

An Approach to
Introducing and Integrating
Judaism to Adults
in a Pluralistic Setting Using
Derekh Torah
as a Practical Model

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1. History, Description and Results.

History

Derekh Torah is a unique model of outreach and adult education. Described as an intensive Introduction to Judaism for adults, it was created at Ansche Chesed on Manhattan's Upper West Side in 1984. In 1987, two directors of the program, Rachel Cowan and Doris Ullendorff, approached the 92nd Street Y about taking over responsibility for its funding and administration. Cowan had been affiliated with the Y for many years as a leader, along with her husband, Paul, of the Workshops for Interfaith Couples¹, which had in turn partially inspired her to create the Derekh Torah program. Housed at the 92nd Street Y in New York since then, it has run successfully and consistently for almost 25 years. Within the first several years there, the 92nd Street Y expanded Derekh Torah to serve more people and deemphasized the pre-conversion component of the course to expand its reach. During that time, the Nathan Cummings Foundation provided a grant to replicate the program at approximately 15 other JCCs around the country in a modified version. The 92nd Street Y and the Jewish Community Centers of North America coordinated this effort. Since then, other JCCs have borrowed the name "Derekh Torah" on their own to launch their own introduction to Judaism classes; thus the name has been almost genericized in some Jewish education circles over time.

Derekh Torah as a program and as a phenomenon has been documented in Jewish communal research and literature. In *Jewish Education in JCCs: The Best Practices Project in Jewish Education*, the program is described as follows:

Two "turn-key" adult education programs [are typically found in JCCs]...

¹ These Workshops for Interfaith Couples are still offered at the 92nd Street Y.

As is mentioned above, across Jewish Community Centers the two most popular programs for intensive (and largely introductory) adult Jewish learning are the Melton Mini-School and Derekh Torah, both of which have had a distinctive, nearly exclusive association with Jewish Community Centers. In a very real sense, the Melton Mini School and Derekh Torah programs have been born, nurtured, and developed primarily within the precincts of JCCs in North America. Although the programs have certain similarities, some Centers offer both programs. In such places, Derekh Torah is usually seen as the more basic program; its graduates are steered toward the Melton Mini School as the next step in Jewish Study.

...As the program evolved, the fundamental orientation toward non-Jews or interfaith couples remained in place, but it grew to include any Jews simply seeking knowledge about Judaism. Typically, people who apply to the program are interviewed by the teacher in advance. In one locale that we visited, several students were new-comers to the community. DT seemed to be an access point into a social network for (mostly single) Jews. Central to the program is its social dimension. Classes meet in the homes of the instructors or students and are bracketed by informal meeting time.”²

Derekh Torah came about in the mid 1980's, soon after the “Commission on Maximizing Jewish Educational Effectiveness in the JCCs (COMJEE 1) sparked a significant across the board surge in investment in Jewish education and culture. ... Surveys of JCCS conducted in the 1980s and 1990s documented a large and growing amount of Jewish education programming across North America.”³

This (AJR) project describes the Derekh Torah program as run in New York and explores the salient elements of its approach and impact. While it is impossible to calculate the number of students served at these other JCCs in which the program has officially and unofficially been offered, several thousand students have completed the Derekh Torah program in New York. A long term impact study of the program was undertaken (by me) in 2006. The questionnaire and preliminary results are an appendix to this project.

Description⁴.

² Cohen, Stephen, Jewish Education in JCCs: The best Practices Project in Jewish Education 1996, pg. 28

³ Cohen, Stephen, Jewish Education in JCCs: The best Practices Project in Jewish Education 1996, pg. 2

⁴ *I have an intimate knowledge of the program from several perspectives and it seems fitting to write my senior project on a program that has had such an impact on me personally and professionally. I was first*

In many ways which will be detailed and outlined in the course of this work, Derekh Torah is a combination and embodiment of solid adult education, religious identity, and spiritual guidance theories; many timeless principles of Judaism and the historical and cultural reality of our times.

The 92nd Street Y launches a new Derekh Torah group every 3-4 weeks (13-15 annually). These groups run throughout the calendar year. Students are randomly gathered in groups of approximately 15-17 people for a 30-week course of study. This group will meet together with their (one) teacher for the full 30 weeks. Since there are no classes held on major Jewish or secular holidays, any one person's/couple's Derekh Torah experience is 8-11 months long from the time a new student/couple meets with me. Any given class has its own fixed night of the week and runs from 7.30 to 9.30pm.

Derekh Torah classes are only held at the 92nd Street Y for the first of the 30 sessions. After that, all classes meet in the homes of the students or, occasionally, in the home of the teacher. Students are advised of the requirements of the class at the intake meeting. These requirements include taking turns hosting (in Manhattan), bringing food for the snack break that occurs in the middle of each session and reading. Two Shabbat "field

introduced to Derekh Torah as a student in the program in 1990 as a new mother and thoroughly ignorant Jew. It ignited a passion for Judaism which ultimately launched my rabbinic path. My own Derekh Torah instructor, Rabbi Steven H. Moskowitz was a former director of the program itself and became a friend and mentor, ultimately writing a letter of recommendation for me to AJR. I began as a teacher in the program in 2001 and in that capacity lead 5 class groups of students through 30 weeks of study. I initially "auditioned" for the position in one of Rabbi Carol Levithan's ongoing classes, who ultimately became my project advisor. Rabbi Levithan taught in the program longer than any other Derekh Torah teacher since its inception. In 2003, I was hired to direct the program in addition to my teaching responsibilities. In my capacity as director, I hire, audition and supervise the teaching staff; approve the syllabus and curriculum; conduct all the intake interviews and provide counseling for the prospective students; act as a resource and guide to the students and teachers in ongoing classes. In addition to these functions, I also direct the marketing, administrative and community liaison functions necessary to sustain the program.

trips” are part of the program. One is on a Friday night; the other on a Shabbat morning. Each trip includes participation in a synagogue service followed by a group Shabbat meal. These are held at about 10 weeks and 20 weeks into the program, respectively.

The core course of study includes but is not limited to the Jewish Holidays and the Jewish Calendar, Life Cycle events, Ethics, God, the Sabbath, Jewish Prayer, the Dietary Laws, Written and Oral Torah, Mitzvot, modern and historical perspectives of the Jewish people, including the State of Israel, Zionism, the *Shoah*. Better defined as broad rather than deep, one topic is usually covered each evening.ⁱ A syllabus is provided the first week of class which contains a required book list. Other readings are customarily emailed or distributed over the duration of the class to supplement. Reading assignments are limited to about 30-35 pages a week. Hebrew language instruction is not part of the program; however key Hebrew/Yiddish terms and expressions are introduced, defined and expounded upon. Testing, grades and certificates of completion of any kind are not part of the program.

Derekh Torah is taught from a consciously cross-denominational or pluralistic perspective. That is to say that the goal of the program is to offer the broadest view of Judaism possible as expressed in America and, to a lesser extent, Israel. Judaism in other countries may be explored to a greater or lesser extent, depending upon the nationalities and interests of students in a class. Teachers hired for the program, regardless of denominational affiliation, must demonstrate the ability and enthusiasm to teach various approaches to Judaism in an objective and balanced manner; and from both philosophical

and practical perspectives. They must show maturity and the capacity for self-reflection. They often have had some counseling or chaplaincy training.

Derekh Torah consciously does not call itself a “conversion course” nor a class for “Interfaith Couples.” At no point in the program must a student have a commitment to conversion if they are not Jewish, nor does it require any commitment to any form of Jewish practice or belief for either a Jewish or non-Jewish member of a class. Similarly, the 92nd Street Y does not perform conversions. To reinforce the neutral stance of the program, the Derekh Torah teaching staff is not permitted to sponsor or officiate at students’ conversions or other life cycle events *during the duration* of the 30- week course (though no such restriction applies after the course). At the same time, when appropriate, the teachers and director frequently offer suggestions and guidance for rabbis and communities that may serve as a good fit in this pursuit. We often counsel students before and after they engage a sponsoring rabbi for conversion.

While not a conversion course per se, there is a consistent demographic breakdown in each group. More than half of the students of each group are non-Jews. Most of them are at least considering conversion to Judaism and almost all of them are in serious romantic relationships with Jews. Most in that situation take the class with their Jewish partner. About 10% of Derekh Torah students overall join the class as individuals who define themselves as single. Most of this 10% are non-Jews who are exploring conversion or who are already on that path.

Registration in Derekh Torah can not be done anonymously or impersonally. Part of the program is that each student attends an informal private intake meeting with Director of The program/Jewish Outreach before they are permitted to register. In the (frequent) case that the prospective student is part of a couple, when logistically possible, it is required that the meeting be with the couple, even if both members do not initially intend to participate in the class. About 30 minutes, but sometimes longer, this meeting acts as the beginning of the Derekh Torah journey. If a prospective student asks the purpose of the meeting, they are told it is mostly informational and administratively beneficial to ensure registration and the students' orientation to the class flows smoothly. At this meeting the details of the program are described. Its requirements are delineated and any questions are answered. While these are true and important reasons and goals, there are even more important, yet unstated reasons for the meeting, which serve important pedagogical functions of the program:

- To set the tone. It's personal and informal, friendly and non-intimidating. The lighting and set up of the office is intimate and non-institutional. The initial conversation usually centers around how the couple met, what they do, where they come from, how they were raised; it moves to why they are now exploring a program such as this, their dreams and goals for their future family.
- To explore the reality of their religious differences (for couples) and tell them flat out, yet gently what most already know or intuit: that these differences need to be confronted proactively and are best tackled with knowledge, communication and communal support.
- To open the door to conversations of identity and how that impacts their lives, families and future.

- To explain why it is important, almost essential, that they take the course together as a couple. To reinforce the commitment the program has to this principle, the couple's price is significantly less than double the single rate (\$600 for an individual; \$925 per couple.⁵) Scholarship and payment plans are also offered to help those with financial constraints.
- To explore concerns they have (or don't have) regarding religious differences.
- To answer questions they ask regarding the conversion process.
- To teach a little something—it gets woven in.

Results

Derekh Torah is not the first adult Jewish learning program to have profound impact:

*Rabbi Akiva was a shepherd forty years; he studied Torah forty years; and guided Israel forty years.*⁶

For many years the results of the Derekh Torah program were anecdotal and inferred from its word of mouth success and growth. The program did not and still does not statistically track the outcome and impact on the students. However, in 2006, I designed and implemented a survey aimed to measure the long term impact of the course on the Jewish lives and identities of the participants after Derekh Torah. It had an astoundingly high (for direct mail⁷) response rate of approximately 15% with several important findings. Details of the survey are part of the appendix of this project, but two findings showed:

⁵ 5768 (2007-2008) price.

⁶ Sif. Deut., #357. *We have excellent forbearers as examples of adult learners. Mostly to emphasize that even the great Rabbi Akiva acquired his learning as an adult; it also highlights that his adult learning is as valuable as those whose learning was acquired earlier. That learning influenced his generation and generations to follow.*

⁷ 3% is considered a very successful response to a direct mailing. This implies that the impact on students was powerful enough for them to take the time to share their response.

- 73% of respondents reported *beginning* Derekh Torah as part of an interfaith relationship and
- 84% of respondents who have completed Derekh Torah report now being in a committed relationship wherein *both* members of the couple identify as being Jewish.⁸

Statistically speaking, this is remarkable. While each individual respondent in the 73% (part of an interfaith couple initially) is not represented in the 84% (part of a Jewish couple eventually), it indicates two things. One is that after Derekh Torah, a significant number of interfaith couples are no longer interfaith. The other is that a substantial number of Derekh Torah students go on form life partnerships with other Jews. Additionally the survey showed that:

- 74% of all respondents say they practice Judaism; 55% of them report either a daily or weekly practice; 20% a monthly practice and 25% have a practice expressed yearly or of unspecified frequency.

This high percentage of personal Jewish practice is not inconsistent with other contemporary research. Such research finds direct connections between post-bar Mitzvah/adult Jewish education and greater subsequent Jewish involvement. Further, since Derekh Torah educates both the born Jew and the (potentially) new Jew in the process, the Derekh Torah survey is not inconsistent with literature already published on the subject of Jewish identity in conversionary and mixed marriages:

In contrast, just Jewish conversionary marrieds⁹ consistently score higher and sometimes much higher, than Just Jewish inmarrieds¹⁰ on all three measures of

⁸ This is a self identification, although we could infer a conversion in many cases, the question on the survey was not posed in this manner. Nor did the survey inquire whether the present "committed relationship" was with their Derekh Torah partner.

⁹ Couples containing 2 Jews, one of whom converted.

¹⁰ Couples containing 2 Jews, neither of whom converted.

religious affiliation and identification. Thus 49% of Just Jewish conversionary marrieds belong to synagogues, as compared with 34% of Just Jewish inmarrieds; 66% of the conversionaries attend synagogue at least a few times a year, but only 43% of the inmarrieds do. Again, 86% of Just Jewish conversionary marrieds light Hanukkah candles and 60% fast on Yom Kippur, as compared with 52 and 33 percent, respectively, of just Jewish inmarrieds.¹¹

Nor is the relationship between the Derekh Torah graduates' responses and their post Derekh Torah practices surprising, even in individuals whose secular education far overshadowed their Jewish education:

...the data indicate that, contrary to popular opinion, secular education does not necessarily alienate young people from Judaism. Instead the data show that Jewish connectedness is positively linked to Jewish education, not negatively linked to secular education...

Far from suggesting random patterns of assimilation, the 1990 NJPS figures reveal that strong Jewish connections are clustered in households in which members have received substantial levels of Jewish education.¹²

The survey empirically confirms the anecdotal evidence of the program's results that has led to its widespread reputation for excellence. With little or no advertising, a growing number of students who are usually in their 20's and 30's pay the sizeable fee plus books, their contributions toward food for snack and Shabbat experiences. This is a sizeable investment in money; 8-10 months is a significant time commitment. Although the web is a growing factor, the vast majority of students hear about Derekh Torah through word of mouth. They hear about it from friends and colleagues who have participated. Even more frequently, students are referred by rabbis and other professionals in Jewish institutions who either suggest or specifically require it for those exploring or formally entering conversion processes to fulfill their educational requirements. Some rabbis will

¹¹ Fishman, Sylvia Barack, *Jewish Identity in Conversionary and Mixed Marriages* (with Peter Medding), pg. 22

¹² Fishman, Sylvia Barack, *Jewish Education and Jewish Identity among Contemporary Jews: Suggestions from Current Research*.

agree to perform an interfaith marriage only on condition the couple complete the course. Students from as far away as South America, Europe and Australia have been referred by their rabbis at home. Rabbis from every denomination refer students to the program.¹³ Students in the program (born Jews and *gerim*-converts or Jews by choice) have found their Jewish homes in every denomination.

¹³ It is appropriate to delineate denominational differences here. There have been many *Derekh Torah* students who have converted with Orthodox Rabbis without additional formal education. However this is not the norm. Most students ultimately choose liberal rabbis (i.e. Conservative, Reform, Reconstructionist, Non-denominational); most Orthodox rabbis do not see *Derekh Torah* as an appropriate conversion course. However, while still a substantial minority, more Orthodox rabbis will refer to *Derekh Torah* outside of the conversion equation.

2. The Purpose of the Program: What Needs and Who Does the Program

Serve?

Albert Einstein once said that he was sorry to be born a Jew because he was thus denied the opportunity and personal satisfaction of independently choosing Judaism.¹

Goals, Philosophy and Conditions of the program

R. Abba stated in the name of Samuel: For three years there was a dispute between Beit Shammai and Beit Hillel, the former asserting, 'The halakha is in agreement with our views' and the latter contending, 'The halakha is in agreement with our views'. Then a bat kol issued announcing, '[The utterances of] both are the words of the living God, but the halakha is in agreement with the rulings of Beth Hillel'. Since, however, both are the words of the living God, what was it that entitled Beit Hillel to have the halakha fixed in agreement with their rulings? Because they were kindly and modest, they studied their own rulings and those of Beit Shammai, and were even so [humble] as to mention the actions of Beit Shammai before theirs...

This teaches you that him who humbles himself, the Holy One, blessed be He, raises up, and him who exalts himself, the Holy One, blessed be He, humbles; from him who seeks greatness, greatness flees, but him who flees from greatness, greatness follows; he who forces time is forced back by time but he who yields to time finds time standing at his side.²

The purpose of the Derekh Torah program is to give group of adult learners the broadest possible introduction to Judaism. The program has no pre-conceived goals for the students other than enabling them to make educated and informed choices about their identity and affiliation. The hope is that by the end of 30 weeks, students will have an accurate sense of where they will fit best on the Jewish philosophical, cultural, communal, halakhic and denominational spectrums; where they fit in Judaism, and where it fits in them. The goal of the program is to enable and empower; support and encourage students in their next steps into the Jewish community and their Jewish life journeys

¹ (As quoted by) Bellin, David, Choosing Judaism: An Opportunity for Everyone, Jewish Outreach Institute, pg. 1

² Talmud Bavli, Eruvin 13b

however and if they are drawn. In that way Derekh Torah is not a comparative religion class which looks dispassionately and objectively at the subject from a scholarly perspective and only from the “neck up.”

While everyone in the class, Jewish or not, is looking at Judaism somehow fitting into their future, most are not really sure how or what that means. They may or may not be exploring the conversion option (for non-Jews.) Similarly, they may or may not be interested in synagogue/denominational affiliation or adopting any kind of Jewish practice and/or beliefs.

The Student Body

The consistent diverse make-up of Derekh Torah groups matches the profile and perspective of an increasing number of Jewish Americans and communities. Therefore, defining the needs of the program is dependent upon identifying the students: how they are similar and different; where they come from religiously and the circumstances in their lives that bring them to exploring this topic at this time. The breadth and pluralistic perspective of the program is essential to serve the needs of the students in Derekh Torah and explains why the program serves an essential function integrating students into today's Jewish America.

On the surface, most Derekh Torah students are very similar. The vast majority are in their 20's and 30's and college educated. Most are couples. Of a group of 15-17 students, 6-8 couples will likely populate the class. No more than two or three individuals are likely to be single, Jewish or (usually) not. They live in Manhattan or in the outer boroughs and counties surrounding New York City and work in Manhattan. Of the

couples, one is usually Jewish³ and the other is not, but not always. Several groups a year see couples with two Jews (more frequently) or two non-Jews⁴ (less frequently). Most couples are either exploring marriage/partnership, engaged or are recently married. This is and has been the consistent demographic profile throughout the almost 25 years of Derekh Torah. This is the case although the program is neither advertised as such nor specifically structured this way. On the whole, they are a group at the stage of life where they have completed all or most of their formal education, and are newly established in the “real” world of work. Usually at the age many are considering marriage or a committed relationship, they are now beginning to question what will define their adult homes and values, community and life patterns. In many ways they are in transitional places in their lives. This is often the first time in their adult lives that they are formally exploring the relevance and expression of religion and identity.

The Students’ Religious/Spiritual Stage of Life

This means that most students encounter Derekh Torah at a key stage of life; one wherein they are considering life choices that will give form to their religious identity and futures. It is at a key nexus point between the home of their parents and the home they will establish for themselves and their future family. Therefore it is essential that Derekh

³ *Defining who is a Jew is a question beyond the scope of this paper, though certainly not beyond the scope of discussion within a Derekh Torah class. For purposes of this study, I refer to people who are “Jewish” as people who are either halakhically Jewish (according to Conservative or Orthodox standards) OR who both self describe themselves as Jewish AND do not indicate or foresee any question or issue with their Jewish identity. Therefore, I would describe someone with Jewish patrilineal descent looking for halakhic acceptance in a halakhic community as not technically Jewish. Conversely, I might describe someone Jewish through patrilineal descent raised in, informed by and comfortable with the Reform Movement as being “technically Jewish.” At the same time, I would expect that the latter would be clear as to his/her own personal status outside the Reform world by the end of their Derekh Torah Journey if they were not already.*

⁴ *Usually two non-Jews in a Derekh Torah class would be a couple in which one member is converting to Judaism. Two Jews could be one of several circumstances. One would where there is a self-described vast difference between the individuals’ backgrounds and practices of Judaism. Another is that one or both feel their Jewish education was lacking or spotty. All couples are encouraged to participate together.*

Torah classes are conducted as a mature and complex exploration of the topic. They seek to explore and accept the tensions and embrace the paradoxes that fill Jewish tradition in the same way that it fills adult life. This transition time of early adulthood is seen as having both educational and religious significance:

The late teens and early twenties witness a profound transformation in our primary mode of responding to the world. (Referring to Erikson's stages of educational development- stage 5/ acquiring a sense of identity :) During this pivotal period in the life cycle, we shift from the status of being essentially dependent upon adults to becoming adults ourselves..." "This comes with autonomy and self determination as well as the responsibilities that come with them. Questions as Who am I? Who should I become? And what do I believe in? [are asked] and no longer have simple answers. ...What is more, the moral and religious beliefs formerly acquired secondhand in a rather unquestioning way can now be reexamined from other points of view. Individuals begin to ask themselves whether social conditioning is alone responsible for their religious beliefs.⁵

This time of life has been similarly seen as pivotal in the Jewish textual tradition:

"Train a lad in the way he should go" (Proverbs 22:6). R. Judah and R. Nehemiah differed. One said: "Lad" means from the age of sixteen to twenty-two. The other said: From the age of eighteen to twenty-four.⁶

The textual tradition also recognizes that being introduced to and integrating Judaism/Torah in adulthood is a more complex process than in childhood:

Elisha ben Abuyah used to say: 'When a man learns Torah while young, the words of Torah are absorbed into his very blood and issue from his mouth in explicit form. But when a man learns Torah in his old age, the words of Torah are not absorbed into his blood and do not issue from his mouth in explicit form.' Hence the proverb: 'If you did not long for them in your youth, how do you expect to attain them in your old age?'

