tossing out the Christmas tree, or Kara recounting her family's excitement at the first taste of Sizzlean, fake bacon — were those "pieces of lived experience turned into bits of text"[464] that informed their stories, while collective memory that grew from a search for meaning and belonging impelled them forward as it also turned them back. Earlier suppositions that recalled past conceptions of BT transformation as a return home, a homecoming, were just that; metaphors that had worked in prior generations to conceive of a move towards more observant Orthodoxy did not capture the seriousness of this generation's quest or the intellectual rigor that informed it. Gender infused this study with a compelling complexity and immediacy, again inspiring a long backward glance to the 1960s and 1970s and a look forward to today's world, complicated by gender, power, and authority and its many manifestations, particularly more recently its sexual implications. Time and place, the social, cultural, and political contexts, were critically important in understanding the phenomenon, the larger milieu of American contemporary society and the individual generational location of the subjects and the position on their life courses. Challenged were conceptions of gender, Jewishness, home, work, accomplishment, and material success, of how the women spent their time and their money, of how they conceived of who they wanted to be, and drove their becoming.

In the same sense, it is how I conceived of this study, plotted my fieldwork, analyzed my data, and wrote this thesis. Its being is a product of a process of becoming, inspired by my own

[464] Emerson, Fretz and Shaw, *Writing Ethnographer Fieldnotes*, vii.

intellectual curiosity, informed by past studies, and infused with the experiences of the subjects and the reflections of the writer.

It is, as Charmaz suggests, a combination of involvement and interpretation, each step along the way precipitating the next. The endpoint, she writes, "emerges from where you start, where you go, and with whom you interact, what you see and hear, and how you learn and think. In short," she writes, "the finished work is a construction — yours."[465]

I can hear this in the stories of the subjects in this study. They are motivated by an intense desire to be better, to improve, to become more like the beings created in God's image that they believe they were meant to be. "I just want to be a better person," says Ava. "And being observant helps me to do that." They are further enough along their life course to have made mistakes, to have regrets, and to suffer remorse. They are further along in their life course to more confidently assess choices, and to more independently make them. They are further along in their life course to judge themselves, to confront their failings, and to resolve to change them. They are further along in their life course to take responsibility for their actions and to take responsibility for their own spiritual lives, as well their material lives.

So Rena tells the story of her beginnings, of the friend who tired of her reading and learning and talking about the ritual and practice of more observant Orthodoxy, who, finally, called the question. "Why don't you just do it?" she asked. And, as Rena relates, "I did."

All it takes is the first step, she says, recalling the ancient Israelites as they confronted the fearsome parting of the Red Sea while the Pharaoh's army neared, and they needed to overcome their terror and cross over.[466] "Someone had to take the first step," she says.

And for the women in this study, they have to find that opening, that tear in the heart, that space, and go through.

[465] Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory*, xiv.

[466] http://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/2199147/jewish/Meet-Nachshon-ben-Aminadav.htm. A biblical *midrash* credits Nachshon with overcoming his fear and being the first to venture into the Red Sea. His name means "jumping into the sea."

APPENDIX II

PROFILES

Aileen

"God was absent."

Aileen is in her late sixties, married for more than fifty years, with two grown children and five grandchildren. She was raised in a suburb of a large East coast city, with a then growing Jewish population. She and her husband are college graduates: he an accountant, and she an interior designer and educational consultant. They are both now retired. The couple moved to the Southwest shortly after marrying.

Aileen is bright and articulate; her speech is energetic, punctuated with pithy, and often pointed, observations.

Aileen recalls grandparents who gradually put aside Orthodox belief and practice as they sought to assimilate, and parents who embraced the more progressive streams of Judaism, as more reflective of their identity as American Jews. She was raised in a Reform congregation, its members as close as family. Her parents were part of an effort to build a new temple in a nearby town, which erupted into a contentious zoning dispute that was eventually resolved by the courts. Her memories are infused with her conflicted desire to find her place Jewishly, while navigating the larger non-Jewish world.