⁵ Fuller, Robert C., Religion and the Life Cycle, pgs 34-35

⁶ Talmud Bavli, Kiddushin 30a. *This text highlights that one can not accurately pinpoint the best time in life to offer lasting religious guidance. It teaches not only that those moments vary with each individual, but that ones religious identity and expression is neither fixed in childhood nor static over a lifetime. Further, people marry and accept the full responsibilities of adulthood later than in Talmudic times.*

*He also used to say: 'When a man learns Torah in his youth, what may he be compared to? To ink written on a clean sheet. When a man learns in his old age? To ink written on a sheet from which the original writing has been erased.'*⁷

Whether or not they are new to Judaism, most students are revisiting ideas and terminology frequently left behind in Middle School. Fuller further points out that:

The irony here is that of all the aspects of our personalities, our religious attitudes are likely to be the least mature."... "Thought to be proper subject matter of churches [synagogues] and not of public education, it's confined to catechism classes and Sunday schools, which ordinarily end by the time persons reach their early teens."⁸

This is all the more so in non-Orthodox Jewish America, that overwhelmingly draws a vast divide between religious and general education today. Politically, the non-Orthodox tend to support a strong separation between "church and state," if for no other reason than to differentiate themselves culturally from the "religious right." Most attribute comparatively little value to Jewish education compared to their secular education. To add further to the irony to which Fuller refers above, despite encouragement and opportunities within the Jewish educational establishment, most adherents of liberal Judaism have functionally prevented a maturation of faith, religiosity and religious identity by ending their (children's) Jewish education at Bar/Bat Mitzvah. Though many Jewish Derekh Torah students may have a strong foundational Jewish identity, many feel they are unable to maturely or eloquently justify or describe how to define that identity or upon what it is based. Fuller concludes that:

⁷ Avot d'Rabbi Natan 24; Avot 4.20. *Different from absorbing Torah and Judaism as a child, those learning as adults are integrating the tradition into a life of lessons already taught. It requires a more complex exploration and opportunities to ask and answer why? Why should this be part of my life? This life that already has other valid examples of how to live.*

⁸ ibid (Fuller) pg 46

...If religion is to provide the foundations for a mature identity, it must impart a mature ideological direction for the continuing development of personality⁹.

From a Jewish perspective, the attention that the liberal Jewish community devotes to Jewish education up to age 13 is counter to the traditional commitment to lifelong Jewish study. Most non-traditional American Jews would be shocked to learn:

*If he (the father) wants to study Torah and he has a son (who needs) to study Torah, he (the father) takes precedence before the son...*¹⁰

The Students' Religious/Spiritual Stage of Life in a Jewish Cultural and Historical Context.

This phenomenon of ending religious education prematurely does not exist in a Jewish cultural bubble. Adult religious growth has been stunted by several important dynamics of the 20th century. There is a considerable amount of largely unexamined Jewish psychological and spiritual residue from the now several generations of American Jews who emphasized assimilation and success in the American secular culture. They followed the lead of the Enlightenment which stressed the predominantly rational over the emotional or mystical connections within Judaism, internalized cultural anti-Semitism, and are scarred by the emotional fallout from the *Shoah*. This has produced a generation of many Jews with a distorted relationship and misunderstanding of Judaism and religion itself. This is certainly the case with some Jewish Derekh Torah students and, to a lesser extent those from other traditions as well. While most Derekh Torah students express a strong connection to their Jewish identity and the desire to pass that on

⁹ ibid (Fuller) pg. 46

¹⁰ Rambam, Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Talmud Torah 1:4. *This text presumes a financial tension is behind the need to decide precedence; both are required to study. The father takes precedence in that he is able to teach his son.)*

in some way, their connection is often couched in disclaimers and discomfort. The sources of discomfort are complex and many and some will be explored below. Nonetheless, they are exploring a 30-week term of study to introduce their partner to the tradition and perhaps clarify it for themselves.

The program supports Jewish growth and understanding at this time in the lives of the students and at this time in Jewish history. The education guides each student to define (or redefine) Judaism in the context of their relationships, (extended and future) family, friendship groups, community, peoplehood and God. This approach is consistent with what Bethamie Horowitz defines as the Jewish question of the era. She notes that the question has shifted from the last generation from "How Jewish are American Jews?" to "How are American Jews Jewish?" in this generation. She compares the experience of growing up in a community with a concentration of first and second generation Jewish Americans with growing up in a more fully assimilated community as a:

Move from ethnicity from living in neighborhoods to symbolic ethnicity based on actual interaction-- more episodic and potentially voluntary...with a consensus emerging that the religious aspect of Judaism provides a more enduring framework for Jewish identity than old-style ethnicity.

The conclusion here is that simply living among a concentration of Jews does not adequately convey a complete or enduring connection to or understanding of Judaism compared to an exposure that includes a Jewish religious framework. She notes that:

Because parents and children now have similar levels of class attainment in the more recent generations than previous, poor immigrant generations, the inducement of each subsequent generation of American Jews to shed the practices of its parents has diminished.

This provides a cultural opening for young adults to freely explore a heritage they sense is only a shadow of its former self. The community has shifted dramatically in the post WWII era in that young Jews are likely to relate through a Jewish religious framework. The community has changed; people feel disconnected and no longer have a link to Jewish ethnicity in the same way. So while Derekh Torah can not provide the equivalent of growing up in a nurturing community in which Judaism and Jewish identity is fully integrated with daily life, it can provide an education substantive enough to offer understanding and tools for Jews to begin, in Horowitz's term, to interact Jewishly. It can provide an antidote to childhood Jewish education experiences found lacking or an ambivalent Jewish upbringing. Horowitz further quotes Kellman (1961) who:

...argues that an individual's specific connection to being Jewish depends on the extent to which a person internalizes and integrates elements of his/her Jewish heritage or background into the core of his/her personal identity. In contrast to a "vicarious" Jewish identity, which emerges from a person's compliance with the demands of the immediate context, or a "conferred" Jewish identity, which emerges from a person's identification with other people, an "authentic" Jewish identity is "one composed in large part of internalized elements" which the individual has incorporated over the years. The authentic identity is one that is enduring across changing contexts and relationships, whereas the conferred and vicarious identities are less stable.¹¹

Therefore, exploring and expressing Judaism does not have the dangerous and disempowering connotations it once had, even in this country. This reasoning may similarly contribute to the Ba'al Teshuvah phenomenon to which the Derekh Torah experience will be compared later. Part of Derekh Torah is framing Judaism as a normal, healthy, safe, wise and beautiful choice for living in today's world.

¹¹ Horowitz, Bethamie in Contemporary Jewry

Expecting, Respecting, Embracing and Embodying the Diversity of Backgrounds, Goals and Motivations in a Derekh Torah Group.

While the general age and socioeconomic background of every Derekh Torah group is roughly consistent, the religious background and goals of individual students in every Derekh Torah group are often completely different. At no point in the program does the program require a commitment to conversion for non-Jews; nor does it require a commitment to any form of Jewish practice (or belief) for either Jews or non-Jews. This policy enables two important elements of the program. One is that it makes Derekh Torah a free exploration of the topic; there are no personal religious or denominational “strings” attached. The other is that it creates a comfortable learning environment respectful of and consistent with the rich plurality of goals, religious identities and motivations of the people in the course. It is also consistent with good adult educational practices:

It’s real when people “choose to register for this program because it treats them as something other than a professional, a worker or a parent.” And designed to “respect the intellect” of the individual so that there is an “opportunity to have fun with intellectual affairs.”¹²

At the same time it is important and customary to concurrently acknowledge and value and even draw upon the education and experience in the group. This is consistent with the need for:

Recognition of... the differences between the extensive general backgrounds brought to the class by the learners as compared to their limited knowledge of Judaism.¹³

¹² Flexner, Paul Arthur, (PhD dissertation., Teachers College, Columbia University), Facilitating Adult Jewish Learning (Quoting the Melton Teacher guide), pg 137

¹³ ibid (Flexner), pg. 142

This is all more important in a Derekh Torah setting. Jews are among the secularly best educated demographic group in the country and their life partners tend to fall into the same category. Jewishly educated or not, most Jews are proud of an identity that they understand values education and being generally knowledgeable and educated. As a whole, Jews feel very uncomfortable being ignorant. Derekh Torah classes must never make any student, Jew or non-Jew feel uncomfortable in their learning or insult the students' intelligence. Rather, the goal is to create a class environment that feels "safe" to not know and to ask questions. It strives to connect the students' usually considerable knowledge in other areas to the subject matter in every way possible. Frequently just introducing the existence of this phenomenon in class in a class brings a smile of recognition and is enough to lower resistance:

It is important for born Jews to admit their own lack of knowledge about Judaism if they have that lack. Once of my uncles was reluctant to enter a synagogue. He had a doctoral degree from Columbia, had studied philosophy at Harvard, and was in all respects very intelligent. The brilliance he could display in the world, however, contrasted badly with his ignorance in synagogue which deeply embarrassed him and so he understandably chose to avoid feeling embarrassed simply by not going to Jewish religious events.¹⁴

On the other side of the same educational page, Bethamy Horowitz describes one Jew who:

Got into his Jewishness as a musician through Klezmer: "The issue of competence and empowerment [was essential to his finding his way]. His was music"¹⁵

Therefore Derekh Torah supports learning a Judaism that is consistent with what psychologist Gordon Allport specifies as the development of a:

¹⁴ Epstein, Lawrence J, Conversion to Judaism: A teaching Guide

¹⁵ Bethamy Horowitz, in Contemporary Jewry, "Reframing the Study of Contemporary American Jewish Identity, Connections and Journeys: Shifting Identities among American Jews," Vol. 23 pgs 14-34

...mature and productive personality... [reinforcing] ...the attributes of a religious faith capable of guiding individuals to the highest levels of personal development. A mature religious faith, he concluded, must be 1. well-differentiated (reason plays a strong role, not all or nothing based on blind acceptance, 2. dynamic (an impassioned approach to life, between passivity and activity, 3. productive of a consistent morality, (that requires us to “go beyond the perspective of our own limited personality”, 4. both comprehensive and integral and 5. heuristic. (“That is, it views religion not as a closed system of doctrines but as a journey, a quest.) ...[These] criteria of religious maturity are helpful in that they draw attention to the fact that religion needs to be assessed according to his ability to foster a psychologically strong identity, at least ideologically...¹⁶

In its not requiring any commitment of belief, practice or conversion from the students,

Derekh Torah also acknowledges that:

Adult learning [is] based upon genuineness, trust, respect and believability which are the four categories for the indicators of authenticity/credibility....the learner as “trusted with the responsibility of deciding the outcome of his/her own learning experience.”¹⁷

It is a very “New York” group in its sophisticated heterogeneity. Derekh Torah students come from every walk of life. While interfaith couples are the norm and in the majority of every class, it is also not uncommon for classes to include people of every race, sexual orientation, nationality (including Israelis), cultures and religious traditions. This diverse group reflects the Jewish community that the class will learn about and embody.

A figurative mirror is held up during the first class when the tone for each group is introduced. Every group’s first session begins with each individual’s story and journey to the class, making both the group’s diversity and commonalities evident. Underscoring the importance of starting with the learner rather than with Judaism, McKenzie (1986) supports this practice with her three approaches to adult learning:

¹⁶ ibid Fuller, referring to the work of psychologist Gordon Allport, pg. 47

¹⁷ Flexner, Paul Arthur, (PhD dissertation., Teachers College, Columbia University), *Facilitating Adult Jewish Learning* (Quoting the Melton Teacher guide), pg 137

1. The learners need to be able to explore their own heritage.
2. They need to relate this heritage to their own life experiences.
3. The learners need to be able to question the religious tradition critically...¹⁸

This self-introduction is an essential tool for the teacher to get to know his/her students' backgrounds. This enables to the instructor to begin thinking about tailoring the class to their needs:

Derekh Torah [instructors provides students with a]...curriculum [in the form of] a set of topics that are covered in weekly meetings over an academic year. The instructor has considerable latitude in adapting the curriculum to his or her own interests or abilities, as well as to the interests of the class....Like Derekh Torah, Melton Mini School relies on good teachers for its success....Both emphasize a social community-building approach, and both are intent upon utilizing dynamic teachers who are nonjudgmental, engaging, enthusiastic, and open.¹⁹

That is, while the teacher will begin the class with a clear idea (in the form of a concrete syllabus) of the range of material and perspectives (s)he will want to cover, this will become individualized for the class as their needs and interests crystallize. This is also consistent with good teaching, community building and negotiation strategy:

All planners know that they are not free agents able to directly mold the purposes, content and format of a program to satisfy their own interests. Rather, planning is always conducted within a complex set of personal organizational and social relationship among people who may have similar, different, or conflicting interests. Thus, program planners' responsibility—and the essential problem of their practice—centers on how to negotiate the interest of these people to construct a program.²⁰

It is typical in Derekh Torah that each student's level of knowledge and engagement in their religious tradition of origin varies widely as well. Roughly shaped like a "bell curve," the typical range in any given class can be people with very little religious connection with any tradition to people with a tremendous amount of exposure and

¹⁸ Flexner dissertation: Facilitating Adult Jewish Learning

¹⁹ Jewish Education in JCCs: The best practices in Jewish Education Project, pgs. 28-29

²⁰ Cervero, Ronald M., (with M. Wilson) What Really Matters in Adult Education Program Planning: Lessons in Negotiating Power and Interests, pg. 63

personal history with Judaism or other traditions. While most Jews in Derekh Torah classes follow the national trend of ending formal religious education and communal involvement at age 13, this is not always the case. Jewish Derekh Torah students have included rabbinic students, children of rabbis and yeshiva educated Israelis and Americans.²¹ We see Jews who have woven in and out of different Jewish denominations, institutions and definitions their entire lives. Derekh Torah Jews can also come with little or no Jewish education or even having been raised in non-Jewish families and traditions. Regardless of education and exposure, the nature of the relationship of Jews to their Judaism is equally varied. It can be affectionate or cool, affected by a number of things including Israel, culture, God, family, synagogue, camp, grandparents and/or the Shoah. The program assumes no prior education or knowledge of the subject; it is an introductory level class geared for a sophisticated student body.

Of the non-Jews in the group, some come from places in the world or the country where they never encountered Jews and only read about Judaism in books and newspapers; perhaps they fell in love with the first Jew they ever met. Others grew up with Jews as family members, close friends or in or locales (such as the New York Metropolitan area) where Jews, Jewish symbols and cultural vocabulary were commonplace. Still others express being drawn to or affected by Jewish people and tradition over time.

Whether single or part of a couple, some are very sure about their decision to convert to Judaism and have already established relationships with rabbis for that purpose. Others

²¹ *People fitting this descriptions have taken the class with their non-Jewish significant others.*

are at the exploration stage and are considering or are open to conversion but feel the need more information and/or time to make such a decision.

Classes can also include couples in which the non-Jewish member is committed to or comfortable with his/her current religion (or non-religion). At this point in their relationship, these students have generally experienced enough Jewish family and expressions of identity to realize they need to understand Judaism better for a more integrated and comfortable relationship with their beloved's tradition and family and in such settings. While not considering Judaism for themselves, they recognize that if their relationship is a lifetime commitment, Judaism will play at least some role in their lives together. Rarely does a single individual with no interest in Judaism for his/herself inquire about Derekh Torah. For these people or committed non-Jewish partners of students on a Jewish path, I make it clear Derekh Torah is not a "comparative religion" class, juxtaposing or defending Judaism against other religions. It is un-selfconsciously Jewish. If the circumstances seem likely to disrupt the dynamics of the class, potential students are rarely, but occasionally counseled to wait or reconsider.

Derekh Torah as part of a couple

*Hence a man leaves his father and mother and clings to his wife, so that they become one flesh.*²²

Whether a member of a couple is converting or not, embarking on the Derekh Torah journey as a couple will explore three different relationships to Judaism. There will be two individual personal Judaisms-- one for each member of the couple-- and one that that

²² Bereshit 2.24

will be the shared expression of the home they will build. While in some ways distinct; this will be no different from many other areas that couples negotiate during a life together that balance individuality and solidarity. Derekh Torah offers an education that can only help to clarify what is important to each member of the couple. With it they can articulate to one another what will be Jewishly important to sustain in their home. As in the merging of any two lives, the negotiated outcome will reflect the values and personalities of both as underscored by this text:

*A man's marriage partner is from the Holy One. At times, a man is guided to his spouse's home; at other times, the spouse is guided to the man's home.*²³

Derekh Torah's teaching and honoring Judaism's diversity supports the multiplicity of choices couples can make. It can also function to alleviate potential stress in a relationship; learning about and experiencing the diversity within the group lessens the impact of any forces suggesting there is only one legitimate way or that homogeneity is either the norm or ideal as underscored by this text:

*Resh Lakish said: An unusually tall man should not marry an unusually tall woman, lest their offspring turn out to be as tall as a mast. A dwarf should not marry a dwarf, lest their offspring turn out to be finger-sized. A man whose complexion is abnormally white should not marry a woman whose complexion is abnormally white, lest their offspring turn out to be albino. A man whose complexion is abnormally dark should not marry a woman whose complexion is abnormally dark, lest their offspring turn out to be pitch-black.*²⁴

²³ Bereshit Rabba 68:3. The Torah also gives us examples of this in narratives of our matriarchs' and patriarchs' relationships. Jacob certainly adapted to Rachel and Leah's family customs during the years in Lavan's house. Rebecca adapted to Isaac's family while retaining a very strong personal identity and influence in their home. Abraham and Sarah can be seen as the paradigm for taking the journey together, adapting their relationship to one another, to God, in their names, customs and traditions as circumstances and life changed and evolved, while staying committed to one another.

²⁴ Talmud Bavli, Bechorot 45b. Lest one would think that this text is meant to be taken literally, it teaches that diversity in all areas of life, personality, values and backgrounds are desirable and even necessary in the ideal relationship. The necessity of negotiation within such a relationship is certainly implied.

While the tradition certainly imposes limits to diversity in marriage, specifically, (often) intermarriage, it is important to see this text as a counterbalance to an unrealistic ideal of complete homogeneity within couples and Jewish homes.

Many non-Jews entering Derekh Torah are in a partnership wherein they have committed to raising Jewish children. Many of those are also considering conversion but not all.

Some have an idea of what that may mean; most don't. One of the points emphasized in the initial intake meeting is that no one can be a spectator or a bystander in the religious or spiritual upbringing of their children. Parents need to know in what practices and principles they can participate, model and teach with integrity and enthusiasm, and where they need to bow out and have their partner take the lead. Of course, this is the case regardless of the Jewish identity of a parent, which is one of the reasons couples are strongly encouraged to participate in the program together.

Often this issue and this truth is what initiates students' Derekh Torah journey. The Jew, regardless of his or her level of ambivalence or affection toward Judaism, almost always expresses a commitment to transmitting Judaism to the next generation. Some can describe what they want to transmit to their children (and their partners) eloquently. Less so for many others, who understand that both they and their partner need a greater understanding and appreciation of the tradition for that to happen. Sometimes when Jews realize they can only define their Judaism by what it is not or what they have rejected, it makes them realize they need this class as much as their non-Jewish partners, even while remaining ambivalent. This is all the more true when they realize that they may be the one responsible for that transmission.

While most Derekh Torah students want to and agree about raising Jewish children, this too is neither always the case nor a requirement to participate in the class. Some are contemplating “exposing” their (usually) future children to both parents’ religions. Some couples take Derekh Torah while contemplating raising children in two religions. While this would be respected as an option in Derekh Torah, it would not be recommended.

While having a couple with this intention can be potentially challenging to a class (and family) dynamic, learning about Judaism would be an essential element for that couple in determining how to do that with integrity to both traditions. Limited only to one or two sessions which might include Bar Mitzvah or the “December dilemma,” the instructor would potentially introduce readings, research and counter views. Doing this heavily handedly would neither be appropriate or necessary. I’ve found the strongly expressed opinions and experiences of fellow class members offered in class discussions can be a potent impetus for couples in this category to rethinking their position.

Even for the non-Jewish partner of the most educated or practicing Jew, it is not just a class for the non-Jew or “less Jewish” to take to “catch up.” Similarly, the more educated Jew is not there for a factual review. While he/she will undoubtedly have been exposed to much of the material, two other factors are important. One is that being a pluralistic program, there are likely perspectives and practices that will be new to him/her. Second and more important for their relationship, Derekh Torah will spur and help clarify the many important discussions surrounding Jewish values and practices that couples must have over the course of their relationship to envision their family’s religious future.

A Judaism that accommodates shifts over time

Like many Derekh Torah students, our tradition records sages displaying tremendous shifts in their world outlook after studying Torah:

One day R. Yohanan was bathing in the Jordan when Resh Lakish saw him and jumped into the Jordan after him. R. Yohanan said to him, "Your strength should be devoted to Torah." Resh Lakish replied, "Your beauty should be devoted to women." R. Yohanan: "If you repent, I will let you wed my sister, who is more beautiful than I." He undertook to repent, but when he tried to jump back and collect his gear, he could not do so. Subsequently R. Yohanan had him read Scripture and study Mishnah, and he became a great man²⁵.

Derekh Torah describes and models a Jewish life that is frequently foreign to how students are living. While it might be familiar to some of the Jews from their childhood, in many cases it is not. At the same time, it is not uncommon that students have drifted from their Jewish communities and practices. Jews and non-Jews alike observe shifts in the religious lives and affiliations from their own families of origin. Rather than presenting a disconnected or disjointed relationship to religion as shameful or as an aberration, it presents a tradition that can and often does go through multiple incarnations and variations over a lifetime. Supporting that Bethamy Horowitz writes:

A person's Jewishness can wax, wane, and change in emphasis. It is very responsive to social relationships, historical experiences and personal events. It is worth noting how the concept journey differs from the more typical Jewish self image of the "Wandering Jew."²⁶

Our tradition also points out that different stages of life call for different relationships; to study, to the tradition and to one's relationship to the community:

²⁵ Talmud Bavli, Bava Metzia 84a. *These two texts illustrate the spiritual journey of one of our sages, Resh Lakish. It also illustrates that for Resh Lakish, the draw toward Torah was at least partially bound up with his being drawn into a relationship with a spouse, a family and a people. This is certainly the case with people being drawn toward and being drawn back to Judaism today.*

²⁶ Bethamy Horowitz, in *Contemporary Jewry, Reframing the Study of Contemporary American Jewish Identity, Connections and Journeys: Shifting Identities among American Jews*, Vol. 23 pgs 14-34

He used to say five years (is the age) for (the study) of scripture, ten- for (the study of) Mishnah, thirteen for (becoming subject to) commandments, fifteen- for (the study of) Talmud, eighteen- for the (bridal) canopy, twenty- for pursuing [a livelihood], thirty for (full) strength, forty- for understanding, fifty- for the (ability to give) counsel, sixty- for mature age, seventy- for a hoary head, eighty (is a sign of superadded) strength, ninety (is the age) for (a) bending (figure), at one hundred, one is as one that is dead, having passed and ceased from the world.²⁷

Acknowledging these shifts as natural and acceptable also helps to calm the insecurities and fears of the potential Jews by choice in the class by pointing out that growing up Jewish or religious is not a pre-requisite for a fulfilling Jewish life as an adult. For those in couples, it recognizes that their legitimate interest in Judaism, while potentially spurred, even invited by their partner, is not dependent upon their partner.

Derekh Torah students frequently form relationships within the group and start to experiment among themselves with Jewish life during the course. This happens naturally and underscores the lesson of an evolving religious life. It also serves to reinforce the lesson that they will need to create opportunities to be around like minded and valued friends over time and in the future. At the same time most Derekh Torah students are not quite anticipating the impact the class will have on them. Somewhere around week 20, when class has really hit a comfortable stride and is feeling to many students like it is flying by, the instructor gently plants an important seed for the future that underscores this message. Reminding the class that they are moving into the end of the course, (s)he may say something like “We’ve really grown as a group and as a learning community here, but do you realize we only have about 10 classes left? If this is speaking to you I’m wondering if you have thought about where you might go from here-- to either continue your learning or to maintain or develop a community and circle of friends with whom to

²⁷ Mishnah Avot 5:23

learn and celebrate--Shabbat, for example. It's very hard, maybe even impossible to do this on your own and in many respects we all have to create our own Jewish community and circle of friends."

It's (likely) not the Judaism you thought you were walking away from.

Jews are rarely neutral about their heritage. Often there is pain and animosity just below the surface:

Greater is the hatred the ammei ha-aretz feel for a disciple of the wise than the hatred heathens feel for Israel. Their women hate even more fiercely than the man. It is further taught: He who has studied Torah and then given up his study hates disciples of the wise even more fiercely than all the foregoing.

*We have been taught that R. Akiva declared, 'When I was an am ha-aretz, I used to say: Would that I had a disciple of the wise before me, so I could bite him as an ass bites.' His disciples said to him, 'Master, you mean as a dog bites.' 'No,' he replied. 'When the ass bites, he breaks bones; when the dog bites, he does not break bones.'*²⁸

This text starkly illustrates that hostility faced by Rabbis as representatives of the Jewish tradition is not a new phenomenon. Rabbi Akiva of this text is one of our paradigmatic adult learners and integrators of Judaism. Said in his name, it suggests that part of a good integration into Judaism includes reflection of the journey itself; coming to terms with past attitudes and their experiential, emotional and rational sources.

*Rabban Simeon ben Gamliel said: When a man learns Torah while young, he is like a young man who has married a virgin--she is right for him and he is right for her; she feels passion for him and he feels passion for her. But when a man of advanced years studies Torah, whom may he be compared to? To a man of advanced years who has married a virgin--she may be right for him, but he is not right for her; she may feel passion for him, but he shies away from her.*²⁹

²⁸ Talmud Bavli, Pesachim 49b

²⁹ Avot d'Rabbi Natan 23

This text illustrates the complicated tension in the process of integrating a different relationship with one's religion. "This "man of advanced years" is still bound in relationship to his "virgin" wife. At the same time he has to work (perhaps throughout his entire life) in a different way from the "man who learns Torah while young" to find his own integrity of expression and peace with the relationship.

This isn't easy and doesn't always work. Many people arrive to Derekh Torah committed to Judaism--- quite content to either reject the Judaism of their youth or to embrace an ambivalent, conflicted or ill-informed version they hold.

I've interviewed enough interfaith couples to believe that for some Jews, their falling in love with a non-Jew is not just an accident of circumstance. For some particularly ambivalent Jews, their choice of partners and their journeys are both a symptom and part of a subconscious drive to heal their aches and pains of growing up Jewish. Often their Derekh Torah learning functions in this way even though most Jews in the program would be (outwardly, initially) happy to have their partners take the class alone. The wounds are many: irrelevant or missing Jewish educations of youth; perceived hypocrisy in the community or family; answers that couldn't ring true; feelings of inadequacy compared to the more religious; spiritual emptiness; cultural alienation. Epstein's example³⁰ of the brilliant man whose embarrassment over his Jewish ignorance led him to avoid all things Jewish illustrates the point that we need to deal with the phenomenon of ambivalence of the Jewish partner:

³⁰ See footnote 14 above.

There are a lot of people like my uncle in the Jewish world. We all need to find strategies... to let them know they are welcome. For those of them...married to gentiles, they will be more supportive if they are less ambivalent about their own attitudes toward Judaism.³¹

Regardless of the source of their pain or ambivalence, it is likely that during the course of *Derekh Torah* their learning functions to address and even to contribute to healing their wounds of growing up Jewish whether they are wounds of (well-meaning) over- or ill-exposure to Judaism or wounds of neglect. No *Derekh Torah* group is without individuals' Jewish history, even baggage. It is often expressed during the course of a well functioning class. When this happens it must be examined and validated for the individual to grow and the group to function and learn in an open healthy manner. Frequently, those struggling with their own Jewish pasts and place are not alone in the group. Knowing they are not alone in the group, in the world or in modernity, it is a question of degree:

There is no one today who is not alienated, or does not contain within himself some small fraction of alienation. All of us to whom Judaism, to whom being a Jew, has again become the pivot of our lives—and I know that in saying this here I am not speaking for myself alone—we all know that in being Jews we must not give up anything, not renounce anything, but lead everything back to Judaism. From the periphery back to the center; from the outside, in.³²

For the individual, the class helps him/her examine assumptions made along the way which led to their conclusions. For the group, these struggles make the tradition less idealized and thus even more true to life. This is necessary for a balanced honest presentation of the tradition and a taste of challenges that can lie ahead.

³¹ Lawrence J. Epstein, *Conversion to Judaism: A teaching Guide*, pgs 80-81

³² Levenson, Alan Todd, quoting Franz Rosensweig, "upon Opening the Juedisches Lehrhaus" in "The Ba'al Teshuva" Movement, *CCAR Journal*, Vol. 40, No. 1 (1993)

Especially for the one whose wounds are of Jewish spiritual neglect, one can almost look at a Derekh Torah graduate who embraces a renewed commitment to and enthusiasm for Jewish life as being on the same sociological and religious continuum as a Ba'al Teshuvah. Whether they come to Derekh Torah on their own or it is initiated by involvement in a romantic partnership, they are often open to or looking for a religious expression or spirituality they felt lacking in their youth. The quote below is consistent with what incoming Derekh Torah students sometimes describe as their formative Jewish educational experience and exposure.

Judaism became/is a “religion without religiosity.”... “Focused on pragmatic considerations of congregationalism, community building and further integration into mainstream America,” creating a “religious expression that was not only a-theological, but resulted in a Judaism that was “smooth, sober, shallow and uninspiring.”³³

It's not your parents' Judaism

All of the above notwithstanding, most Jews enrolled Derekh Torah have a strong enough affinity and connection to the Judaism of their past or present to invest 30 weeks in the program. Many are very excited to introduce their tradition to their partners and hope they grow to feel a strong connection as well. While many Jews are happy, even excited to participate with their (mostly) non-Jewish partners, a substantial number need significant encouragement. Additionally, the question of practical/denominational choices is often a point of discussion and sometimes tremendous concern. (i.e. with whom to convert, where to affiliate, certain practices), especially when they differ from one (or both) Jewish families of origin.

³³Shapiro, Faydra L, quoting Charles Waxman in Journal of Psychology and Judaism, Continuity, Context and Change: Towards an Interpretation of “Teshuvah”

Often participating in Derekh Torah witnesses the (intended and unintended) outcome of adult children forging significantly different Jewish lives than their parents. This can be emotionally difficult. If there is a direction offered to Derekh Torah students struggling with the nature or outcome of their Jewish expression, it is this: Learn as much as you can about the foundations, philosophies, individual and communal expressions of Judaism as you can. Visit; try them on. Then figure out where you fit best and go out and build your most authentic, beautiful and best Jewish life from there. Continue to make and find meaning within the tradition; stay open to transformation and evolution in your practices and beliefs. Be respectful of the variation within *Klal Israel*, but don't look over your shoulder looking for disapproval or division. If you do you are sure to find it. There will always be more observant, less observant and differently observant Jews than you. There will always be more knowledgeable, less knowledgeable and differently knowledgeable Jews from you. They may even be in your own family. Celebrate the myriad areas of commonality. While some of this process is unique to Judaism, in other ways, it is universal. While this is certainly the age in which children differentiate themselves in many ways, Fuller notes its specific expression in religious choices:

Deciding who I am at this age is bound part and parcel with deciding who I will be... Young persons also typically need to make commitments that in some way express independence from their parents and thereby demonstrate their own ability to make decisions about their lives... [It] often expresses itself in terms of a rejection of the parents' religious faith. ... The demands of identity formation tend to prompt youth to examine the intellectual aspects of religion; it also compels them to subject religion to what might be called ideological critique. In the meantime, they tend to find fragments of their identity from a variety of sources that strike them as both realistic and meaningful.³⁴

³⁴ Fuller, pgs 37, 39-40

Derekh Torah students who are integrating a more observant form of Judaism than parents are often bewildering to their parents. During their process, students are well advised to recognize and appreciate their own family's heritage and Jewish values in their upbringing as they forge their own way. Whether a differentiation from one's parents or a differentiation from the overall culture in which one was raised, developing one's own religious identity as a subset of one's overall identity is part of the maturation process.

This principle is suggested in the following text:

R. Hezekiah said: There was a heathen in Ashkelon who was the chief of the city fathers. He never presumed to sit on the stone upon which his father sat. And when his father died, he had the stone made into an idol.³⁵

While we have many textual illustrations which encourage following the traditions and *minhagim* of one's father, this text offers another perspective within the tradition. It makes two comments on the ways of idolatry. One way is by not taking your own mature place among your people, not making the role your own. The other way is by turning your father's tradition (i.e.: Judaism) into a "stone"-- unmoving, unchanging, unexamined and fixed in the context of another's generation. It is potentially the way of idolatry not to question or dig deeper into what your father taught you and to turn what you learned as a child into an unchanging, paralyzing idol.

Derekh Torah students differentiating themselves religiously from their parents are a subset of a group expressing this developmental phenomenon among liberal Jews. The flip side of students becoming more observant than their parents is Derekh Torah students who are forging an overall less observant practice. Included in this subset are Jews from

³⁵ Talmud Yerushalmi, Peah 1.1, 15c

outside the U.S., where liberal Judaism has not taken significant hold. These students need, within limits, their choices supported and Jewishly justified and authenticated. They often worry about acceptance in a larger Jewish world. Even people with no intention of making *aliya* commonly express concern that their children³⁶ will not be accepted as Jews everywhere, especially in Israel, while knowing that for whatever reason, traditional³⁷ Judaism can't work for them. While this can be hard for people without traditional backgrounds and family, for those who are closer to it, it can be especially painful. While a consciousness of Jews as one people is important to retain, it forces serious consideration in the process of personal values clarification. An observant Jewish life is a beautiful and valid choice. However, if students are considering their religious expression and community affiliation based on fear of rejection rather than meaningful expression, they need to be reminded of what they already know. That is that they will find it increasingly difficult to live with their choices and that it will become empty and meaningless.

Therefore, students should be encouraged to formulate their own informed relationship to the tradition. The points of Jewish connection with which students begin *Derekh Torah* are acknowledged and valued regardless of their nature; whether they are based knowledge, identity, peoplehood, spiritual/emotional connection, practice or even nostalgia. At the same time personal growth of a deeper, more comprehensive and mature

³⁶ People who are anticipating having children in families where the mother is not born Jewish and does not convert with one of the reported fewer than 50 living Orthodox rabbis in the United States whose conversions are recognized as valid for Jewish religious status according to the Israeli Rabbinit. (See <http://www.thejewishweek.com/news/newscontent.php3?artid=12414> for an article dated May 5, 2006.) This section mostly refers to interfaith couples wherein the Jew (especially the if it is the man) comes from a more traditional family.

³⁷ While denominational differentiations are not the focus of this work, for purposes of simplicity, I use the term "traditional" for Orthodox Jewry and "liberal" for all other forms, i.e., Conservative, Reform, Reconstructionist, Renewal, etc. throughout this work.

understanding and appreciation is encouraged. In this way it is likely that the outcome is that a Derekh Torah Student's relationship to and expression of Judaism will be different from what they expected, different, perhaps, from that of his or her parents.

*Samuel said: 'In one matter I am to my father as vinegar is to wine; for my father used to inspect his property twice a day, whereas I do so only once a day'. Samuel here followed his own maxim, for Samuel used to say: 'He who inspects his property [at least once] daily is sure to find at least one sela.'*³⁸

Alternatively, the sage Samuel is acknowledging the differences between his and his father's tradition. Here, Samuel's practice is more relaxed than his father's: he implies that while it is perhaps less refined or less savory, he finds meaning and learning in it. Samuel's comparing himself as vinegar to his father's wine is an interesting metaphor in two ways. One is that it is not put in terms of a hierarchical progression of being more or less stringent, better or more attainable: vinegar can never evolve into wine. The other is that vinegar is useful, even necessary in its own right.

Regardless of the specific nature of the students' religious backgrounds, family and family dynamics are always in the background of a class, both the students' families of origin and the (sometimes immanent) families they dream of building. This means that along with the teaching of real and objective material, for the class to be an effective integrating tool, classes need to offer more. Discussions have to elicit and offer personal experiences, examples and challenges to get out of the realm of the purely theoretical expressions and principals of the tradition. Because the students are exploring how their lives might change, questions as to where and how far the tradition can bend, stretch and even be defined must be encouraged. In some circumstances the definition of religion

³⁸ Talmud Bavli, Hullin 105a

itself needs adjustment into a totally different (Jewish) paradigm. In this way the students form a subjective relationship with the material. It cannot be simply academic, factual, distant or one dimensional.

Addressing fear

When what was first seen as just a class (albeit a long one) starts to look like new unanticipated uncharted life territory, the vision of one's life changing can become frightening, even to the most committed enthusiastic student. This kind of fear can often be compounded by the transitional nature of the lives of many Derekh Torah students. For example, in every class there are couples planning a wedding or moving in with one another. Students are commonly finishing graduate programs, starting new careers or recently arriving from other cities or countries. Sometimes they find themselves on a journey they didn't realize they were signing up for—and may not have wanted if they did. Even if they enrolled with the intention of converting, there are times this presents scary unintended consequences.

The fact is that Derekh Torah profoundly impacts the lives of its students. It impacts people differently and to different degrees. It is a journey best not attempted alone in the context of a relationship. At the same time, identities and loyalties to other people, personally held values and practices are being challenged or seen as such. For example, in addition to the dynamic explored above, students may experience:

- Fear that relationships with families of origin feel threatened. Beyond the typical “December dilemma” questions with non-Jewish parents, feelings of betrayal, alienation or abandonment are sometimes projected. Christian parents may be afraid for souls; Jewish parents afraid for the Jewish identity and continuity of their children and (future) grandchildren. They can apply pressure in various

distressing ways and degrees. (I.e. withholding financial support, boycotting a wedding, sending religious emissaries or literature, general unpleasantness.)

- Individuals within couples may experience the class dramatically differently. One person may realize (s)he is more committed or enthusiastic than the other to the extent it threatens the relationship. Couples occasionally break up. This is frightening to the couple on this trajectory and devastating when it happens. Further, it frightens the other couples in the class. It is also sensitive since both members of the (split) couple are still students in the class and are both entitled to continue even if the relationship does not.
- Fear of being seen as “going off the deep end,” becoming an insular “religious fanatic” or some kind of “bible banger.” For some people whose (Jewish) identity has been powerfully shaped by secular ideals (such as those from Yiddish/Workman’s Circle, political activism or strict rationalist or atheist backgrounds) the implications of a “religious” Jewish identity and connection can feel difficult to square or fully integrate. It’s not uncommon for such people to have been engrained with the idea that all expressions of religiosity are oppressive, myopic, non-intellectual, essentially discriminatory and backward. They can be afraid of losing their valued universal perspective as they appreciate the particularism of Jewish expression.

While fear and uncertainty is not uncommon, the teacher and group support helps manage it without minimizing the tension it produces. Demystifying and clarifying the issues in class helps to defuse it as well. It also helps that groups grow close to one another over time and these challenges are discussed openly within a Derekh Torah class itself, during the “snack break” or in private conversations with one another or with the teacher. While insecurities that are more acutely felt at times of transition abound, both the fear and insecurity are real.

With all of this in mind, teaching Derekh Torah is a balancing act with a number of essential things always in the forefront. The tone of the class must be non-intimidating and accessible. Judaism in all its different flavors and even inconsistencies must be supported and validated. Care and sensitivity to the individual challenges faced within

the group must never be overshadowed by educational material to be covered. While Derekh Torah can serve a therapeutic purpose at times, it is first and foremost Jewish education.

3. The Subgroup of Those In Derekh Torah Exploring Conversion

1 in 37 American Jews is a Jew by Choice.¹

Though not a prerequisite to be in Derekh Torah, conversion is at least an option for most if not all of the non-Jews in any given group. Some have already decided they are on that path and have already established relationships with rabbis in the community to sponsor them for conversion. Often Derekh Torah will serve as the formal educational component of a student's conversion, with a person's formal conversion occurring soon after the class ends.

Converting alone or as part of a couple

While conversion is always a personal journey, if a person is single (singles usually represent 1-3 people in a 15-17 member class), participating in the class alone is the norm. (Although there have been incidents of mother/daughter, siblings and friends exploring conversion together in a class.). However, when part of a couple, Derekh Torah's position is somewhere between "highly recommended" and "required" in that both members should participate if at all logistically possible. The program has been successful at implementing this policy; the policy is part of the program's success.

Single people are informed of the typical couples/singles mix within the group at their intake/counseling session. This is important to mention; most students are already at least a little nervous in anticipation of the first class; finding themselves (one of) the only single people in the group is not a good surprise. Most don't care or don't find this a

¹Lawrence J. Epstein, Conversion to Judaism, A teaching Guide, pg. 1.

barrier to registering for the class. Some do. This year the program is experimenting by offering a singles only class for the first time.

While we stand by the couple's policy as being important for a couple's future and recognize the preponderance of couples in any given class, it is important that the teacher not gear the class only toward traditional couples-based Judaism. Teachers are oriented toward sensitivity to the concerns of and needs of potentially Jewishly marginalized members of the class exploring Judaism, such as students who are homosexual, single and/or racially or culturally underrepresented within Judaism. Derekh Torah is committed to expanding the definition of family (beyond the traditional heterosexual couple with children living together as a nuclear family) and community in the context of viable and fulfilling Jewish living. It is also important that the teacher work to ensure all students feel like full members of the class. To that end, they encourage activities both in and out of class to strengthen all ties within the group. For example, teachers may present the occasional hevruta-style² study exercise by splitting up couples. A teacher may also encourage classmates of similar interests or in geographical proximity to explore synagogues or Jewish cultural offerings together.