She and her husband joined a Reform congregation in the community where this study takes place, leaving it for another, ultimately distancing themselves from organized Jewish life, after their children became *b'nai mitzvah*. They were introduced to the local Orthodox community through their son who began studying Orthodoxy in college and later took on the obligations of stringent belief and practice.

Aileen and her husband were drawn to Orthodoxy — and persuaded of the limits of Reform, with its perceived cultural rather than religious emphasis — after facing critical health challenges and experiencing the outpouring of care and concern of the observant community.

Her husband's almost fatal heart attack and her continuing battle with cancer have brought Aileen closer to observant practice and have opened her up to her own needs and the power of the divine to provide comfort and hope.

"I needed something to hold on to."

Annie

"There's something missing."

Annie is in her late fifties, divorced for many years, with two grown sons, both married with children. She grew up in a suburb of a large Midwest city with a substantial Jewish population. She attended public school through the ninth grade, when she left to attend an elite private arts school where she studied concert piano. She earned a bachelor's degree in psychology and later earned a master's in social work. Her first jobs were in the Jewish community, drawing on her love of music, initially working with preschoolers, and later seniors. She currently works as a financial trader.

She is voluble and forthright, confident and in control, although her vulnerability is palpable.

Annie was raised Reform, although she recalls the conflict between her mother and her maternal grandmother, who was Orthodox, in her childhood home. Her husband, a physician, was also raised Reform, as were their two sons. After her divorce, Annie began looking for more religious substance, leaving a more progressive Reform congregation for another that was less so, seeking to increase her Jewish knowledge and involvement, joining the temple choir, becoming an adult *bat mitzvah*. A gradual sense of being adrift and unmoored, especially as another long-term relationship ended, eventually led her to the charismatic Sephardic rabbi who has become her teacher.

She has gradually moved toward more observant practice, taking on "one mitzvah at a time," in ways that comport with her lifestyle, and making them her own. She revels in finding what she feels has been lost and in so doing, in finding herself. Her life, she says, is immeasurably enriched, its goodness only increasing as her happiness radiates outward towards others in the good deeds she performs.

She is buoyant, although not sure where this path will take her.

"My goal is to keep growing," she says.

Ava

"I like having rules."

Ava is in her early sixties, and married with three grown children, two married, and seven grandchildren. She grew up in the suburbs of a large Midwestern city with a substantive Jewish population. She attended public high school and graduated from the state university; she later completed a masters' degree at the state university in the city where this study is located, after deciding to make a career change. She started her own business many years ago and continues to work there. Her husband is an attorney; they have been married more than forty years.

Ava exudes strength and resolve, an almost brusque manner masking the softer, sensitive person inside.

Ava was raised in what she calls a "traditional" home, observing the Sabbath and holidays and keeping kosher. Her parents were both raised Orthodox, though her father was more knowledgeable and observant than her mother, who had little, if any, formal Jewish education. Ava's husband, an attorney, was raised with less observance, although his family also belonged to a traditional congregation.

The couple moved to the community where this study is situated just after marrying, joining a Conservative congregation where they were members for many years. They left and joined an Orthodox congregation after becoming disenchanted, when a younger, more progressive rabbi was hired to lead the Conservative congregation, following Ava's parents, who also lived in the community.

A series of critical health issues for her parents, then the death of her only sister from a brain tumor, drew Ava towards stringent Orthodoxy. Ava gradually began increasing her observance, deciding to stop driving on the Sabbath the day her sister died. She found comfort in the structure of observant Orthodoxy, particularly when it seemed as if her life was spinning out of control. Her husband gradually followed Ava's path; their sons are both observant Orthodox, while their daughter is less so.

Ava says that becoming more observant has made her a better Jew and a better person. She also aspires to do more.

"I think we all need to grow a little bit."

Carrie

"Where are we going?"

Carrie and her husband are in their early seventies, and married more than fifty years. They have two grown children and seven grandchildren. Both Carrie and her husband hold college and advanced degrees and have had long careers in education: Carrie as a special education teacher and her husband as a professor of business and marketing. Her husband later started a consulting practice that eventually brought the couple to the Southwest, where they purchased a second home in the city's outskirts.

Carrie has a serious gaze, a ready smile, and a gentle way of making her point.

She is from a major Midwest city with a large and rooted Jewish population, tracing her family back five generations. She was raised Reform, as was her husband, and they affiliated with a Reform congregation after marrying. Carrie's father died suddenly when she was a child, leaving her mother with two daughters to raise. Carrie recalls little of those years other than the family's resolve to carry on. Her mother remarried, adding two stepsisters to the family and later a half brother. Carrie says she and her husband were committed to making family time a priority as their children were growing up.

The couple began to explore their Judaism further as empty nesters. With lessened family responsibilities and the prospect of slowing their professional commitments as well, they began taking classes and attending programs to learn more about Jewish belief and practice. They also traveled to Israel, further strengthening their conception of Jewish peoplehood.

As they learned more, they began to add enhanced ritual and practice to their lives, eventually purchasing a *Shabbos* house in an observant neighborhood. As their observance grew, so did their awareness of its spiritual underpinnings. They sought not only to see where they had come from and where they were going, but also to know the force that was taking them there.

"Where is God?" asks Carrie. "Wherever you let Him in."

Dina

"Faith is my middle name."

Dina is in her late forties, married for more than two decades with four children, three still at home. She worked as a pharmaceutical representative after college, meeting her husband, a physician, during his medical training. The couple married and moved to the community where this study takes place when her husband opened his medical practice.

Dina exudes style, her hair beautifully coiffed, her makeup just so, her manner confident, and her speech honest and forthright.

She grew up in a devout Christian family in a Western farming community. She recalls life attuned to the cycles of nature and the family's strong faith. Her husband grew up in a non-observant Jewish family in the community where this study takes place, with no Jewish education or ritual experience.

Dina began to question her own faith as a young adult and had begun to consider other religious traditions, when she met her future husband. His desire to marry and raise Jewish children — despite his lack of Jewish grounding — further impelled her search, and his. She converted to Judaism in a Reform ceremony, before marrying, later undergoing an Orthodox conversion. He began to study more observant belief and practice. The couple gradually took on heightened Jewish obligation, first *kashering* their home, then becoming Sabbath- and holiday-observant. More modest dress and an attempt at keeping the laws of ritual purity followed, as did the birth of their two younger children.

But as their children became teenagers, the couple confronted the difficulties of trying to raise ritually observant children within the wider world. Only a handful of families in their congregation were Sabbath-observant. Dina and her husband chose to send their older children to public high school, raising issues of dating, dress, and wanting to fit in. The ensuing conflicts have been hard.

Dina's pain is palpable, as is her resolve.

"This is who we are."

Hannah

"I want to do more."

Hannah is in her late forties, married for almost two decades, with one daughter, age twelve. She grew up in a suburb of a large East coast city with a substantive Jewish population. She attended public high school and graduated from an elite East coast liberal arts college, later working in business consulting and marketing. She and her husband, an attorney, met and married on the East coast, moving to the Southwest with their daughter when they were seeking a change. Hannah is currently in partnership with her husband in a new business venture.

She is bright, exceedingly reflective, expressive, and honest in her responses.

Hannah was raised Conservative, her mother raised Orthodox, schooled in traditional ritual observance, but not stringently so. Her father was raised Reform. The Conservative affiliation of their family reflected a compromise. Hannah's husband was raised Reform, less ritually observant than Hannah but proudly Jewish. A desire to learn more about Judaism was one of the things they shared from the beginning of their relationship.