There are ways in which the person converting as part of an established couple is at an advantage over either a single person in the process or in a couple wherein both are Jewish. The prospective convert with a Jewish partner has a clean Jewish slate and model for support. While the student initiate to conversion is certainly on his/her own Jewish journey, in a couple the practical questions and negotiations of how and with

² Hevruta-style study must not be seen as initially natural or comfortable to most Derekh Torah students, many of whom are not comfortable with nor accustomed to analyzing or having permission to question religious texts.

whom this journey will manifest are not theoretical. Not so with the single person on the conversion path who forges a Jewish identity living (usually) alone.³ At the same time single converts may feel at an advantage with fewer constraints and more choices.

Whether as single or as part of a couple, an interesting recent phenomenon to note is an increase in patrilineal descent Jews looking to halakhically solidify their Jewish identity. For purposes of this paper, they are included in this conversion group as a sort of sub-group of Jews by choice in the program. For many of these people, part of their journey is coming to terms with terminology and framing their “conversion” process given their history. The word “conversion” itself is problematic and it often feels like it doesn’t accurately apply to them. With people who have always identified as either entirely or significantly Jewish, negating what came before doesn’t feel like an accurate or comfortable reflection of where they have been or what they are undertaking. Although their process may be technically identical to the person converting from a distinctly different religious identity, offering alternative names to their process can be helpful. I have offered the additional alternatives such as affirmation, confirmation, formalization or, more colloquially (and fitting in nicely with the mikvah image), “jumping in with both feet” with the Jewish people.⁴

Converting as a single adult

Converting as a single adult presents unique opportunities and challenges. On the one hand, a person is free to formulate and build a Judaism and Jewish identity based solely on his/her own proclivities. On the other hand, the single convert does so without the

³ Also see the Jewish Week dated February 2, 2007 article in the appendix to this paper.

⁴ *This can be particularly acute with Jews from the Former Soviet Union. Legally defined and discriminated against there as Jews through patrilineal descent, they arrive in America and Israel to feel discriminated against and rejected by the Jewish community because of this same patrilineal standard.*

possible support of a Jewish partner and may encounter social isolation since the tradition sees a partnered Jewish family life as ideal. Synagogues are bastions of couple/family life and entering the Jewish world as both single and a convert is a double challenge. On the other hand, single converts who are coming to Judaism without relationship incentive are often intensely committed and motivated in the conversion process. While independently at the helm of their Jewish life's future, they are free to follow where their heart where their learning leads them without the need to consider their partner's background or preferences once they have made the decision to become Jewish.

At the same time, I have witnessed singles' conversion processes and have sometimes observed singles taking a longer time in the period between stating their desire to be Jewish and their actively taking practical steps in that direction than I have found with initiates in a relationship. I've known people committed to a Jewish future who feel uncomfortable, even intimidated by entering that world alone. Even for normally outgoing people, they may feel shy and/or socially less daring or outgoing. The preponderance of couples and families that make up the membership of most synagogues can add to the feeling of not comfortably fitting in. The established Jewish community bears some responsibility for assuming the coupled nature of its members—but not all of the responsibility. The following text illustrates how the tradition 'prefers' the solo convert, but that Jews are more comfortable within the context of a couple, and might contribute to this feeling:

MISHNAH. IF A MAN IS SUSPECTED OF [INTERCOURSE] WITH A SLAVE WHO WAS LATER EMANCIPATED, OR WITH A HEATHEN WHO SUBSEQUENTLY BECAME A PROSELYTE, LO, HE MUST NOT MARRY HER. IF, HOWEVER, HE DID MARRY HER THEY NEED NOT BE PARTED. IF A MAN IS SUSPECTED OF INTERCOURSE WITH A MARRIED WOMAN WHO, [IN CONSEQUENCE,] WAS TAKEN AWAY FROM HER HUSBAND, HE MUST LET HER GO EVEN THOUGH HE HAD MARRIED HER.

GEMARA. This implies that she may become a proper proselyte. But against this a contradiction is raised. Both a man who became a proselyte for the sake of a

woman and a woman who became a proselyte for the sake of a man, and, similarly, a man who became a proselyte for the sake of a royal board, or for the sake of joining Solomon's servants, are no proper proselytes. These are the words of R. Nehemiah, for R. Nehemiah used to Say: Neither lion-proselytes, nor dream-proselytes nor the proselytes of Mordecai and Esther are proper proselytes unless they become converted at the present time. How can it be said, 'at the present time'?-Say 'as at the present time'! Surely concerning this it was stated that R. Isaac b. Samuel b. Martha said in the name of Rab: The halachah is in accordance with the opinion of him who maintained that they were all proper proselytes. If so, this should have been permitted altogether! - On account of [the reason given by] R. Assi. For R. Assi said, Put away from thee a froward mouth, and perverse lip's etc.⁵

There is another sub-group of people that fall into the single category of their legs moving slower than their heart. For lack of a better term, I describe those who are slower to move toward formalizing their conversion as wanting to keep their “Jewish options open.” While they express commitment and passion for eventually living (some form of) a Jewish life, there can be an undercurrent of psychological or emotional ambivalence. This might be a function of concern on the part of (or for) their primary (birth) family. Alternatively, I’ve sensed there is a hesitancy to hold a Jewish life as a higher life goal than finding a life partner and having children. Some are concerned that converting and integrating Judaism into their lives now may limit their exposure to and chances of meeting suitable (Jewish) mates. This cuts both ways; for example, the concern that committing to a particular (i.e. either liberal or observant) Shabbat practice or community limits or cuts off the possibility of the other. With those who have families, Rabbi Marc Angel, author of *Choosing to be Jewish: The Orthodox Road to Conversion*, notes a higher rate of drop-out with singles than with people in a relationship. He adds there is just not the same anchor.⁶

⁵ Talmud Bavli, Yevamot 24b

⁶ Rabbi Angel’s comment was recorded as notes taken in a conversion class; not as a quote from his book, referenced below.

Converting as part of a couple:

With intermarriage rising significantly over the last generation, few American Jewish families do not count an intermarried couple among them. This fact makes the pressure to convert in order to marry less of an accepted social necessity. While there may be tremendous support, encouragement and enthusiasm on the part of the Jewish family for the non-Jew in a couple to convert or consider conversion, I don't often hear of tremendous (parental or spousal) pressure or coercion. I only very rarely encounter couples facing threats of a parent's sitting shivah or disowning the child who has married a non-Jew.⁷ While the Jewish status of future children is commonly a concern, conversion of the non-Jew in the couple is less so. One positive outcome of this shift is that non-Jews in relationships with Jews who are considering conversion understand that this is a big personal decision, and as such, take the process seriously, personally and are thinking deeply about their motivations.

Whether or not they know about the Jewish bias against converting because of marriage, they often struggle with deciding whether being married/in a relationship with a Jew is a valid, disqualifying (or somewhere in between) element in their decision to convert. They know their Jewish partner's being Jewish plays a role and can not be honestly taken out of the equation at some level; the question is how heavily it should weigh in the equation along with other personal factors. I often counsel people that there is a significant (and accepted) difference between converting *for* someone and converting *because of* someone. In fact, from the beginning, our prototypical convert Ruth is drawn to Judaism through her relationship with her husband's family. Our tradition is full of

⁷ In fact, facilitators of Workshops for Interfaith Couples report more recent concern on the part of and pressure from non-Jewish parents to intermarriage than from Jewish family. This is not reported as an attitude of anti-Semitism or not accepting the non-Jew into the family; rather it is expressed as a concern for the soul or (usually) Christian identity of their child and future grandchildren.

texts describing people who have converted after encounters with Jews and their

expressions of Judaism that have moved them to explore it for themselves. One tells of:

... a man who was very scrupulous about the command to wear fringes on his garments; nevertheless, when he heard of a certain courtesan in one of the cities across the sea who charged four hundred gold denars as her fee, he sent her four hundred gold denars, and she fixed an appointment for him. When his time arrived, he came and sat down at the entrance to her house. Her maidservant went in and told her, "The man [from across the sea] who sent you four hundred gold denars has come and is sitting at the entrance to the house." The courtesan replied, "Let him come in."

After he came in, she prepared seven beds for him [one above the other], six with silver [bedclothes] and one with gold. Between one bed and the next there was a silver ladder, but the last ladder was of gold. She then [disrobed and] climbed up to the uppermost bed, and sat down, nude, upon it. He, too, [disrobed and] went up after her to sit across from her.

But just then the four fringes [of the one garment he still wore] struck him across his face, whereupon he let himself slide off until he sat on the ground. She also slid off until she sat on the ground, and she said, "By the Roman eagle, I will not let you be until you tell me what blemish you saw in me." "By the Temple," he replied, "never have I seen a woman as beautiful as you. But there is one precept the Lord our God has commanded us called tzitzit, 'fringes.' With regard to it, 'I am the Lord your God' is written twice in Scripture, signifying, 'I am He who will exact punishment, and I am He who will give reward.' And just now the four fringes of the tzitzit seemed to me like four witnesses [ready to testify against me]."

She said, "I will not let you be until you tell me your name, the name of your town, the name of your teacher, and the name of your school in which you study Torah." He wrote all this down and gave the script to her.

At that, she arose and divided her possessions into three parts--a third for the government, a third for the poor, and a third she took with her in her hand; the aforementioned bedclothes, however, she retained. She then came to the study house of R. Hiyya and said to him, "Master, direct your disciples to make me a proselyte." "My daughter," he replied, "perhaps you have set your eyes on one of the disciples?" She took out the script and gave it to R. Hiyya. "Go," he said, "you deserve the husband you are about to acquire." Before long, those same

*bedclothes she had laid out for him for an unlawful purpose she was able to lay out for him for a lawful purpose.*⁸

In fact, I don't know of any texts that describe a conversion to Judaism that don't include encounters with Jews and their traditions. (Some additional texts are explored as end notes to this section). Such is almost always the case with Derekh Torah students on the conversion path. They almost always have been influenced by and attracted to Judaism through personal interactions with teachers, co-workers, friends, extended family members as well as partners.

While Jews entering Derekh Torah often express the desire and commitment to raise Jewish children, on the whole, I sense very little pressure on the non-Jew to convert. Therefore most people on this path are doing so freely; not only in their choice to convert or not; but the manner in which they adopt Judaism as their own. Often the Jewish partner is Jewishly disconnected and unaffiliated; walking a tightrope between trying to be supportive without pressuring; perhaps enthusiastic about learning but not so much about changing his/her current lifestyle, yet confident in and attached to their Jewish identity. This leaves the task of guiding this couple toward a meaningful and less amorphous connection to and expression and definition of Judaism for their lives. They will need to formulate a living tradition that is, at the beginning of Derekh Torah, often a more philosophical notion of identity than a concretely expressed or thought-out part of their lives. The goal is for them to build a Jewish framework that can expand as their lives change and as they confront decisions later on.

⁸ Talmud Bavli, Menachot 44a, Sifre Bamidbar, #115. *This text beautifully illustrates the influence of and exposure to Jews, Judaism and even romance on a decision to convert. At the same time it holds the tension between that influence and the need for the individual to come to it him/herself.*

Often the initiate anticipates this more and sooner than the Jew. Like countless American Jews, Jews in Derekh Torah take their right to ignore Judaism or to take it for granted as a birthright; all or some of it. Not practicing or affiliating Jewishly in any or much manner doesn't make them any less or feel any less Jewish. This is not so with the convert. So while many converts rightly see taking the class as a step on a personal journey, it is often the case that the Jewish partner is not anticipating this for him/herself.

The fact that the Jewish partner is also on a journey is a seed is planted at the Derekh Torah intake interview if either partner expresses reluctance for the Jewish partner to participate. I explain to the couple then why it is important for their future that they take the class together. The Jewish member may not see him/herself as a part of the initiate's process and would not even think to ask:

What is my partner's role in my conversion? "... The most crucial role for a born Jewish partner is to support the conversion candidate. More than one conversion student has mentioned a spouse or partner disinterested in Judaism. They have a right to question their own act of converting if their partner does not even care about Judaism....

The best, most tangible form of support that a Jewish romantic partner can show is to attend an Introduction to Judaism or conversion class with their partner. Sometimes, such attendance is even mandated, for rabbis know how crucial the experience is and how helpful it can be for the born Jewish partner...⁹

Depending on their stories and backgrounds, a combination of several rationales is usually enough to convince them to enroll together:

1. Suggesting that an imbalance of Jewish knowledge may not be good for the dynamics of the relationship. This is especially applicable in relationships where the Jewish man exhibits a strong ego. Couples with a member that fits this description often sense the truth of this.

⁹ Epstein, Lawrence J., Questions and Answers on Conversion to Judaism, pg. 80

2. Suggesting that due to the pluralistic nature and broad scope of the class, even those with substantial Jewish backgrounds and education will learn about rationales and practices heretofore unfamiliar. It is unfair for the convert to have to justify or explain something foreign to his/her partner (and thus subject to being heard with suspicion).
3. Suggesting that often people with extensive classic Jewish educations and backgrounds have a tremendous knowledge of Judaism in terms of what to do and how to do it; though a limited experience asking questions or receiving satisfying answers to why. Thoughtful people in Derekh Torah with little Jewish background often have a lot of very good ideas as to why something might be very meaningful but have no idea there is a Jewish manifestation of it. They are almost always in the same class and sometimes they are even in the same couple. Teachers also supply varying “why” answer options. Taking the class together allows the “what/how’s” to teach the “whys” and vice versa.
4. Underscoring that their Jewish lives will be a combination and negotiation of each person’s individual relationship to and practice of Judaism and that of the Jewish home they are creating together. That home must be jointly conceived. Taking Derekh Torah together is a way for couples to organically begin to envision that future.

I offer two opposing scenarios to illustrate: the first wherein they are in class together... There is a class discussion and another student makes a comment or asks a question that reverberates within you in some way. Until that moment, what was on the tip of that person’s tongue was something unformed and disconnected buzzing around in your head. Something clicks; your eyes meet. After class you naturally and easily begin talking about how you felt about it; picking up on that discussion in the context of your own lives.

In this scenario, you both know the topic, the reading, the tone of the discussion, the personality and interpersonal dynamics (in their relationship to one another

and to Judaism) of the person making the comment and the teacher. This puts your personal conversation in immediate context. If only one of you were participating and brought the conversation home from class to discuss with one another, it would be a completely different scenario between you. The (often totally unfamiliar) topic, background, perspective, personalities and context would have to be framed and explained before you could even get to either of your own thoughts on the matter. More likely you would be distracted or exhausted before you even got to it. Perhaps the topic is even difficult to initiate without this context.

Epstein illustrates these points as a way of reflecting on and strengthening the overall communication skills of a couple:

In an interesting way, the method a couple uses to discuss conversion is a symbol of their overall ability to communicate as a couple. They need to be able to discuss conversion issues openly, to express their true feelings without fear of being ridiculed and even if they realize those feelings are not fair. Of course, both during and after a conversion, the Jewish partner can be a teacher and guide. If the Jewish partner does not know a lot about Judaism, learning together can help cement the relationship.¹⁰

This is not to suggest that most Jews entering *Derekh Torah* aren't deeply invested in their Jewish identity and their goals for a future Jewish home and family. Enrolling in — even exploring -- the program implies a personal commitment. For some of these Jews, a personal Jewish practice or communal or cultural Jewish association is already a part of their adult lives. However, for most Jews entering *Derekh Torah* I encounter, it is not. Nor has it substantively played out over the development of their relationship. I find that more Jews have only envisioned Judaism expanding in some way in their future, perhaps even only when they have children of school age. They are committed to it, yet it is often amorphously defined or described. How and to what extent they and their partners will participate/engage is a question often only now coming to the fore. Several times I have

¹⁰Epstein, Lawrence J., *Questions and Answers on Conversion to Judaism*, pgs 79-80

been profoundly moved to witness a non-Jewish partner react to his/her Jewish partner's very first expression (in his/her presence) of how important or meaningful some element of being or growing up Jewish is to them. This can be surprising and both exciting and disconcerting to both people. Such a moment often underscores the importance of both members participation in the class. The meetings, especially at these moments, are a point at which both realize there is more involved in the conversion question and it is more complicated than may have been acknowledged in the past.

For both the invested and the reticent Jew, Epstein also points out that:

...gentiles who choose to become Jews validate the choice of those born Jewish to remain Jewish. The enormous step of conversion makes the smaller step of remaining Jewish both easier and more sensible.¹¹

While this may be persuasive to the Jew who is invested in his/her spouse's conversion, it would not be for all. For the Jew who is more neutral, either about the initiate's conversion to Judaism or the Jew's personal investment in Judaism for his/herself, the answer to why be/stay/grow Jewish(ly) is not at all clear.

Integrating Judaism into the week and ones life during Derekh Torah:

Some people are actively working toward integrating Judaism into their lives when they register for class. Many others have taken little or no action except, perhaps, doing a little reading, attending a Seder, Jewish wedding, Bar Mitzvah or the like. Derekh Torah includes two Shabbat experiences as a group as a "formal" part of the program¹². Outside of that, while not required, students are encouraged to explore different synagogue

¹¹ Lawrence J. Epstein, Conversion to Judaism: A teaching Guide, pg. 2

¹² *Formal only in that all students are expected to participate and that it is a formally organized group "field trip" and a full Shabbat meal. Like everything else in Derekh Torah, informality and a relaxed atmosphere is the norm and essential. The class spends one Friday night and one Saturday morning/afternoon together about 10 and 20 weeks into the course. Together with their teacher, they will attend synagogue services and share a Shabbat meal in one of their homes.*

communities and create personal and Shabbat and holiday experiences over the 30 weeks alone. This is especially true for the person seeking to convert who has not yet formed a relationship with a rabbi to sponsor him/her.

The teacher will encourage the students to see one another as support and company on their explorations and experimentations. A student experiencing anything Jewish outside of class has the teacher as an immediate resource to demystify, explain and culturally “translate” some of the activities, practices and people they encounter (and don’t encounter) in such experiences. Synagogue attendance is especially crucial to all the students in the class, but especially to the potential converts who often report feeling like “aliens” or imposters in a synagogue. Usually having experienced or heard of contradictory, mystifying, foreign, strict or arcane practices, they are frequently so terrified of making a public misstep or being judged in synagogue that they are very hesitant to go, especially alone. Often their Jewish friends or partners are frequently not that helpful; the non-observant, non-knowledgeable people in their lives usually don’t know much more and don’t feel significantly more comfortable in shul. The knowledgeable ones may not be close by geographically or forthcoming with invitations.

Beyond the educational benefits of going to synagogue, it is the best way to find a sponsoring rabbi, choose a community in which to grow and integrate what they are learning into their lives. Rabbis working with students in the Derekh Torah program like to meet privately with the students during the course of the 30 weeks. The material they read and discuss in class often feeds naturally into their discussions. Additionally, going at least occasionally to their rabbi’s synagogue serves to integrate the whole process. In

this way prayer, study and community are all interwoven within a web of relationships in a Jewish framework.

Finally, I believe that synagogue attendance is even more crucial for the initiate to Judaism than for the born Jew at this stage. The truth is that the synagogue will be the nexus of most Jews' communal religious life. Therefore a Jew by choice will only fully feel comfortable in their own Jewish skin when they feel comfortable in synagogue settings. Another truth is that the only way to get comfortable in shul is to go. It doesn't matter if a person is a Jew from the day they were born or converted at age 80, synagogue comfort comes with the familiarity of repetition and recognition and little else. Born Jews who rarely or never attend synagogues don't feel comfortable taking part in the proceedings either. But as discussed above, this may not affect their feeling grounded in their Jewish identity.

Many people join Derekh Torah before they find a rabbi to sponsor their conversion. Some know they want to convert before they register for Derekh Torah and are grateful for suggestions of approachable welcoming rabbis that the director of the program or their teacher may offer. Often potential converts have heard of the rabbinic practice of turning the convert away three times, even expecting to have doors slammed in their face or having the phone hung-up on them. Teachers and rabbis can not be reminded enough that this is the stereotypical expectation and to be sensitive to this. Just like in the case of visiting synagogues, in approaching a rabbi for conversion, too, there is a tremendous amount of insecurity and fear of rejection. This is especially true in the case of a couple who have heard about a bias against converting for an ulterior motive for example, marriage, which does have some textual justification:

When a person comes to convert we examine whether it is because of money that they want to take or to succeed with power or because of fear; if it is a man we examine if perhaps he has eyes for a Jewish woman, and if it is a woman we examine whether if she has eyes for a Jewish man, and if no pretext is found we teach them respect for (being subject to) the yoke of Torah and the hardship that there is in doing it...¹³

To this concern I often say that most rabbis like nothing better than to help to create a Jewish family provided that that both have the intention to do so with integrity.

Additionally, modern practice and Talmudic texts support conversion in the context of a relationship:

This implies that she may become a proper proselyte. But against this a contradiction is raised. Both a man who became a proselyte for the sake of a woman and a woman who became a proselyte for the sake of a man..... are no proper proselytes.... Surely concerning this it was stated that R. Isaac b. Samuel b. Martha said in the name of Rab: The halachah is in accordance with the opinion of him who maintained that they were all proper proselytes." If so, this should have been permitted altogether!" - On account of [the reason given by] R. Assi. For R. Assi said, Put away from thee a froward mouth, and perverse lip's etc.¹⁴

None the less, their fears of being treated with suspicion are historically warranted:

Fourth century Constantine made conversion to Judaism a capital offense. Conversion efforts therefore ceased, but resumed to some degree in medieval times. Then in the late fifteenth century, Spanish inquisitions reinstituted capital punishment for the crime of conversion to Judaism, efforts ceased and the rabbis developed a tradition of discouraging converts....[which] led to the erroneous assumption that Judaism does not welcome converts.¹⁵

Both the Director of the program and the individual teachers help calm the fears and give confidence to the intimidated seekers by suggesting step by step instructions and scripts of ways they might approach a rabbi. (I.e., a brief greeting of Shabbat shalom after services followed by a phone call during the following week; don't call right before or during Tishrei, etc.)