The family joined an egalitarian, non-denominational congregation soon after moving to the Southwest and initially felt they had found a Jewish home. Her husband's loss of his sister to brain cancer several years later and desire to say *kaddish* for her led him to the suburban Orthodox synagogue for daily *minyan*. He was drawn to the young rabbi and his fiery commitment and found comfort in the embrace of the other men who prayed there.

Hannah found the women open and welcoming also, and was open to experiencing a more observant lifestyle. She was a participant on the women's JWRP trip to Israel, returning home more receptive to experimenting with enhanced observance. The couple hosted two *bat mitzvahs* for their daughter, one at the non-denominational congregation and a second at the stringently Orthodox congregation.

They continued to move toward heightened observance during the course of this study, most recently moving into the neighborhood within walking distance to the Orthodox synagogue.

"You have to be moving forward."

Kara

"We're building the future."

Kara is in her early fifties, married for more than two decades with three daughters, one now in college, and two still at home. She and her husband are rooted in the community where this study takes place, their family going back three generations. Both Kara and her husband attended public schools and graduated from the local state university. She works in education; her husband in business and finance.

Kara is open and easy to talk to, with an underlying desire to please.

She was raised Conservative, her family's affiliation with a large, vibrant congregation a significant part of her life. Her husband was raised Reform, and the couple joined a Reform congregation when they married. They were exposed to Orthodoxy, first through Kara's maternal grandma who kept kosher but who also drove with her husband to synagogue services on Saturday mornings, then later, through college friends who were beginning to move towards becoming more observant. They invited the family for *Shabbos* or holiday meals; Kara was taken by the warmth and closeness of the community — her husband less so.

An unexpected financial reversal upended the couple's plans for the future and heightened the appeal of the Orthodox community, with its values predicated less on material success and more on personal growth and family cohesiveness. A series of events — getting to know the charismatic rabbi as a person, experiencing *Shabbos* with another family in their home, moving into a neighborhood close to the *shul* — furthered their progression towards fuller observance.

They are committed to becoming more stringently observant, even as they lament the fractured relationships with their large extended family that it has caused. Kara's pain is palpable, yet she is determined to continue on the path she and her husband have chosen for themselves and their daughters.

"We are growing, our kids are growing. It just feels right."

Lara

"I had to start looking."

Lara is in her early fifties, married twice, with a son from each marriage. She lives with her second husband and both boys in the environs of the city where this study takes place. She grew up in a suburb of a large East coast city with a substantive Jewish population, initially moving West with her first husband. She has both bachelor's and master's degrees in physical therapy and has spent many years working in the field. Her husband is a pharmacist.

Lara speaks with a compelling intensity, her rapid fire speech infused with emotion, her past clearly impelling her towards the future.

She is the granddaughter of Holocaust survivors, and remains haunted by memories of the family that perished. She speaks poignantly of their photos, of glimpsing her resemblance to her great grandmother in the mirror, her anguish in not knowing her. The loss weighs heavily.

Lara was raised in a Reform household by a single, divorced mother, who later remarried and added two stepdaughters and then a son to the family. Lara's relationship with her natural father ended after her parents divorced when she was five or six years old. She still speaks of the loss.

Her first husband converted to Judaism, then renounced the faith after they divorced. Her second husband was raised Conservative; his family is uncomfortable with Lara's move towards heightened observance.

Lara has been searching for something more since she was a young woman, looking for something richer, deeper, and more meaningful in her religious life. The yearning has increased in more recent years, her search first privately on her own, and then later in more public settings. Her husband has been supportive, though much slower in taking on heightened obligations. She confides that sometimes she is envious of friends who are further along the path toward Orthodoxy. Still, she continues on, and her sons, who inspire her, follow her lead.

"We have to do the work. We have our part; God has His."

Leah

"We were doing it wrong … the Torah is the right way."

Leah is in her late-sixties, divorced and the proud mother of three adult children and twelve grandchildren. She grew up in the community where this study takes place, graduating from the local state university and working in her early years as a social worker. She met and married her ex-husband while both were employed at a residential rehabilitation center for boys. They divorced when their children were still at home; he later passed away. Leah has remained single.

Leah is open and direct, her speech reflective of an inner toughness and resilience.

She grew up in a traditional family, her father raised observant, her mother raised with little Jewish observance at home, but learning by experience after marrying. The family belonged to a Conservative congregation where Leah went to Hebrew school. She has fond memories of Sabbath and holiday observance, with extended family around the table, and Sunday mornings at the local Jewish community center for bagels and lox. Her late ex-husband was raised Catholic and converted to Judaism when they married. The couple became members of the congregation where Leah grew up.

Leah's children were the impetus for her exploration of stringent Orthodoxy and continue to be a source of inspiration. They initially went to a community Jewish day school, later transferring to a modern Orthodox school when the community school closed. It was then that Leah began to question Conservative Judaism as it diverged from Orthodox ritual and practice. Her discomfort with its perceived accommodation grew as her Torah knowledge grew, ultimately leading her to gradually embrace Torah true Judaism as "the right way."

The decision caused a rift with her father, who later grudgingly accepted her choice. Her children are all observant, some more stringently so than others, and are raising Leah's twelve grandchildren in observant homes.

"I feel very blessed … I've got twelve dividends."

Rena

"Every Jew has this little spark inside … it just needs to be flamed."

Rena is in her late forties. She grew up in a variety of locales, her father's work taking the family to faraway places around the world. The family ultimately settled in the community where this study takes place and where Rena graduated from high school and college, and where she earned a master's degree in business. She met her future husband at the local state university, marrying him just days after receiving her MBA. He is an engineer, and she is a corporate marketing executive, opting later to leave the business world to become a stay-at-home mom and pursue freelance writing. The couple has five children, their oldest daughter recently married, the other four still at home.

Rena is both ethereal and worldly, and spiritual and practical, as she speaks about her life-changing religious epiphany.

She was raised with little or no Jewish education or background, her parents seeking to steep their children in diverse cultures and universal values. Her husband, raised by a single mother with meager resources in the community where this study takes place, also had little if any Jewish education or experiences.

The couple, with busy professional and personal lives, focused on material progression, buying their dream home and providing for their family. They began reading about Judaism, taking a trip to Israel with the local Jewish federation, and taking a course or two. They did not seriously confront their lack of religious grounding until the untimely death of his mother caused them to begin to question their choices and life course.

Ultimately, it led them to a local Orthodox synagogue, where Rena's husband could say *kaddish* for his mother, inspiring an ever-increasing desire to learn more and do more.

Divine province has led them to where they are today, says Rena, and continues to help them find their way.

"God has a plan … [but] you have to take the first step."

Sarah

"The real deal."

Sarah is in her late sixties, married for more than four decades with five adult children. She is a longtime educator with a doctorate in her field. She has worked in Jewish education for many years and is now retired. Her husband is a physician, with a practice in the community where this study is located.

Sarah speaks plainly, with few words, her demeanor capable and stolid, yet somehow wounded.

She grew up on the East coast in a small farming community outside of a major city. Her parents moved there with Sarah and her two younger sisters after the death of Sarah's older sister, then five years old. Sarah's disclosure of this loss, and its continuing reverberation, is dispassionate. Her husband grew up in a larger Eastern city in a non-Jewish neighborhood, where he experienced anti-Semitism as a youth.

Sarah's family belonged to a Reform congregation, but she grew up with little formal Jewish education or ritual practice. Her husband's family was more ritually observant. The couple joined a large Reform congregation when they married, her husband not wanting to affiliate any place that was "too Jewish." Sarah founded the preschool at the temple, later starting an innovative charter school that combined the study of Jewish culture and history with academic studies. The school foundered after a number of years, due to changing communal dynamics and loss of financial support, much to Sarah's profound disappointment. The school, and its loss, coincided with Sarah's deepening desire to learn, and do, more Jewishly.