¹³ Shulhan Aruch, Yoreh Deah 268:12, Laws Concerning Converts

¹⁴ Talmud Bavli, Yevamot 24b

¹⁵ Bellin, David, Choosing Judaism: an opportunity for Everyone, Jewish Outreach Institute, pg. 3

Mourning a previous identity while you develop your Jewish one.

For it was indeed taught: 'Both a proselyte and a slave bought from an idolater must make a declaration of acceptance'... 'The same law applies to a proselyte and to an emancipated slave remains! — That was taught only with reference to the ablution'¹⁶...Our Rabbis taught: And she shall shave her head, and do her nails, R. Eliezer said, 'She shall cut them'. R. Akiba said, 'She shall let them grow'...

Our Rabbis taught: 'and she will lament her father and mother (... for a month's time.)'¹⁷

R. Eliezer said: 'her father' means her actual father; 'her mother', her actual mother. R. Akiba said: 'her father and her mother' refer to idolatry; for so Scripture says, 'who say to a stock (idol): "thou art my father, etc."' A full month: 'month' means thirty days. R. Simeon b. Eleazar said: "Ninety days. For a 'month' means thirty days; 'full', thirty days; 'and after that' thirty days." Rabina demurred: "might it not be suggested that 'month' means thirty days; 'full', thirty days; 'and after that' as many again! — This is a difficulty."¹⁸

In this text, mourning during transition into the Jewish people is assumed. However within this Talmudic discussion, the “difficulty” is undoubtedly the unresolved period of time needed to mourn. As a teacher of initiates to conversion and in the context of *Derekh Torah*, I hear this “difficulty” differently. Highly variable and very personal, sometimes palpable while often completely non-existent, it can happen that even the most committed and enthusiastic initiate to Judaism experiences a transitional period of mourning. After reaching a decision to convert, the fact that they are experiencing an emotion akin to mourning is sometimes in and of itself confusing and troubling to the initiate. True to the Talmudic discussion, the transition time is difficult to quantify and the object of mourning is sometimes challenging to identify. As in the discussion, what

¹⁶ I.e., only the proselyte must make the declaration of acceptance; it is not necessary for the slave. Both require immersion in mikvah.

¹⁷ Deuteronomy 21:13

¹⁸ Talmud Bavli, Yevamot 48a/b. The Torah identifies the woman mourning as a captive transitioning to a wife of an Israelite and member of the Israelite community. Later on in the Talmud, the subject is not only a captive, but expands to include a proselyte's (and slave's) transition into the Jewish people. In combining these categories, the rabbis acknowledge the psychological and emotional impact and transition of each as similar.

is mourned may be something valuable like family (as in the text) or seemingly unexpected and tangential like a Christmas tree ornament collection. (perhaps as the idols in the text).

In modern practical terms, it's important to first note that initiates to conversion are differentiating themselves from something other than the loaded Talmudic term "idolatry." This is not a study or comment on which and whether other religions meet the Jewish definition of "idolatry." Nor is this an in depth study of the spiritual and psychological process of the initiate to conversion. For purposes of this work, the discussion is limited to the initiate who has both rejected bonds and claims to any religion other than Judaism. Even with such people there is often an emotional process which resembles mourning.

The objects of mourning are varied, and not always clearly articulated. Often intangible, they may include the loss of the more carefree independent outlook. This can be a sobering part of the initiate's identity shifting from being a member of the majority culture (however much on the fringe they were) to being a member of a minority culture with historical and modern perils. Becoming personally invested in a people to which one didn't previously belong can feel like an unaccustomed weight. The weight could alternatively (and meta-physically) be defined as the weight of the yoke of Torah. Carrying any weight requires time to build the muscles required to carry that weight. Arguably, taking responsibility in the world is part of any maturation process. Nonetheless, losing a more carefree uninvested attitude can feel, psychologically, like a loss.

The objects of mourning can also be accessories or practices (or, less frequently, in my experience) ideas that are Jewishly inconsistent or taboo to which the initiate has emotional and psychological bonds. Often they revolve around holiday practices, especially those in December. For example, they may mourn dreams of giving future children the magic and warmth of opening gifts Christmas morning under a fresh smelling decorated pine in the flickering light and warmth of a fireplace; singing Christmas carols or baking and eating special favorite holiday foods. Vivid descriptions such as this illustrate how painful its loss might be.

It is often helpful to guide the initiate toward examining the underlying emotional source of the connections to the practice; valuing the emotion and reframing it in a Jewish context. For example, examining these practices may reveal that the powerful connection to the scenarios above include: family time; the power of performative ritual; creating consistent family traditions; the excitement, anticipation and practice of preparing for holidays; holiday accessories; music; food; involving all the senses; the role of sacred myth; a child's overflowing joy; surprises. All of these underlying meanings are consistent with Judaism and have countless Jewish manifestations. Moreover they are tremendous opportunities for creativity, joy and meaning in a Jewish context. This is often both validating and a source of relief.

Guiding the initiate through some important Jewish and secular distinctions

ברוך אתה יי, אלהינו מלך העולם, המבדיל בין קדש לחול, בין אור לחשך, בין ישראל לעמים,
בין יום השביעי לששת ימי המעשה. ברוך אתה יי, המבדיל בין קדש לחול.

*Blessed are you Adonai, sovereign over all time and space, who draws
distinctions between sacred and secular; between light and darkness; between*

*Israel and other people; between Shabbat and the six days of doing. Blessed are you Adonai, who distinguishes between the sacred and the ordinary.*¹⁹

Conversations regarding drawing distinctions are part of a larger conversation of Judaism's demand to examine nuance and differentiate between sacred/Jewish and ordinary/secular. This is often an important teaching opportunity to stress that if you try to pack all your eggs of meaning exclusively into the Hanukkah basket, they will break. Not only is the holiday not significant enough within a Jewish context, but no matter how much of a big deal you make of it, it will never withstand the onslaught of American marketing on its own. For that you need a more expansive holiday repertoire: to beautifully decorate a sukkah; to collect those decorations all year and create new ones together; to hide little presents with the chametz the night before Passover; to bake challah, hamentashen and the countless variations of Jewish holiday recipes; to prepare for Shabbat, make crazy costumes for Purim, to buy new clothes for Rosh Hashanah, to carve out sacrosanct Shabbat family time; to learn and sing some of the many holiday and Shabbat songs; to share meaningful Jewish and family stories with your children.

Often the initiate recognizes the philosophical or rational inconsistency and/or the Jewishly distasteful nature of the issue with which they are struggling. That is, for example, the scenario of desiring a Christmas tree in a Jewish home while understanding the symbolic Jewish "buttons" it pushes and recognizing both its personal and philosophical inconsistency. However, the feelings themselves should not be belittled. As with any process of mourning, it is a gradual, individual one in which the feelings need to be acknowledged and honored. At the same time, they may still return over time powerfully, unexpectedly and disarmingly. With awareness, support and rich and

¹⁹ Part of the Havdalah liturgy at the close of Shabbat.

meaningful Jewish alternatives they also diminish in severity and frequency over time and can reach a point of emotional neutrality that can even become playful. The initiate needs to know this to help make sense of their feelings.

There are other distinctions the initiate must form during the course of his/her study and conversion. While there are some non-Jewish *practices* which have no place in a Jewish life and home, there are important non-Jewish *people* who will still have a central place in the initiate's Jewish future; most importantly their family of origin.

To a greater and lesser degree this is an interpersonal issue between the initiate and his/her family. Young couples are often quite naturally oblivious to the pain and fear of separation that parents can feel as their adult children establish their own families. At the same time, they are not usually oblivious to the interpersonal tension those feelings can initiate. Both parent and adult child may be wrestling with complex feelings of abandonment, betrayal and mourning completely independent from their feeling about conversion. While Epstein makes the following suggestion to initiates about initially telling parents about the decision to convert, I believe it is applicable advice for other future interactions:

Be prepared for a range of reactions from support to shock to total disapproval. In general, remain calm, show an understanding of any resistance to the idea of converting, and stick to your views. Be polite, but firm....If your parents do reject your religious conversion; remember that parents may in time change. In the meanwhile, seek support from your partner and from within the Jewish community while constantly seeking continued communication with your parents. Perhaps most of all try to maintain a sense of humor and a clear display of love.²⁰

²⁰ Epstein, Lawrence J., Questions and Answers on Conversion to Judaism, pg. 30

Conversion to a different religion can complicate feelings parents and adult children have about the changing nature of their relationship in adulthood. As with the practices above, examining and dealing with the underlying emotional causes rather than the surface “religious” symptoms can go a long way toward alleviating tensions and developing both an authentic Jewish identity and strong family bonds with important non-Jewish family members.

In a *Derekh Torah* context, a plurality of perspectives is offered with regard to contact with non-Jewish family in contexts which are clearly not Jewish. There are some who advocate a strict wall of separation between Jews (converted or born) and non-Jewish celebrations and some who feel that separation can be more flexible. From a more restrictive perspective, Rabbi Marc Angel writes:

Aside from the above issues, converts also may experience inner conflicts when their biological families are celebrating major non-Jewish religious holidays. Should they attend a Christmas party at their parents’ home? Should they join in Easter dinner, even if the family provides kosher food? And what about the convert’s children? To what extent should they participate in non-Jewish holidays at the homes of their grandparents or their uncles and aunts? Since converts are now Jews, they are bound by Jewish law, which forbids participation in non-Jewish religious holidays and ceremonies. Despite the pain that this may cause, loving families can find alternative ways to spend time together in meaningful ways, without demanding that either Jews or non-Jews compromise on their deeply felt religious beliefs.²¹

Rabbi Angel seems to suggest that any family gathering held on days such as Christmas or Easter are, by definition, religious holidays or non-Jewish ceremonies and are therefore forbidden to Jews. This can certainly be the case. Christian religious holidays and celebrations that are imbued with meaning and religious practice and tone are often uncomfortable to converts and their Jewish families. Many converts and Jewish families

²¹ Angel, Rabbi Mark, *Choosing to Be Jewish: The Orthodox Road to Conversion*, pg. 76

would feel either commanded or inclined to avoid them. At the same time many Jews honestly describe such gatherings as being (or having the potential to be) religiously neutral. In families such as this refusing to attend such gatherings because of its non-Jewish religious implications often feels disingenuous and problematic to Derekh Torah students.

Conversely, there are many others who draw a distinction between witnessing or participating in someone else's ritual and creating or participating in it as your own.

Rabbi Dr. Ron Wolfson uses the analogy of a child's birthday party to illustrate a Jew's role in a non-Jewish setting, namely Christmas:

Early childhood educators tell us that one of the most crucial stages in socialization occurs when a child is between 18 and 30 months old and attends another child's birthday party. When the birthday cake is brought in, most of the little guests try to blow out the candles right along with the birthday child. As the child opens presents, little hands start to grab for the toys. Why do you think "party favors" were invented? To help children begin to distinguish between what's mine and what's his/hers. Toddlers must learn the difference between celebrating one's own birthday and celebrating someone else's. Thus many Jewish educators will advise parents to give their children who want to celebrate Christmas a very important message: Christmas is someone else's party, not ours. Just as we can appreciate someone else's birthday celebration and be happy for them, we can wonder at how beautiful Christmas is, but it is not our party.²²

It is the same for adults as it is for children. Authorities such as Rabbi Wolfson don't find it useful or honest to "pretend" non-Jewish family doesn't exist or that their important holidays (and vacation times) are not the Jewish holidays. Ignoring Christmas in America is all but impossible; all the more so with Christian family. However Rabbi Wolfson's perspective may suggest that attending or participating in *anything* is potentially acceptable with the proper intention.

²² Wolfson, Ron, in Hanukkah: as reprinted from The Family Guide to Spiritual Celebration (Jewish Lights) and posted on http://www.myjewishlearning.com/holidays/Hanukkah/TO_Hanukkah_Themes/Wolfson_December_864.htm

Wherever one draw the boundaries, it is perhaps more helpful is to do serious soul-searching and determine where to draw boundaries with the most integrity for everyone involved. For example: going to your parents Christmas afternoon for dinner might feel fine, but being there in the morning when all the cousins are opening gifts may not. Accompanying parents to Midnight Mass may be a neutral and religiously meaningless act of respecting your parents in their holiday practice; kneeling in church or reciting Christian prayers would be something else. Enjoying a friend's tree in his/her home may be fine; buying and decorating one in a Jewish home isn't.

Decisions may need to be revisited or change over time as the transition and/or mourning progresses and the Jew by choice matures in his/her Jewish identity. Often a sense of humor and some flexibility is useful.

Deciding how and for whom to convert: teasing through and making sense of different expectations and their ramifications.

Derekh Torah is a pluralistic program with the goal of equipping its students with the knowledge they need to make their next steps into the greater Jewish community. Derekh Torah's pluralistic approach itself is more fully explored in section 5 of this work. So while Derekh Torah must teach about our being one people and the elements that unite us, it must also teach what distinguishes different communities and denominations. Only in that way will students be able to make a home in any particular Jewish community. The teachers must give an accurate sense of the range of both what is normative and what is ideal in different settings. For the initiates to conversion, that not

only means choosing a synagogue in which they will settle, but also a rabbi that will undoubtedly have certain expectations of the initiate before he/she feels comfortable finalizing the conversion. For Derekh Torah students, it may also include expectations of a partner and his/her partner's family.

This can be dizzying for the initiate who has not yet settled on a synagogue or rabbi. An instructor will teach that one converts to Judaism as a whole and as a people, not to a particular denomination. At the same time challenging questions about the practical ramifications of converting with one rabbi/denomination or practice over another can make that statement difficult to swallow whole.

A person born a Jew will likely feel a legitimate and unequivocal Jew in any setting. Even if his/her Jewish practice is not respected, accepted or legitimized, a person born Jewish will always be accepted as Jew. Not so with the Jew by choice. There is security in the born Jew's feeling of identity that that is often less fortified in the Jew by choice. While, as one of my students offered in a flip manner, there is no "Jew police" checking your papers or circumcision at the door, developing one's identity and claim of authenticity as part of a people defined by birth is inherently paradoxical. Adding denominational and potential family expectations with its inherent complexities only compounds this. It feels like an unfair "double standard" to many students, Jewish and non-Jewish alike. It also makes the support and learning of a Derekh Torah group essential. Many Jews by choice report benefiting from joining similar support/learning groups for other Jews by choice after Derekh Torah and after finalizing their conversion.

Almost everyone in Derekh Torah arrives with pre-conceived ideas or stories about different denominations' conversions—as if the conversions are handed out by the denominations themselves. This includes the varying ease/difficulty in securing one and the varying levels of acceptance among them. Some enter Derekh Torah with the erroneous idea that an Orthodox conversion is their Rolls Royce or gold standard of conversion. For those who are attracted to the universal acceptance of such a conversion without seriously committing to the comprehensive integrated Jewish life an Orthodox choice offers, the intake meeting may be a disappointment. When they learn that the “price” of such a process may be choosing between adherence to what many imagine is an untenable lifestyle or lying to your rabbi (and converting under “false pretenses”), it forces them to examine other options which encourages personal investment and integrity.

Conversely, others assume that as a Jew by choice (s)he will only be comfortable and accepted in a Reform congregation or that a Reform conversion is pro-forma or even meaningless-- until (s)he learns, for example, that a community with adherents of traditional ritual and Hebrew is often more important in Reform congregations than first believed. Others may be surprised that there are (male) Conservative rabbis who preside over and support fully egalitarian congregations but may not agree to serve on a beit din with a woman rabbi out of concern for their legality or acceptance. They may also be surprised to learn that according to every denomination's understanding of Jewish law a Jew by choice is no less Jewish than one born Jewish. At the same time, unfortunately, every denomination counts adherents who are either ignorant or resistant to this rule. Many are bewildered and understandably upset by Jewish denominational politics.

Some find the Orthodox rabbi that looks the other way and the perfect traditional Reform community. Many others realize that just like people, Jews and Jewish communities don't fit in neatly tied up philosophical and practical boxes. In fact, that reflection of reality is often tied up with what attracts them to Judaism to begin with. The sooner they realize this, begin looking for their best fit and jump in the waters of Judaism, the better.

Some essential things happen for the initiate to conversion during the course of his/her Derekh Torah class. One important thing to grasp is that every Jew's life, his/her practice, philosophy, community and relationship to God shifts and develops over time. Some experience more profound shifts than others. A Jew by choice's journey is on that same continuum. As with the mourning, the insecurities will fade as time goes on. While the day of their conversion is an important point on their Jewish journey, often before they can reach that point itself, they must realize it is just one point of many along that journey.

Additionally, they keep growing in their Jewish learning. And the more they learn and live Jewishly, the more they realize how far they have come; how things become continually more natural and how the pieces all fit together. They begin to realize that they know more than many Jews they encounter and begin to offer as many informed answers and valuable insights as the number of questions they ask. They notice they are being sought out as authorities within their own communities and circles of friends—even sometimes their (Jewish/future) in-laws. While their quest for learning may at first be partially motivated by their insecurities, the learning will often be self-reinforcing. How can you not feel at least as authentically Jewish as those who know so little or who are ill-informed? How can a visible commitment to Jewish life and learning not be

admired and respected (even if misunderstood or misinterpreted) by someone differently observant?

Initiates to Judaism become clearer and more secure in what they believe. They start to develop a framework for a Jewish life that is wide and strong enough to support their Judaism today and for years down the line. In and out of Derekh Torah class, they are exposed to many different stories, people and living expressions of Judaism which expands that framework further. This leads them to understand the rationales and variations between the denominations themselves. It also helps them to be more comfortable with the differences and inconsistencies between the espoused and practiced religion of the denominations' adherents. Reports of people with seemingly inconsistent Jewish identities abound. Whether it is encountering people parking a block a way from an Orthodox shul and walking the rest of the way on Shabbat; people praying only Hebrew and not understanding a word; Conservatively affiliated families not keeping kosher homes; Reform affiliated families that do or that insist that their Rabbis perform intermarriages; or a avowedly secular Israeli (or American) insisting that he affiliates Orthodox as the only authentic expression of Judaism that he proudly does not practice.

Appreciating the variations of Judaism and the variations within variations are helpful only to certain extent. Students still have personal decisions to make. On this, the same advice is offered to the initiate to Judaism struggling with community/denominational affiliation as is offered to the born Jew. It bears repeating²³: Learn as much as you can about the foundations, philosophies, individual and communal expressions of Judaism as you can. Visit; try them on *slowly*. Then figure out where you fit best and go out and

²³ From page 24 of chapter 2 of this work.

build your most authentic beautiful Jewish life from there. Continue to make meaning and find meaning within the tradition; stay open to transformation and evolution in your practices and beliefs. Be respectful of the variation within *Klal Israel*, but –and this is especially important for the Jew by choice--don't look over your shoulder for rejection, disapproval, or division. If you look you will find it. Unfortunately sometimes you may find it even if you aren't looking. There will always be more observant, less observant and differently observant Jews than you. There will always be more knowledgeable, less knowledgeable and differently knowledgeable Jews from you. They may even be in your own family. You might get insensitive or ignorant comments or questions if you don't "look" Jewish or have a Jewish "sounding" name. Celebrate the myriad areas of commonality and rejoice in the life you are creating.

The goal is to realize that every community and rabbi, even within the same denomination is different. While the details and specifics therein may be different, the language and currency is the same: learning to live with the rhythm of the Jewish calendar, in solidarity with the communities of the Jewish people and seeing and expressing life in Jewish terms. Through this lens they can see that most Jewish communities have far more in common than they perhaps once thought. From there they hopefully come to understand that you do, in fact, convert to Judaism as a religion and a people as a whole, and not to a denomination. Encouraged by their learning in *Derekh Torah* and in relationship with different kinds of Jews, they may wind up growing comfortable in many different places, even places they never thought possible.

This vision of a pluralistic Jewish community may even be the hallmark of a *Derekh Torah* conversion journey. There are numerous educational programs which introduce

Judaism to adults with or without the conversion factor. Most of them are sponsored by denomination umbrella groups themselves or institutions which are denominationally affiliated. They may offer some vision and enthusiasm for broader forms of Jewish expression. However bound by denominational norms, political/cultural realities and limited to teachers educated and living within those parameters, it makes exploring and embracing pluralistic nuance comparatively less likely.

In this realm, Derekh Torah students are also comforted to learn that if they (or their future children) ever feel like a more liberal²⁴ conversion doesn't satisfy their *own* needs i.e. they want Jewish religious status in Israel or if they feel they can not comfortably fully participate in a more traditional community, those options are always open to them in the future. Conversely, they might find that even with a conversion sponsored by the Chief Rabbi of Israel²⁵, the most authentic and honest expression of Judaism for them is far more liberal. Their Jewish future is indeed an open book:

A proselyte has the legal status of a newborn child. ²⁶

End notes to chapter 3:

I believe these two central texts are important to explore in the context of conversion in Derekh Torah:

²⁴ See footnote 41 in section two above definition of terms in this work.