Sarah was exposed to more observant practice and belief, first through her teachers, and later through the community. A pull towards more traditional Judaism became stronger when one of her daughters became observant. Sarah gradually took on more religious obligations — dressing modestly, covering her hair — and also became more engaged in the community, particularly in fundraising for the local girls high school. Her husband is non-observant, though accepting of Sarah's newfound belief in Torah-true Judaism as authentic — the real deal — which gives her renewed meaning and purpose.

"I want to get it right … the manual is Torah."

APPENDIX III

GLOSSARY

Ashkenazic – Jews of Eastern European descent
Ba'alei teshuvah – masters of return, lesser observant Jews turning toward more stringent Jewish ritual and belief
Bar/Bat mitzvah – Jewish coming of age ceremony for a boy/girl, plural *b'nai mitzvah*
Bashert –meant to be; divine providence
Bedeken – the veiling ceremony preceding a wedding when the groom "veils" the bride after assuring she is his betrothed
Beit din – rabbinical court that decides issues pertaining to Jewish law, including conversion, marriage, divorce, and other social status issues
Black hat – a colloquial term to describe stringently Orthodox Jews derived from the black hats worn by men who subscribe to such Jewish belief and practice; sometimes used pejoratively
Bris – ritual circumcision
Challah – traditional braided bread prepared for and eaten on the Sabbath and holidays; plural, *challot*
Chametz – foods prohibited during the Passover holiday, traditionally those that are leavened
Chuppah – wedding canopy
Conservative – a stream of Judaism founded in the early twentieth century as a contemporary response to Orthodoxy that is distinguished by moderated belief and practice and a more egalitarian and open approach
Daf Yomi – a program for study of the Talmud, rabbinic discourse on the laws of the Torah, that studies one page a day
Daven – pray
Derekh – the way; refers to the way or path of Jewish belief and practice according to the Torah
D'var Torah – a word of Torah; a sharing with others a thought on Torah
Emuna – faith
Emet – truth
Frum – stringently observant Jews
FFB – *frum* from birth, those who are born stringently observant Orthodox
Hallel – traditional Hebrew prayers of thanksgiving, consisting of Psalms 113-118
Hanukkah – the Jewish festival of lights celebrated to mark the victory of the Jewish Maccabees over the Greeks in 165 BCE, typically occurs in December
Hanukkiah – menorah; an eight branch candelabra for lighting candles in commemoration of the eight days *of Hanukkah*
Haredi – trembling before God; a term used to denote stringently Orthodox Jews; often used to describe both religious and political ways of being; sometimes used as a pejorative by non-Orthodox Jews
Hashem – the name; the word used to denote the divine among the stringently Orthodox so as to avoid speaking His name in other than legitimate circumstances, e.g., prayer
Hashgafah protis – individual divine providence
Hasidic – pious ones; a branch of Orthodox Judaism that developed in Eastern Europe in the nineteenth century distinguished by its emotional and spiritual fervor
Hechsher – seal of approval for food items prepared according to the laws of *kashrut*
Kaddish – prayer for the dead
Kashrut – kosher or proper or acceptable; Jewish dietary laws that delineate allowable or prohibited foodstuffs (pork, shellfish, mixing milk products with meat) as well as practices for their cultivation, production or preparation
Kasher – making kosher, practices that delineate proper food storage and preparation, including cooking and eating modes, utensils and surfaces; e.g., transforming previously non-kosher items into kosher ones
Kavannah – intention
Ketubah – wedding contract
Keva – fixed practice, such as prayer
Kiddush – blessing over the wine, part of the Sabbath ritual; also used to denote a light repast shared in the synagogue after the Shabbos morning service

Kiddush Hashem – sanctifying God's name, in extreme form, martyrdom; actualizing divine presence

Kiruv – outreach; efforts to inspire heightened practice and belief among lesser observant Jews

Kollel – a group of Orthodox rabbis and their wives and families who settle in a community to provide opportunities for Jewish study and to inspire Jewish life