²⁵ Rabbi Andrea Meyers reports to have pursued such a conversion and subsequent Jewish life.

²⁶ Talmud Bavli, Yevamot 22a. *This text is often interpreted as negating or neutralizing the non-Jewish history and upbringing of a Jew by Choice after conversion. I offer this text here as reinforcing the myriad of possibilities in the Jew by choice's Jewish future. A new born baby's whole life is ahead of him to integrate nurture and nature; grow into society and make the choices of adult life, so too will the new Jew by choice forge a new spiritual life from that point on. A question to ponder from this interpretation: Does that mean it takes him 13 years to mature enough to grow into and affirm (the nature of) his Jewish identity?*

Our Rabbis taught: If at the present time a man desires to become a proselyte, he is to be addressed as follows: What reason have you for desiring to become a proselyte; do you not know that Israel at the present time are persecuted and oppressed, despised, harassed and overcome by afflictions'? If he replies, 'I know and yet am unworthy'²⁷, he is accepted forthwith²⁸, and is given instruction in some of the minor and some of the major commandments²⁹.

He is informed of the sin [of the neglect of the commandments of] Gleanings, the Forgotten Sheaf, the Corner and the Poor Man's Tithe. He is also told of the punishment for the transgression of the commandments.³⁰ Furthermore, he is addressed thus: 'Be it known to you that before you came to this condition, if you had eaten forbidden fat you would not have been punishable with karet, if you had profaned the Sabbath you would not have been punishable with stoning; but now were you to eat suet you would be punished with karet; were you to profane the Sabbath you would be punished with stoning'. And as he is informed of the punishment for the transgression of the commandments, so is he informed of the reward granted for their fulfillment. He is told, 'Be it known to you that the world to come was made only for the righteous, and that Israel at the present time are unable to bear either too much prosperity or too much suffering'.³¹ He is not, however, to be persuaded or dissuaded too much³².

If he accepted³³, he is circumcised forthwith... As soon as he is healed arrangements are made for his immediate ablution, when two³⁴ learned men must

²⁷ He must consider his conversion/Judaism an improvement to his life and a positive thing rather than something beneath him or a concession of any type.

²⁸ He is not turned away and is welcomed into the community and peoplehood for initiation. This is so even while he expresses a form of ambivalence, perhaps even because of it.

²⁹ Instruction immediately follows. Start with the easy ones; work up to the harder ones.

³⁰ Being a fully accepted member of the Jewish people requires a Jewish behavior and practice, not just a familial, social or philosophical affinity or system of belief. It starts with responsibility for one another, to tzedakah and of communal expectations. Similarly, he introduces the fact that there are ramifications for not fulfilling these communal expectations.

³¹ Personal kashrut and Shabbat practices immediately follow and are seen as central to teach. There is a warning that not following these practices will have both quantifiable and non-quantifiable; physical and spiritual consequences and rewards.

³² Literally 'and they do not increase upon him nor do they enter with him in details.' The teacher must remain neutral to the outcome; paint a broad picture and be honest and balanced in his instruction.

³³ Accepted what? Not having learned the details or the full picture of what he is to accept, it is impossible for him to accept anything other than this broad and necessarily

stand by his side and acquaint him with some of the minor commandments and with some of the major ones.³⁵ When he comes up after his ablution he is deemed to be an Israelite in all respects.³⁶

In the case of a woman proselyte, women make her sit in the water up to her neck, while two learned men stand outside and give her instruction in some of the minor commandments and some of the major ones...³⁷

The Master said, 'if a man desires to become a proselyte . . . he is to be addressed as follows: "What reason have you for desiring to become a proselyte . . ." and he is made acquainted with some of the minor, and with some of the major commandments'. What is the reason? — In order that if he desire to withdraw let him do so³⁸; for R. Helbo said: Proselytes are as hard for Israel [to endure] as a sore, because it is written in Scripture. And the proselyte shall join himself with them, and they shall cleave to the house of Jacob.³⁹

'He is informed of the sin [of the neglect of the commandment of] Gleanings, the Forgotten Sheaf, the Corner and the Poor Man's Tithe'.⁴⁰ What is the reason? — R. Hiyya b. Abba replied in the name of R. Yohanan: Because a Noahide would rather be killed than spend so much as a prutah which is not returnable.

somewhat vague description. The details of a person's communal and personal expressions must logically be only secondarily important to the rabbi compared to the broader acceptance in his decision to immediately usher him toward the final steps of conversion.

³⁴ *Why two if not for the need for a pluralistic understanding?*

³⁵ *His learning should continue and deepen. Only now that he both knows enough of the basics to ask informed questions and is committed to being a Jew, he has two teachers with, presumably, two different perspectives. Again, the learning moves from the lighter commandments to the more difficult.*

³⁶ *Regardless of which of his teachers/perspectives he is most drawn, he is "deemed to be an Israelite in all respects."*

³⁷ *Women, too, are taught in the same manner.*

³⁸ *This interpretation is consistent with the assertion that the decision is made and he is accepted with the first and broader level of learning.*

³⁹ *He should also know that there are elements within Judaism that are difficult to square; he may encounter ignorance, misunderstanding and misinterpretation from within as well.*

⁴⁰ *That the mitzvot of tzedakah and financially supporting the community is a serious part of belonging to the community. Peoplehood doesn't come cheap.*

'He is not, however, to be persuaded, or dissuaded too much'. R. Eleazar said: What is the Scriptural proof? — It is written, 'And when she saw that she was steadfastly minded to go with her, she left off speaking unto her.'⁴¹ 'We are forbidden', she told her, '[to move on the Sabbath beyond the] Sabbath boundaries'! — 'Where you go' [the other replied] 'I will go'.⁴²

'We are forbidden private meeting between man and woman' — 'Where you lodge, I will lodge'⁴³ 'We have been commanded six hundred and thirteen commandments'! — 'Your people shall be my people'.⁴⁴ 'We are forbidden idolatry'! — 'And your God my God'.⁴⁵ 'Four modes of death were entrusted to Beth din'!⁴⁶ — 'Where you die, will I die'.⁴⁷ 'Two graveyards were placed at the disposal of the Beth din'! — 'And there will I be buried'.⁴⁸ Presently she saw that she was steadfastly minded etc.

'If he accepted, he is circumcised forthwith'. What is the reason? — The performance of a commandment must not in any way be delayed...⁴⁹ As soon as he is healed arrangements are made for his immediate ablution'. Only after he is healed but not before! What is the reason? — Because the water might irritate the wound.⁵⁰ When two learned men must stand by his side'. Did not R. Hiyya, however, state in the name of R. Yohanan that the initiation of a proselyte requires the presence of three? — But, surely. R. Yohanan told the tanna: Read, 'three'.⁵¹

'When he comes up after his ablution he is deemed to be an Israelite in all respects'. In respect of what practical issue? — In that if he retracted and then

⁴¹ Ruth, the prototypical convert, 1:18

⁴² Ruth 1:16. *This is for my whole life.*

⁴³ Ruth 1:16. *I will not separate myself from the community.* (Also from Pirke Avot.)

⁴⁴ Ruth 1:16. *All of them, not just my shul or denomination.*

⁴⁵ Ruth 1:16. *To the exclusion of all other religious traditions.*

⁴⁶ *We see the world through a Jewish lens and live in the world in a Jewish paradigm.*

⁴⁷ Ruth 1:17. *In this world and the next.*

⁴⁸ Ruth 1:17

⁴⁹ *I.e., that accepting and integrating the convert is a mitzvah.*

⁵⁰ *Done foremost with sensitivity and compassion.*

⁵¹ *Three teachers; three perspectives. Pluralism.*

betrothed the daughter of an Israelite he is regarded as a non-conforming Israelite and his betrothal is valid^{52, 53}.

*Our Rabbis taught: A certain heathen once came before Shammai and asked him, 'how many Toroth have you?' 'Two,' he replied: the Written Torah and the Oral Torah. I believe you with respect to the Written, but not with respect to the Oral Torah; make me a proselyte on condition that you teach me the Written Torah [only]. [But] he scolded and repulsed him in anger. When he went before Hillel, he accepted him as a proselyte. On the first day, he taught him, Alef, bet, gimmel, dalet; the following day he reversed [them] to him. 'But yesterday you did not teach them to me thus,' he protested. 'Must you then not rely upon me? Then rely upon me with respect to the Oral [Torah] too.'*⁵⁴

⁵² It is key that the Talmud uses this one practical example (i.e., betrothal/marriage); that which will affect and affirm the Jewish identity of future generations.

⁵³ Talmud Bavli, Yevamot 47a/b. The Talmudic description of how to receive, educate and prepare a person for conversion. The Shulhan Aruch, Yoreh Deah, 268 in Laws concerning converts is shorter, but practically identical.

⁵⁴ Though the convert is taught varying perspectives and may have choice in his own Jewish direction, his choices do not include those independent from teachers and an accepted living heritage of tradition and Biblical interpretation. Thus this text begins with the need for the initiate to understand that being a Jew requires both. This is followed by learning responsibilities toward ones fellow and third, to serving Gd (i.e., Torah, gimilut hasadim and avodah, respectively.)

Hillel is different from Shammai in more than his approach and reaction. Many note Shammai reacting to an affront or assault against Torah or having an impatient nature. They note Hillel's patience. I see this with an additional different perspective.

Without any framework through which to understand the heathen, Shammai doesn't even know how to react to his questions. He's got a blind spot he can't see. So steeped in his learning and community, Shammai can only view the world through this lens. He is so only able to view the world from his learned Jewish paradigm, he can not imagine the heathen is asking an honest question or imagine that the heathen believes he is making a realistic request. Shammai can not see beyond his Jewish way of thinking to have any other kind of reaction to the proselyte.

On the other hand, Hillel understands that the initiate's current perspective of the world prevents him from seeing that what he is asking is ridiculous from a Jewish perspective. Hillel understands that he could only ask questions from the world view in which he lives. In this Hillel is the perfect teacher. He meets him where he is. He believes the heathen was seriously interested in Judaism. Why else would he bother going to the great teachers of the day to ask to be taught? Thus he begins the conversation. Only when the heathen learns the tradition can he begin to frame questions from a Jewish perspective. As further proof of his seriousness, he learns he continues to seek Shammai's perspective despite his initial reaction.

On another occasion it happened that a certain heathen came before Shammai and said to him, 'Make me a proselyte, on condition that you teach me the whole Torah while I stand on one foot.' Thereupon he repulsed him with the builder's cubit which was in his hand. When he went before Hillel, he said to him, 'what is hateful to you, do not to your neighbor: that is the whole Torah, while the rest is the commentary thereof; go and learn it.'

On another occasion it happened that a certain heathen was passing behind a Beit Hamidrash, when he heard the voice of a teacher reciting, 'and these are the garments which they shall make; a breastplate, and an ephod.' Said he, 'for whom are these?' 'For the High Priest,' he was told. Then said that heathen to himself, 'I will go and become a proselyte, that I may be appointed a High Priest.' So he went before Shammai and said to him, 'Make me a proselyte on condition that you appoint me a High Priest.' But he repulsed him with the builder's cubit which was in his hand. He then went before Hillel, who made him a proselyte.⁵⁵ He said he to him, 'can any man be made a king but he who knows the arts of government? Do you go and study the arts of government!' He went and read. When he came to, 'and the stranger that cometh nigh shall be put to death,' he asked him, 'to whom does this verse apply?' 'Even to David King, of Israel,' was the answer...

...Some time later the three met in one place; said they, 'Shammai's impatience sought to drive us from the world, but Hillel's gentleness brought us under the wings of the Shechinah.'⁵⁶

Sources refer to Shammai's decisions as correct in an ideal world. In fact, we are taught that in the days of Mashiach, the law will be according to Shammai. If the ideal world of Mashiach is defined as a world that functions according to God's law through the prism of Torah, it follows that Shammai's perspective would hold and contain that unswerving singular view. With that mindset, he can not even process the heathen's question. It is other-worldly. Hillel is the one who understands that we live in a world which sees things through various prisms and competing loyalties.

⁵⁵ Also seen as a source for turning away a prospective proselyte three times, this can also be understood that he is accepted only after absorbing and accepting the three things on which Judaism sees the world standing (Torah, gimilut hasadim and avodah).

⁵⁶ Talmud Bavli, Shabbat 31a. The Talmud's lesson on competing approaches toward receiving converts and introducing them to what Judaism may offer; the proverbial carrot and stick. This text combined with the Yevamot text above illustrates the tension between creating one's own meaningful personal Jewish philosophical, theological, halakhic and communal practice and it being authentically within traditional Jewish boundaries.

Section 4: The Setting of the Program. Why Is It Important In a Jewish Context?

The Power and importance of the informal setting in Judaism and in establishing a comfortable learning community.

*R. Yohanan said: 'When we studied Torah at the home of R. Oshaia, four of us used to sit [crowded] in the space of one cubit.' Rabbi [Judah I, the Patriarch] said: 'When we studied Torah at the home of R. Eleazar ben Shammua, six of us used to sit [crowded] within the space of one cubit.'*¹

Rabbis Oshaia and Eleazar ben Shammua must have had studio apartments in New York City; similar to Derekh Torah students.

Derekh Torah is a hybrid of formal and informal learning. It has a formal curriculum in an informal setting and with an informal and relaxed tone. After the first orientation class at the 92nd Street Y, all classes are held in the students' homes. Variations to this have occasionally included holding classes in teachers' homes or the offices/businesses of students. As a policy, homes are strongly encouraged. Regardless, the 92nd Street Y never supplies classroom space for subsequent group classes. This tone is typical for a JCC sponsored program:

Jewish Education in the JCC world takes place in an environment that is informal, relaxed and recreational [and]...strives to be highly participatory and welcoming. [The] JCC [is seen] as a gateway.²

The education students receive guides them toward a personal definition (or redefinition or re-evaluation) of Judaism and religion in the context of their family, friendship groups, community and peoplehood. This means that along with the teaching of real and

¹ Talmud Bavli, Eruvin 53a.

² Jewish Education in JCCs: The best practices in Jewish Education project, pgs 33-34

objective material, for the class to do what it means to do, it has to get out of the realm of theoretical and get personal and practical. For that, students have to feel comfortable and safe; with the teacher and with one another. They also have to see it manifesting in the context of their own lives. That is why the informal and personal tone is so important. It encourages the students to really get to know one another and be open with one another without pretense.

The informality encourages people to bring topics they might not think of “religious” into class—broadening their perspective on the scope of Jewish learning and thus its possibilities in their lives. Jewishly infused conversations surrounded by books, photos, art and home tchotchkes personalize the class in a way that cinderblock walls, blackboards and folding tables never could. The setting also allows some--especially hesitant Jews-- to feel safer to ask and explore their Judaism. Their own and the location’s anonymity pushes fewer buttons; it often allows them to become more receptive to engaging with the material on their own terms.

Further, the tone and home setting doesn’t objectify Judaism as a venture as something that only belongs expressed in an institution. Rather, it helps define Judaism as something expressed in broader and more complex terms than “religion” is colloquially defined (i.e., something limited to things done in a church/synagogue, expressed in faith, prayer or as one’s relationship to a more transcendent God.) Often, the cultural and peoplehood element of Judaism is illuminated in student’s home décor. The informality of the setting powerfully underscores the personal, interrelated, decentralized, home-

based nature of Judaism. This is in contradistinction from centralized institutional church paradigms to which some are accustomed. Informality reinforces that Jewish learning and celebration can be done anywhere; that you don't need polished silver and a special building to create powerful Jewish experiences.

This is brought home at the two group Shabbat experiences. Students' ages average in their 20's and early 30's. New York City real estate prices are exorbitantly high and apartments are notoriously small. Restaurants number several to the city block and eating out is part of the culture. All that adds up to Derekh Torah Shabbat meal experiences that are not generally the perfect Hallmark greeting card settings, but those which are consistently powerful experiences. There the interpersonal bonds deepen and they see that yes, you can try this at home! First the Shabbat *seder* is taught and explained in class. Then when it is walked through, experienced and thoroughly enjoyed in a relaxed, friendly and non-judgmental atmosphere, it seems much less foreign, complicated and intimidating than most imagined. Further questions and reflections are offered in the following class.

While perhaps people in their 20's/30's who are dating, engaged or newly married are not representative of many synagogues' demographics, it is in a Derekh Torah group. So while there are many variations of backgrounds and goals, the homogeneity of age and life stage is important to bonding as a community of learners:

Homogeneous age and life situations are two points a programmer uses to set up a havurah. One programmer attempted to create an intergenerational havurah and it did not work well...Based on the interviews of Shawn Locke (1985: 29-30), she

found that there needs to be a period for planning events, acquainting and integrating individuals before any learning projects are pursued.³

This age/stage of life homogeneity powerfully sends the message that even if they don't have many people seriously exploring Judaism in their existing group of friends, they meet others who are. Studying together in the intimacy of a home gives them a tangible experience of living Judaism with others with whom they have things in common.

Always an interesting New York group, Derekh Torah students' similar age and life stage encourages forming friendships with people they would often never get to otherwise meet. It enriches the group experience and, experiencing its value, gives them an imprint for the future and confidence for going out and doing it again in their subsequent Jewish communities.

The role of the teacher in the Derekh Torah setting.

The tone of a Derekh Torah group is essential to its success. The instructor plays a major role in setting the tone which must be informal, relaxed and put the student at ease.

Derekh Torah teachers must have exceptional people skills, be engaging and able to interact comfortably and naturally with all kinds of people. A dispassionate, distant or aloof intellectual/professorial manner is not a successful model for a Derekh Torah instructor.

³ Becker, Seth Jordan, "The Social interactive Component of Jewish Education for older adults," MS dissertation in Gerontology, UCLA, pg 33

The importance of the teacher's ability to draw people in is highlighted in several sources:

The teacher plays an instrumental role in creating the climate through which this deep examination of the self in relation to community and people can be carried out. To accomplish this objective and not simply have a class where the tradition is passed on to the student, the teacher must facilitate an open dialogue that is generated through his or her mere presence and the power of his or her personality.⁴

Flexner continues on the theme of developing rapport with students, quoting the Melton Teacher guide:

... [Facilitating] adult learning based upon genuineness, trust, respect and believability which are the four categories for the indicators of authenticity/credibility.'... The instructor is expected to be the embodiment of the model of a learned person who establishes a close personal relationship with the learners in order to facilitate the learning process.⁵

She further notes the teacher's personal skills and charismatic elements being fundamental to the success of a program and concludes:

"Thus the personality of the instructor transcends the actual techniques of teaching that create the exceptional learning situation. [Successful teachers are reported as]...charismatic, inspiring, enthusiastic...warmth, connection, personable, considered charismatic, establish rapport, can hear or sense when he or she is touching individuals."⁶

In *Derekh Torah*, that tone is set in several ways from the first getting-to-know-you session. The teacher will start by first introducing his/her self and including some personal and perhaps unexpected biographical information while sharing some of his/her spiritual/religious journey and biography. Welcoming each person after their story, the teacher will emphasize both the heterogeneous nature of the group and reinforce their all

⁴ Flexner dissertation/ Facilitating Adult Jewish Learning, pg. 137

⁵ibid Flexner dissertation/ Facilitating Adult Jewish Learning, pg. 138

⁶ibid Flexner dissertation/ Facilitating Adult Jewish Learning, pg. 214

being on the same 30-week path together. Even with ordained clergy, all are on a first name basis and (s)he is encouraged to dress casually. While they will first see their teacher as an authority, model and symbolic representative of a religious ideal, the more students can grow to relate to their teacher personally, the more living Judaism can become a possibility and vision in their own lives. The more accessible and human the teacher is, the more likely that dynamic is:

Perhaps the most important characteristic of the successful education is a nonjudgmental openness to the people whom he or she meets, many of whom are less Jewishly committed or knowledgeable than the educator. Although it is true that educators and rabbis in more conventional settings such as schools or synagogues are generally more learned and involved than their constituents, the formal settings tend to have established norms or expectations that are acknowledged (although not always attained!) by both the educator and the lay participant.⁷

The teacher's role as a guide and facilitator of conversation and community is almost as important as being an educator of the tradition itself. Consistent with this, the teacher must also be available to his/her students outside of class to discuss personal matters. In addition to creating the syllabus and lesson plans for the 30 weeks of classes, the teacher must organize and administer the two Shabbat synagogue/meal experiences.

While not officially part of their job description, some teachers will even invite their students to accompany them to synagogue on Shabbat. Since it is unusual for a *Derekh Torah* teacher to serve as a pulpit rabbi, sitting with their teachers in the pews of a shul can be a valuable learning and integrating experience. This is also true when a teacher either holds class or a Shabbat meal in his/her home. Regardless of where the Shabbat meals are held, the instructor should step out of the teacher's role to a certain degree by

⁷ Jewish Education in JCCs: The best practices in Jewish Education Project, pg. 17

simply modeling enjoying him/herself at a Shabbat celebration. Their Shabbat teaching is through modeling.

Educational programs that feature the individual teacher's concentrated personal attention and interaction with his/her students have distinguished other successful Jewish outreach programs. Aish HaTorah is one such program that has been very successful internationally in getting people excited and involved with the organization's expression and interpretation of Judaism. They offer this digested list of key principle lessons for a teacher's perspective and motivation. Despite Aish HaTorah's different outlook and approach to Judaism, each of these principles on a teacher's relating to and understanding the student have deep parallels in principles governing *Derekh Torah*:

- Lesson 1: We have no choice.
- Lesson 2: The term Ba'al Teshuvah is a misnomer: rather a better term is "*tinok shenishbu*": I.e., babies, Jewish souls that were stolen at infancy and denied access to their rightful heritage. Not sinners.
- Lesson 3: All Jews are *Ma'aminim b'nei ma'aminim*, children of Abraham.
- Lesson 4: Even if you win the argument, you lose. Don't argue. You'll lose them.
- Lesson 5: Find out what is really bothering them. Listen. Speak to what you hear them say.
- Lesson 6: Reassure them that you are not judging them.
- Lesson 7: *Mitzvah goreret mitzvah*.
- Lesson 8: Our enemies are out there, are we?

The Aish HaTorah primer further highlights that every student has four universal needs.

These must be understood in order to effectively teach:

- "Meaning" (referencing Viktor Frankl)
- "Pleasure": asking "what truly makes us happy? Is it unlimited choice in the marketplace? The most popular? Drugs, alcohol, entertainment sports, illusion, escape, bigger, fancier, more exciting everything?" Rather, they suggest, "Or [is

it the] transcendental or experiencing the presence infinitely greater than ourselves. Awe.”

- “Understanding.” They offer Judaism as “Tools for Living: users manual.”
- “Self actualization”: “Reaching our potential of how we are created.”⁸

Finally bringing it all together, an instructor in Derekh Torah will create a setting that combines and cultivates these four essentials which, according to Flexner, “emerged in the literature as having a significant role in the process of learning for adults:

1. Charismatic synergism... [Described in that it] “did not fit into the standard descriptions of a successful learning program.... [The respondents] do not adequately describe the qualities that set these instructors apart. Rather there is a blending of all these described by the indicators which when looked at as a whole, is greater than the sum of the individual parts. The state of being within the classroom, enthusiasm and involvement...its authenticity/credibility includes four major sub-headings: Realness or genuineness, trust, respect and believability... [It includes] the blending of all these.
2. Orchestrated Discussions: [Defined as] collaborative learning, facilitating discussion while being the center, the conductor. Sometimes redirect[ing].
3. The inner motivation: the strength of the motivation to take the course— affects willingness to become involved in the learning environment.
4. Learning as part of a community of learners. “A community of like minded people, synergy of relationships developed with other learners who are seeking similar (spiritual) values...It becomes the motivator both for maintaining an active involvement in the learning process and for providing the energy within the individual to seek a deeper [personal connection.]

Each is important because of the impact it has on the quality of the learning experience and the motivation that attracts the learners to the courses.”⁹

A Derekh Torah group functioning as a paradigmatic precursor for students’ future

Jewish communities: study, fellowship and leadership

⁸ Taken from: Eye of a Needle: Aish HaTorah’s Kiruv Primer, translated and compiled by Yitzchak Coopersmith, Feldheim/Targum Press, 2005

⁹ Flexner Dissertation: Facilitating Adult Jewish Learning, digested from pgs. 252-258

*Provide yourself with a teacher; acquire a friend*¹⁰

A Derekh Torah group may also be seen as a microcosm of the Jewish Community of which a student will hopefully become. Under the guidance of their teacher they will experience together:

- Torah study: In addition to the topical lessons of each class, a devar Torah is generally offered by a different student each week. Most teachers follow the liturgical cycle; some begin week one with Bereshit regardless of the season.
- Life cycle events: At least one couple is regularly planning a wedding during the 30-week course of study. Often several are. They share the small steps and the large; the meaningful and the mundane. They begin to weave what they learn into their plans. Often walking through the Aliya procedure is practice for their Auf ruff.
- They have to work to keep it together (they learn community membership is not just a service business.) Responsibilities for hosting, bringing food, giving divrei Torah and other miscellaneous responsibilities are shared. These are assigned and volunteered for democratically and according to ability and proclivity. Teachers are instructed to encourage their students to take initiative and rely on one another as much as they can (as opposed to relying only on the teacher.) For example, calling one another for a reminder where class is being held; covering for one another in an assignment.

¹⁰ Mishna Avot 1:6

- Holidays: All the Jewish holidays are taught and discussed during the time of year in which they fall and before they occur. This brings the holidays themselves into the consciousness of the students. As opposed to in the more secular areas of their lives, their individual experiences and celebrations are topics of conversation.
- Gimilut hasadim/Tzedakah: Opportunities for modeling values are offered at appropriate times. For example, arranging it so that classmates on scholarship can participate in the Shabbat meal experiences through anonymous class contributions of a couple of extra dollars each or by ability; general tzedakah fund collections; calls and wishes to class members who are struggling in other ways; invitations to Shabbat dinners at one another's homes.
- Friendships grow with Jewish growth as an anchor.
- Prayer: Services on the group field trips, learning brachot and (for some teachers) in practicing regularly in class.
- They have to work through diversity issues and disagreements: Examples of this commonly included:
 - Discussions can get heated and opinions strongly expressed. Guiding the conversations so that all can be heard and spoken to with respect and kindness is a function of the teacher's modeling.
 - Meeting places can be an issue. Some have to host more than others. Others may not get to host at all out of respect for the group (i.e. those who live outside of Manhattan may not host unless all agree it is not a burden. Those with animals or toddlers must defer to those with allergies or who would be distracted.)

- Shabbat and Kashrut/dietary needs of the whole group need to be respected in choosing snacks and locations for the Shabbat get-togethers (including the teacher's).
- Different and divergent personality and learning styles and preferences must be accommodated.

These reinforce the following teaching. The teaching guides the group:

R. Eleazar ben Azariah said: Where there is no Torah, there are no good manners. Where there are no good manners, there is no Torah. . . . Where there is no bread, there is no Torah; where there is no Torah, there is no bread.¹¹

In this way participating in a Derekh Torah group provides an experiential framework for many of the elements of modern Jewish life students may choose to develop in their own lives. In her article “Reframing the Study of Contemporary American Jewish Identity, Connections and Journeys: Shifting Identities among American Jews,”¹² Bethamie Horowitz identifies an important shift in the question of how one's Jewish identity may be measured. She sees the question as having moved from “How Jewish are American Jews?” to “How are American Jews Jewish?” She notes the impact of the very real phenomenon of the American Jewish cultural shift of the last half century. Namely the:

Move from ethnicity from living in neighborhoods to symbolic ethnicity based on actual interaction—[which is] more episodic and potentially voluntary. (Noting) studies by Gans, (1994) “with a consensus emerging that religious aspect of Judaism provides a more enduring framework for Jewish identity than old-style ethnicity

¹¹ Mishnah Avot 3:17

¹² Horowitz, Bethamie in Contemporary Jewry. Article: Reframing the Study of Contemporary American Jewish Identity, Connections and Journeys: Shifting Identities among American Jews

With the last few generations no longer learning Jewish ways through concentrated ethnic neighborhood and family exposure, Derekh Torah provides a well-rounded albeit perhaps remedial experience for born Jews and a solid grounding for new Jews.

In responding to the cultural transitions of the last 50 or so years, the phenomenon of Derekh Torah's success and impact is similar to that of ba'alei teshuvah in that both reflect:

...a process of separate groups of people responding in a similar religious manner to different and particular historical, social, economic or cultural condition. Early studies of religious conversion took the view that only a disturbed individual would actually choose the restrictions of religion over the liberty of modern secular society.¹³

From their Derekh Torah experience, students learn that in various kinds of Jewish institutions, their Jewish expressions can take on any number of forms, combinations and intensities. The expressions can include prayer, social action, study, social/family activities around Shabbat and holidays, community organizing and leadership and raising children in a community/school community.

Similarly, in his work, Robert C. Fuller¹⁴ "looks to modern psychological theories for descriptions of how religion emerges in the lives of individuals and the role it plays in their psychological development."¹⁵ In his attempt "to narrow the definitions of 'religion' in a number of ways," one of the definitions is put more in functional terms:

¹³ Shapiro, Faydra L, "Continuity, Context and Change: Towards an Interpretation of "Teshuvah," in *Journal of Psychology and Judaism*, Vol. 19, No. 4 (1995) pgs. 295-314

¹⁴ Professor of religious studies at Bradley University, Peoria, Illinois in his work, *Religion and the Lifecycle*

¹⁵(Fuller) *ibid*, the synopsis/introduction

...i.e., less what religion is than what it does....facilitate social cohesion, overcoming feeling of fear, loneliness and guilt...giving life meaning and purpose, of orienting persons to a set of goals and values that can be experienced as meaningful and fulfilling...How it functions in common human experiences, i.e. in the context of life transitions such as marriage, having children...¹⁶

Orienting Students toward the synagogue. How it does and doesn't. How important is it and why?

R. Helbo, in the name of R. Huna, says: 'Whosoever has a fixed place for his prayer has the God of Abraham as his helper.' And when he dies, people will say of him: 'Where is the pious man, where is the humble man, one of the disciples of our father Abraham!'¹⁷

This text teaches that we must not only find a regular synagogue, but that we find a regular seat within one's synagogue. It suggests that through becoming a "fixture" in that seat we are established in our community. Though the accuracy of this belief can be debated, it is a commonly held notion among Derekh Torah students (and in Jewish life in general) that a seriously engaged Jewish life and synagogue membership/attendance are closely identified with one another. It is also logical and true that Derekh Torah students at least contemplate joining a synagogue during or after their class series. Further, at least in the case of a person working toward conversion, the sponsoring rabbi and his/her accompanying synagogue hold the keys to the initiate's entry gate into Judaism. Therefore it is paradoxical that prayer, as the central activity of a synagogue, is one of the least understood and most complex elements of Jewish life. Many (Jewish and non-Jewish alike) uninitiated in Hebrew, the liturgy or choreography of prayer report finding the Jewish prayer experience unfulfilling. Further they report that despite their

¹⁶ ibid (Fuller), pgs. 8-9

¹⁷ Talmud Bavli, Brachot 6b

growing and deepening Jewish learning, it doesn't translate and fluidly lead to facility in understanding and participating in synagogue services.

It is impossible to both balance the course and give Derekh Torah students a substantive understanding of the intricately layered, highly choreographed and linguistically dense endeavor that Jewish prayer is. Derekh Torah can not possibly fully orient students to a full understanding/ participation in the prayer experience.¹⁸ So while students are fortified with the substantial Jewish education of Derekh Torah, they often find participation and meaning in Jewish prayer challenging. This is problematic because when they (as most people) encounter synagogue, it is inevitably for a prayer service.

So while there is not sufficient time to give Derekh Torah students sufficient or substantial understanding, skills or background in prayer, they rightly have a hard time envisioning entry into synagogue/community life without more of a connection to it. To help with this tension, Derekh Torah teachers spend time orienting their students to other activities, opportunities and purposes of synagogue life.

With the relatively brief time for synagogue initiation, sometimes the most important orientation information to offer in a Derekh Torah setting is an insider's guide to etiquette and overall choreography; enough to make them feel like they could attend a service without feeling like imposter or bumbling alien. The same goes for navigating certain elements within synagogue administration. Similar to their feelings or reactions to

¹⁸ *Derekh Torah does not have a Hebrew language component. Arguably even if all of Derekh Torah's class time (60 hours) was dedicated to liturgical Hebrew, it would not be enough.*

visiting a synagogue, often students often report that accessing information about their programs is difficult or intimidating as non-members. The growth in web based information is helpful here. While this orientation takes class time away from deepening liturgical understanding, it is essential to their feeling prepared to and confident in taking their next steps into a community and deepening their understanding of prayer.

Hopefully they will internalize that the fullness of Jewish expression includes synagogue participation, even if prayer is something they never fully appreciate. If there is one useful message to offer, it is that only one thing gets you comfortable with and meaning from Jewish prayer: just doing it. Born Jews in the class reinforce the message to Jewish initiates by acknowledging that they, too, often don't really know what's going on; that facility with Jewish prayer is a practice and a skill, not a birthright. However often the answer to "just go" is easier with initiates to Judaism than it is for born Jews. Born Jews often have negative associations with synagogue attendance in their past and are not enthusiastic about taking time and energy to fortify this element of their Jewish practice. Thus the phenomenon of new Jews- by-choice "dragging" their partners to shul to fortify their identity, comfort and knowledge is thus not uncommon.

Lines of Support: Derekh Torah as a touchstone and nexus of support systems.

A story of Monobazos and Zotos, King Ptolemy's sons, who sat reading the book of Genesis: When they reached the verse "And ye shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskin" (Gen. 17:11), each turned his face to the wall and began to weep. Then each of them went and had himself circumcised. After a while, when they again sat and read the book of Genesis, and reached the verse "And ye shall be circumcised," one said to the other, "Alas, my brother." The other replied, "Alas for you, my brother, but not for me." Then each disclosed to the other what

*he had done. When their mother became aware of it, she went and told their father, "Your sons had a growth on their member, and the physician ordered that they be circumcised." He said to her, "Then let them be circumcised."*¹⁹

Like King Ptolemy's sons, students in Derekh Torah do not live in a Judaic bubble. Family, future in-laws, friends, co-workers, rabbis are all in the Jewish network of Derekh Torah students' world, acting as supports and foils, real and imagined. For the born Jew and initiate to conversion, these interconnecting lines of relationships in and out of their Jewish worlds play key roles in solidifying their Jewish futures.

In her study of "assimilated American Jews who became more ethnically defined," Defant identified "social and intrapsychic factors which influenced the return to Judaism."²⁰ In her chapter entitled "Themes in the Return Process," she writes:

An analysis of the ten case studies identified common themes which were organized in terms of the development of the relational self and that of the autonomous self. The themes relating to the relational self include cultural relationships, face-to-face communities, family connectedness, and personal relationships... (There is considerable overlap between the themes.)

- a. Having a culture which belonged to them. History, people, community, language rituals, traditions.
- b. Having allegiances to a worldwide Jewish community.
- c. Small group affiliations, extended family.
- d. Connectedness to family: some more, some less freedom within a definition of Judaism.
- e. Powerful personal relationships: romantic, teacher/mentor, friendship (with some enthusiasm).
- f. Helping with adult identity formation. The stage of consolidating their adult identities is at a key place in their lives.
- g. Transitional phenomena: use of ritual and prayer—serving different purposes with different imageries of purpose and effect, even within the same individual. Soothing, connection to, regenerative, relaxing, personal exploration and expiation, resolution of conflicts, advantage of structure

¹⁹ Genesis Rabba, 46:10

²⁰ Defant, Miriam, "Returning to Judaism: Ethnic Identity, Religiosity and the sense of Self," PhD dissertation, University of Massachusetts, 1990, abstract.

added to their lives, giving perspective and structure to their lives, orderliness, intentionality.”²¹

The Derekh Torah class often acts as the nexus point of their Jewish world. In many ways, a student’s weekly Derekh Torah class becomes a grounding place, their Jewish home base for 30 weeks. Every category of Jewish experience--in their current and future families, at work, in synagogue in the news or out shopping-- gets processed, culturally religiously and spiritually translated, contextualized, supported in their Derekh Torah group.

Family, especially parents and future in-laws are naturally often felt as a powerful influence. Defant further notes that:

...generational interconnectedness is a consistent theme of the family life-cycle concept. One of the most powerful forces in the family is emotional connectedness...The life course of an individual may be seen as a reflection in his or her emotional connection and reactivity to parents... [There is] sensitivity to the existing bonds within the family, [who may have such feelings as] mourning expectations, acknowledgement of how they are different, yet not wholly rejected...[and notes the] conflict family members may experience over invisible loyalties...” American families, in particular, have difficulty acknowledging their interdependence and wishes for connectedness.²²

For Jew and non-Jew alike, the Derekh Torah journey is often an intricate dance with parents and in-laws. Each is forging new maturing relationships to one another while forging a (perhaps different) relationship to Judaism. Derekh Torah teachers are there for support and advice. Key to sustaining these crucial relationships is honest loving dialogue with everyone involved. For a couple in which a member is converting, Epstein acknowledges the influence Jewish parents can have:

²¹ Ibid (Defant dissertation), pgs. 147-185

²² Ibid (Defant dissertation), pg. 30.

Question: I've got Jewish in laws. Do they have any role to play in my conversion?

Answer: While most...[are a] source of support, others [...are..] not. Jewish families, like all families, differ greatly. ...For example, I was brought up [with] incomplete and inaccurate [information and] to believe that converts could not ever genuinely be Jewish... Some parents experience feelings of pain, guilt anger and helplessness.”

To the in-laws: Accept and welcome that partner. Help the partner become part of Jewish life. Explain all you can, give them a sense of feeling part of the Jewish people, of pride in being Jewish and knowledge about some of the expressions, food attitudes and so on. Celebrate. Have a Sabbath meal together... Passover... Help your grandchildren lead Jewish lives. Tell them stories about your parents; let the Jewish community know how wonderful it is to welcome those who become Jewish and your positive experience.²³

Fortunately, most in-laws are very happy that Judaism is being so well received by their child's (initially) non-Jewish partner and are very supportive of their process, even if it is not taking on the form or expression they would chose. As an instructor in *Derekh Torah*, I would advise such a student to cultivate their relationship with their in-laws as Jewish mentors and guides as much as possible.

Such is not always the reception from the non-Jewish parents of the student moving toward Judaism. While the move can be tremendously supported in many emotional and tangible forms, so too can it be a terrible source of distress for the adult child struggling with being the cause of pain and disapproval from the parents they love. Similarly so with Jews who are gravitating toward a different Jewish expression from their youth and from their parents. For people in this category, ongoing support and acceptance is all the more crucial for them to continue to feel settled in the Jewish community.

²³ Epstein, Lawrence J. Questions and Answers on Conversion to Judaism, pgs. 84-85

From the communal perspective, Sibil Montgomery studies the “integration of Jews by choice into the Philadelphia Jewish community in her dissertation.”²⁴ In stressing the need for “social integration” she details commonly expressed experiences of Jews-by-choice. Her subjects reported:

- Feelings of alienation...
- Non-Jewish friends and family [who] didn’t approve or understand...
- Insults and insensitivities from Jews in shul...
- [Feelings of growing] weary of explaining why they don’t look Jewish...
- [Others having an attitude of] They are [now] Jewish and that’s that [which] may lead to withdrawing support too early....
- Feeling abandoned; [that] conversion was only the beginning. It takes time...
- [Having a] positive experience with their rabbi, a supportive partners and in laws.

[Her subjects also reported] needing:

- A social network rooting that [can] last...
- Acceptance as Jews and positive Jewish role models...
- Activities to continue their socialization process...
- Emotional support...
- Informational and referral services...
- The Jewish Converts Network JCN...

[Finally,]

Respondents played a key role in their own socializing by participating...they facilitated the acquisition a Jewish religious system and ritual behavior, and enhanced their Jewish belief system [and reported that it was] initially a religious process and then it moved into a socialization and broader process of identity and belonging.”

It is essential that people in new Jews’ lives are aware and sensitive to these things.

Especially since formal conversion happens near the end of many students’ 30 week

Derekh Torah series, it can leave many needing a similar support network. Fortunately

²⁴ Montgomery, Sibil E., “The Integration of Jews By Choice into the Philadelphia Jewish Community, PhD dissertation in Social Work, Rutgers, SUNJ, 1991

successful groups run in New York and the students often independently maintain the personal relationships formed during Derekh Torah for years.

What it means to be engaged in a non-institutional, trans-denominational and non-coercive exploration; for there to be “no strings attached.”

It is certainly the case that many, even most, enroll in Derekh Torah as a tool to a particular outcome (i.e. conversion, marriage, etc.) and not for its own sake. This program is for those who pursue Judaism purely for its own sake. It is also for those for whom the nature of the outcome of their study is not entirely open and independently chosen. The trans-denominational and pluralistic perspective of Derekh Torah will be more extensively explored in chapter 5 below. However, an important element of the overall program is its official stance of not being invested in any one particular outcome of the students' Derekh Torah education, conversion or a specific denominational affiliation being only one element within a range of possible outcomes. The ideal is that Torah should be pursued for her own sake and freely embraced. However we recognize the potential for something even as beautiful and life affirming as Torah can cause damage when approached from a corrupted position.

As explored above, though people span a wide spectrum, Derekh Torah students rarely come from a completely neutral Jewish or religious background. To a certain extent, Derekh Torah students are a self selecting group in their choice of a neutral program. One reason it may attract a wide variety of people is simply the large number of Derekh Torah classes offered yearly. However, people invested in or open to learning specific

perspectives have a few other options in denominationally or institutionally based programs in the New York area. Though the stories are varied, this neutrality helps people and couples who commonly express and share these circumstances:

- Want a broad range of understanding Judaism outside a purely religious or synagogue framework.
- Are feeling pressure to convert in a particular denomination/community, usually by the Jewish partner's family.
- Are attracted to Judaism, but don't know enough about the tradition to ask the questions necessary to make informed decision as to where they might fit and how to get there.
- Have tangentially explored several variations and expressions within Judaism over time and feel like they don't want to limit the perspective of their learning.
- Grew up in one expression of Judaism; loved it enough to feel connected and identified, but found it sufficiently lacking to want to learn a broader perspective.
- Jews especially may even be suspicious of the whole enterprise or any one perspective of Judaism. With a "buyer beware" attitude, they arrive needing a laissez-faire attitude; a buffet table of options set for them with an a la carte menu.
- For those on the conversion track: they want to pose their questions to and struggle with a disinterested un-invested party. They may feel inhibited to ask really hard questions of the rabbi or congregation with whom they are working toward conversion; they may feel self-conscious about expressing doubt or anger with their gatekeeper into the tradition. This is especially prevalent with people

who have been chastised or punished in other religious traditions in the past by rigorous or seemingly irreverent questioning.