L'chayim – to life, traditional Jewish toast

Mazel tov – congratulations

Mechitza – partition to separate men and women in the synagogue

Mezuzah – sacred Hebrew scroll placed on the doorpost of a Jewish home

Mikvah – pool of water used for ritual immersion of women monthly; also used for ritual immersion of men before the Sabbath and holidays; also used to ritually purify kitchen dishes and utensils

Minyan – ten men needed for Orthodox communal prayer

Mitzvah – a commandant of God; an obligation or good deed; plural *mitzvoth*

OTD – off the *derekh;* a contemporary term for stringently Orthodox Jews who leave their former strict belief and practice and assume a lesser standard of religious observance

Pesach – Passover, the springtime holiday that celebrates the passage from slavery to freedom of the Jewish people

Purim – a Jewish holiday celebrating the salvation of the Jewish people from destruction by the Persians

Rebbitzen – wife of a rabbi

Reform – a stream of Judaism, founded in the late nineteenth century in Germany as a response to Orthodoxy, with a later American form developing, reflecting more liberal interpretation of Jewish law including moderated Sabbath and *kashrut* observance and a more open, egalitarian approach to Jewish practice and belief; it is the first stream of Judaism to ordain women

Rosh Chodesh – celebration of a new month on the first day

Rosh Hashana – the head of the year; the Jewish New Year, celebrated in the fall

Reconstructionist – a stream of Judaism which sees Judaism as an evolving civilization, developing from the teachings of Rabbi Mordechai Kaplan in the early twentieth century; initially a branch of Conservative Judaism, recognized as a separate denomination in 1955

Seder – order; the traditional Passover meal

Sephardic – descendants of Jews from Spain; after their expulsion in 1492, they settled in North Africa, the Ottoman Empire, and the Americas

Siddur – prayer book

Shabbos, Shabbat – Sabbath, day of rest, observed from Friday sundown, until an hour after sundown on Saturday and the sighting of three stars

Sheitel – wig worn for religious reasons by married women to cover their hair

Shtibel – little house, small synagogue

Shalom bayit – family harmony; peace in the house

Sh'ma – a core Jewish prayer consisting of Deuteronomy 6:4, which is a declaration of faith in one God, recited three times a day

Shiva – period of mourning after a death

Shoah – the Holocaust

Shul – synagogue

Simcha Torah – holiday celebrating the ending, and the beginning anew, of the weekly reading of the Torah scroll

Sukkah – temporary outdoor dwelling erected during the holiday of *Sukkot* to commemorate the Israelites wandering in the desert; observant Jews eat their meals in the sukkah during the eight days of the holidays, some stringently observant Jews sleep there

Sukkot, Sukkos – festival of the ingathering, or harvest, celebrated in the fall to commemorate the Israelites wandering in the desert

Tisha B'Av – the ninth day of the Hebrew month of Av that commemorates the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem; it is a day of mourning marked by fasting

Talis – prayer shawl
Toivel – to ritually clean items for cooking or eating by immersion in a mikvah
Torah – sacred scroll containing the five books of Moses in Hebrew; the source of Jewish law
Torah true – a lifestyle predicated on the laws of the Torah; a term Orthodox Jews often use to label themselves
Yahrzeit – the anniversary of a death, commemorated often by lighting candle and recitation of Kaddish by the surviving family
Yeshiva – study center for Torah learning, traditionally for men
Yeshivish – of or pertaining to the world of the *yeshiva, often used to label the types of language and ways of behavior*
Yiddish – a colloquial language used by Jews in Central and Eastern Europe that derives from German but is written in Hebrew characters and incorporates some Hebrew words
Yiddishe mama – a traditional "Jewish mother"
Yom tov – holiday
Yom Kippur – Jewish day of atonement
Zionist – a supporter of Israel as Zion, the ancestral home of the Jewish people; a movement to advance the development of the Jewish state