- Who seek plurality in the nature of Jewish expression. Some incoming students define themselves as “cultural Jews.” While this may mean several different things, upon probing, I find it commonly defines a person with a (sometimes proud) Jewish identity who have most (or all) synagogue, ritual, spiritual and many/all forms of communal affiliation or participation absent from their lives. As such, Judaism may have been felt or defined as an affinity for Jews with “Jewish humor,” food, music, history and other cultural expressions. While deeply felt and sensed as an important source of communal richness, many seek Jewish answers to philosophical or theological questions not often asked in more cultural realms. While these elements of Jewish life and identity will be explored and celebrated as part of an all encompassing Jewish experience, the program is not shy about teaching these cultural expressions as a piece of a deeper heritage and way of life. Both the cultural elements and religious traditions are integral elements of a broader definition of Judaism which can not be separated. At the same time, Derekh Torah will not teach a life of religious ritual and belief or devotion to God is the only way to express a Jewish life. Study, social action, community service, acts of *gimilut hasadim* and raising or donating *tzedakah* are important and equally valid elements of an overall Jewish life.

Derekh Torah is not a “proselytizing” program, i.e., the program does not try to talk anyone into converting or to change his/her practice. If a student wants to convert, we

will support him/her in numerous ways as outlined above on that path. We will support, welcome and teach them equally if they are not on that path. (It should be noted that some decide to convert well after the class ends.) Derekh Torah's insistence on having a neutral position and not acting in the role of or being officially connected to anyone's personal or institutional gatekeeper or judge supports this.

Similarly, Derekh Torah is not invested in couples (notably without children) staying together. This is especially so if a couple's Derekh Torah education serves to clarify or bring to consciousness that religious differences and identities are more important than the couple originally thought. At the same time, we will not insist there is one right religious formula for an interfaith couple to have a satisfying family life. Therefore if a couple breaks up over religious differences before having children, it is sad for the couple and stressful for the class. At the same time it is a powerful moment for all to recognize how much more pronounced and difficult to overcome those differences will become as a relationship matures and children are no longer theoretical. Better to break up before children than to begin one's first blessed week of parenthood arguing over whether to welcome the child with a brit milah or a baptism.

While as an institution, the 92nd Street Y's mission is to serve all people from all backgrounds in their programming, in regard to its independence, Derekh Torah is a paradigmatically Jewish Community Center (JCC) program in that at the Center:

The educatory needs to be comfortable with a wide range of behaviors, beliefs, and knowledge- and expectations of "success" or conformity to "what we do here" needs to be very fluid and often undefined. An educatory unable to meet the "client where he or she is" will not succeed in a JCC. Thus a Center educatory

must be willing to accept the various Jewish choices that Center members may make.²⁵

This may not always be so easy for Derekh Torah educators who must be passionate about Judaism to be effective teachers, but it is also essential. At its core, Derekh Torah aims to help people find where Judaism fits in them and where they fit into Judaism; where it resonates with them communally spiritually, practically, philosophically, halakhically and denominationally. This independence forces a more complex understanding of the many continua of Judaism and encourages students to ask: Is this for me at all? If it is, where and how does it resonate? What are the most important elements for me? Where can I get invested and serious or not? How? When? All of this helps students come to Torah and Judaism freely chosen and in an informed and more committed manner.

²⁵Jewish Education in JCCs: The best practices in Jewish Education project, pg. 17

5. Perspective: Pluralism

*Rabbi Yannai said: 'Had the Torah been given in one cut (i.e., as one final, unchangeable opinion in all matters) without any possibility for divergent opinions, we could not stand on our feet.'*¹

Derekh Torah teaches Judaism from a pluralistic and cross-denominational perspective, reflecting the fact that Judaism contains a multiplicity of expressions, beliefs and definitions within itself; and, within limits, has a range of expression and thought within every Jewish denomination, community, home, couple and even Jew. As has been said before, the purpose of the Derekh Torah program is to present Judaism in its broadest and truest possible forms, beliefs and expressions.

Its approach is pluralistic in that it does not (merely) tolerate divergent Jewish perspectives: "Tolerance has overtones, which in relation to the tolerated are both pejorative and condescending."² Rather, varying approaches are recognized as legitimate, justified, supported and defended choices. Similarly:

Pluralism does not inform the content of our beliefs....the term 'pluralism' serves as the prescription for the lens through which we look at and see each other and those outside of the Jewish people.³

Its approach is transdenominational not by teaching the existence of one "common approach to Jewish theology and practice."⁴ Rather it is transdenominational by

¹ Talmud Yerushalmi, Sanhedrin 4:2, as translated by Rabbi Dov Lerea in the Abraham Joshua Heschel School handbook.

² Greenberg, Simon, Pluralism and Jewish Education, Vol. 81 no. 1 winter 1986

³ Lerea, Dov, "What Does It Mean To Be a Parent in a Pluralistic Jewish Day School?" (May 1999), Written in his capacity as Director of Judaic Studies of The Abraham Joshua Heschel School in New York.

⁴ Akiba Hebrew Academy, Report of the Pluralism Committee, October 4, 1999, pg. 2, www.akibaweb.org/plural.htm

attempting to evenhandedly present the denominations' many understandings and manifestations of Judaism.

The program has no pre-conceived goals for where the students end up other than in a position to make educated and informed choices about their Jewish identity and affiliation. The goal of the program is to enable and empower students to take their next steps into the Jewish community if and however they are drawn. These tenets are essential to both serve the needs of the students found in Derekh Torah and an important piece of why the program serves an essential function integrating people into today's Jewish America.

Why is the pluralistic perspective essential in Derekh Torah?

While a substantial number of texts are included in this work to support this perspective, the purpose of this chapter is not to justify pluralism as a valid approach. The discussion begins with the premise that it is a valid perspective from which to teach and view Judaism.

The Derekh Torah program is first and foremost an outreach/inreach program looking to attract as many as possible who are drawn to Judaism or toward a deeper appreciation of and involvement in the tradition. Jewish institutions are responding to the studies they have commissioned revealing record high Jewish intermarriage rates and record low Jewish affiliation and identification rates. Derekh Torah is symptomatic of one such response, reaching out, welcoming and orienting non-Jews and disenfranchised Jews to

Judaism. Within that cultural reality and definition, Derekh Torah is sponsored by an institution that celebrates diversity as a strength within itself as Jewish institution and within Judaism itself. The program fits well within the philosophy of 92nd Street Y as serving the needs of a diverse Jewish community and city. So from the perspective of the institution, the city and culture in which it operates, Jewish pluralism is both simply a reality and the place from which to begin any discussion. Further, the program requires this stance to serve the needs of the students as a microcosm of American Jews. However, in that it is one approach among many possible approaches, this section explores why it is an important element of the program.

Incoming Derekh Torah students are frequently wrestling with complex family and cultural interactions around Judaism and Jewish choices greater than perhaps at any time in Jewish History. Gone is the day in America where Jews all live in tight knit communities with well defined and communally followed traditional norms. Even within families it is the norm that Jewish practice and affiliation differs from one generation to another. It is often diverse even within the same adult generation. Even for a Jew, living a Jewish life is another lifestyle or values choice on a continuum that goes from “completely off the Jewish map” to Haredi. At the same time, it’s hard to find a Jew who doesn’t have an intermarried relative. The demand for workshops for interfaith couples⁵ has greatly diminished. Simply put, being Jewish or raising a Jewish family is just one of several options Jews have. Consistent with the capitalist market society in which we thrive, American Judaism and the form it may take can be seen as just another expression

⁵ In 2003, the 92nd Street Y ran 6-8 of these workshops yearly. In 2006-7 only 1 class had sufficient registration to run. Other JCCs report similar trends. Apparently increasingly couples don’t believe that being interfaith requires a workshop.

of supply and demand. As products of our overall society which has emphasized that no one form of religion is referenced, Derekh Torah students are accustomed to personal choice and religious freedom as an inalienable right. This is the case even as they know, experience or learn that they can choose to live a Judaism defined by more personal responsibility than personal choice. Further, they either sense or know that a single denomination's perspective does not give them the full range of choice or perspective they desire.

This is a reality of modernity in which various expressions of Judaism are thriving for those who choose to engage or invest in it. As the longitudinal survey of the impact of Derekh Torah shows, many students report choosing to make Judaism a more central part of their lives after completing the program. This is similar in nature if not degree to the oft reported ba'al teshuvah movement. While some deride this shift as retrogression from individual choice and freedom; others clearly interpret it as another expression of modern personal choice:

...even if the Ba'al Teshuva arrives at a final behavior that approximates his or her ideal from the past, the method of arriving from that past, as well as the permeability of the self imposed borders, marks the Ba'al Teshuva as a modernist. This argument for the modern character of the Ba'al Teshuvah movement may seem [as follows;] ...liberals, like traditionalists, tend to see "authenticity" in exceedingly monistic terms, and to assume that diversity and "authenticity" are incompatible. If liberal Jews, however, would recognize the modernism implicit in the Ba'al Teshuvah movement, their fears of winding up in eighteenth century Cracow or Warsaw would be considerably assuaged.⁶

⁶ Levenson, Alan Todd, Reclaiming the 'Ba'al Teshuva' Movement: a Liberal Critique: CCAR Journal, Vol. 40, No. 1 (1993), pgs. 22-23

While there are some students who begin the class clear about their Jewish denominational directions, it is not the norm. Most students have many questions and are open to exploration; they have a connection to (at least some) history with and a curiosity about Judaism. Their attraction often lives alongside a skepticism or suspicion that Judaism and its complexities and inconsistencies are incompatible with one another or inconsistent with their lives. They need the pluralistic approach to clarify their choices.

For some students, denominational affiliation is a looming question (more commonly in the guise of Orthodoxy vs. a form of Liberal Judaism, but not always.). While most students in *Derekh Torah* do not ultimately affiliate with even “Modern” Orthodox communities, however, it is common enough that students have Orthodox (or Israeli) family members or backgrounds themselves. If they ultimately choose a more liberal expression, they need to be able to understand and even justify liberal Judaism within the framework of the Judaism they encounter from their family or their past lives/education. Unfortunately, I meet many who have been offered a lot of negative and de-legitimizing (and often untrue) “information” regarding liberal Judaism. These students choose a pluralistic course because they are not able to intellectually or emotionally either choose or reject a program that is entirely traditional or entirely liberal in its scope.

Students with no or limited exposure to traditional forms or ideas of Judaism soon grasp that there is more to the subject for them to personally consider than they may have originally thought. They need concepts and practices that were heretofore foreign or esoteric framed into comprehensible and accessible language. They also can come with a

sense that (ultra-) Orthodoxy is the only legitimate or “real” form of Judaism and need a frame in which to understand and legitimize liberal Judaism. Both groups need a frame which validates and broadens the range of Jewish choices.

It is also not uncommon for Derekh Torah students to begin with preconceived and often incorrect or even hostile ideas about denominations, either their own or others including⁷:

- “We were “Reformed,” so (that means) we didn’t do anything, maybe a Passover seder or Rosh Hashanah dinner with family, but we didn’t belong to a Temple for most of or any of my childhood.”
- “They were really Orthodox; they kept kosher and went to synagogue almost every week.”
- “I’m Conservative, but we won’t be “accepted” there. If he doesn’t convert, the only place we could ever go is a Reform Temple”
- “I’m not *dati*, but I’m Israeli; I know what’s the *right way* of Jewish. I don’t care if she converts, but it would have to be Reform; there’s no way we’re going to deal with *one of those* (Orthodox) rabbis. I’ve heard about those conversions; it’s a nightmare; they are robbers; they lead you on for years and take your money. I want my children to be considered Jewish in Israel, so we’ll find a rabbi there to convert the children if we have to.”
- “She and my children will never be considered Jewish with my family/in my home community if it’s not an Orthodox conversion.”

⁷The list represents a sampling of such notions; (not uncommonly expressed) by prospective students at their intake sessions.

- “Regarding (having an Orthodox or liberal) conversion, my cousin in Israel told me, ‘you can have clean water or you can have dirty water.’”

These notions are reinforced in Bethamie Horowitz’s research; noting the prevalence and problems of Jewish identity being tied in with denominationalism:

Denominations (e.g. Orthodox, Conservative, Reform) have become one of the most common sociological shorthands for describing a person’s Jewishness, although the various denominations refer to particular institutional affiliations with underlying ideological positions about Judaism and modernity. While there are observant Jews of all denominations, the widespread reliance on the idea of denomination has turned into an index of religious observance (ranging from high to low)... [and is] now used as an index of determining someone’s future Jewishness.

She sees denominational affiliation as problematic way of describing someone’s Jewish identity. Why?

People are confused by it; they use it as a measure of involvement; high involvement is equated with Orthodoxy; low/no involvement is equated with Reform. [Further], it doesn’t speak to their cultural/civic Jewish involvement... Mostly a problem with both denomination and affiliation as proxies for identity is that both characterize all Jews by relying upon a single scaled dimension ranging from “high” to “low” or from “none” to “some.”

To allow for a more pluralistic and perhaps more personalized view of the ways that Jewishness may be exemplified, it may be more helpful conceptually to move away from thinking about Jewish identity as a single dimension that can be scaled, and instead to start conceptualizing Jewishness in terms of different types or ways of being. We would then be saying that there are different ways of connecting to Jewish life in America today, and what is needed is a better understanding of the full range of connections.⁸

Teaching Judaism in a pluralistic manner helps to debunk denominational stereotypes and definitions that are not always helpful. *Derekh Torah*’s approach to Judaism as a whole is consistent with this way of understanding Judaism in America today.

⁸ Horowitz, Bethamie. 2002. “Reframing the Study of Contemporary American Jewish Identity.” *Contemporary Jewry* 23, pgs 14-34.

Appreciating and understanding the diversity in Judaism helps the ambiguity and paradox inherent in the tradition seem manageable, even beautiful:

The divine origin of the Torah does not guarantee singleness of meaning. The student of Torah must develop a receptivity to the various manifestations of truth...This demands a high tolerance for ambiguity.⁹

Learning Judaism in its totality of expression also encourages a love and affinity for *clal Israel*, all of the Jewish people and an appreciation for the wisdom inherent in the tradition as a whole.

Learning about Judaism as a plurality of expression and belief also allows students to learn about Judaism in honest historical context. Historically and organizationally speaking, like much of Judaism from the beginning, each denomination formed and grew to prominence by responding to cultural forces in their day affecting Jews and Judaism. All of the denominations thus began by recognizing a spiritual or communal need or void and formed professional and communal associations to serve that need. This is a natural holy force. To be successful, the need must first be filled. To survive, denominations, like all organizations, must sustain themselves after that original void or need is no longer as pronounced, if it still exists at all.

To sustain itself after being successful in serving its original mission, it must nurture two elements concurrently. One is to remain conducive to addressing new and changing needs; the other is to somehow develop “brand loyalty.” Today’s denominations recognize this and to a greater and lesser extent are working to do both. The shift to accommodate religious and spiritual needs and modern realities may be interpreted as

⁹ Kimmelman, Reuben, “Judaism and Pluralism,” *Modern Judaism*, Vol. 7, 1987, p. 139.

holy work or “*l’shem shamayim*.” Alternatively, approaches to building brand loyalty that illegitimize or merely tolerate other “brands” can become divisive and be seen as “*lo l’shem shamayim*.”¹⁰ There are many today who feel that they have been part of a Judaism that, for several reasons, is either no longer conducive to their needs or no longer deserves their brand loyalty.

People sense the inappropriate and dangerous nature of divisiveness or triumphalism in religion at this time in history. Even if it were true that a uniform expression of Judaism was ever the norm, it is not one that many see as a desirable state today. While there are many who are comfortable and satisfied with a Jewishly insular view of the world, many others are not.

Teaching a Judaism with an imbalanced emphasis on a Jewish world or denomination that either no longer exists nor does not reflect the needs of its members is incomplete and will not survive.¹¹

Nonetheless, imposing on the past a single mold not only ignores the complexity of past Jewish experience but facilitates denial of the spiritual fragmentation which characterizes modernity. A nostalgic yearning for a uniform past that never was leads to a disinclination to face the multiform expressions that exist today. Modernity has cracked the facade of uniformity... [Concluding] God’s will is only partially disclosed in each historical tradition or personal revelation...Are not denominations the institutionalization of divisiveness? It all

¹⁰ “For the sake of heaven,” as described in Mishnah Avot, 5.17:

“Every controversy that is in the name of heaven, the end thereof is [destined] to result in something permanent; but one that is not in the name of heaven, the end thereof is not [destined] to result in something permanent. Which is the [kind of] controversy that is in the name of heaven? Such as was the controversy between Hillel and Shammai; and which is the [kind of] controversy that is not in the name of heaven? Such as was the controversy of Korach and all his congregation.”

A controversy of Hillel and Shammai may be interpreted as for the future and wellbeing of the Jewish people and a larger truth (see Yevamot 13b-14b below). One of Korach and his congregation may be described as one for the sake of power and control; for the love of victory.

¹¹ Kimmelman, Reuben, “Judaism and Pluralism,” *Modern Judaism*, Vol. 7, 1987, p. 139

depends on whether the denomination is Ptolemaic or Copernican. Those denominations that see themselves as the center of the Jewish solar system with all else revolving around them cannot but prove to be divisive. It takes a Copernican shift to realize that God, Torah, the Jewish people, and the land of Israel constitute the hub of the Jewish solar system...¹²

Pluralism is a reaction to insular trends on all ends of the spectrum. Dissatisfaction with the inflexibility or turf guarding that characterizes platforms, rhetoric, positions or Jewish definitions of denominations point to pluralism as the most Jewishly and intellectually honest perspective. This perspective can arguably only be taught in a program that doesn't have to toe a denominational party line.

Additionally, a pluralistic perspective is a characteristic of successful adult Jewish education:

Perhaps the most important characteristic of the successful education is a nonjudgmental openness to the people whom he or she meets....At the Center, however, the educatory needs to be comfortable with a wide range of behaviors, beliefs, and knowledge- and expectations of "success" or conformity to "what we do here" needs to be very fluid and often undefined. An educatory unable to meet the "client where he or she is" will not succeed in a JCC. Thus a Center educatory must be willing to accept the various Jewish choices that Center members may make. For example, we heard an Orthodox educatory in once Center enthusiastically talk about a member who had participated in his classes and then joined a local Reform synagogue. Not all educatory are able to take such a stance. ... "I don't care what Jewish path they take, but I do want them to be on a path!"¹³

A pluralist perspective of Judaism supports the consistently heterogeneous nature of the group. It sends the message that everyone's voice and perspective in the group is essential. This creates a supportive environment in which to learn and reinforces the

¹² Kimmelman, Reuben, "Judaism and Pluralism," *Modern Judaism*, Vol. 7, 1987, pg. 143 & 145.

¹³ Cohen, Stephen, *Jewish Education in JCCs: The best Practices Project in Jewish Education 1996*, pg. 17

important overall message that just as in the group, there is a place for their perspective within the Jewish people:

And why do they record the opinions of Shammai and Hillel to set them aside?— To teach the following generations that a man should not [always] persist in his opinion, for behold, the fathers of the world did not persist in their opinion.

And why do they record the opinion of a single person among the many, when the halakha must be according to the opinion of the many? So that if a court prefers the opinion of the single person it may depend on him. For no court may set aside the decision of another court unless it is greater than it is in wisdom and number. If it was greater than it in wisdom but not in number, in number but not in wisdom, it may not set aside its decision, unless it is greater than it in wisdom and in number.

R. Judah said: If so, who do they record the opinion of a single person among the many to set it aside? So that if a man shall say, thus have I learned the tradition,' it may be said to him, 'according to the [refuted] opinion of that individual did you hear it.'¹⁴

Finally, embracing the heterogeneous makeup of the class is a key element to success in developing the class dynamic. The non-judgmental and pluralistic approach to teaching the class must be extended beyond the denominational or even the Judaic. For example, vegetarian and other dietary restrictions are respected in addition to kashrut; everyone's needs (i.e. allergies or convenience) and schedules are factors in choosing class locations, Shabbat locations and the occasional make-up session. This is the way of Torah;¹⁵ ways of pleasantness and peace¹⁶:

Though these forbade what the others permitted, and these regarded as ineligible what the others declared eligible, Beit Shammai nevertheless did not refrain from marrying women from [the families of] Beit Hillel, nor did Beit Hillel [refrain from marrying women] from [the families of] Beit Shammai. [Similarly, in respect to] all [questions of ritual] cleanness and uncleanness, which these declared clean where the others declared unclean, neither of them abstained from using the utensils of the others for the preparation of food that was ritually

¹⁴ Mishna Eduyot 1:4,5,6

¹⁵ The translation of "Derekh Torah."

¹⁶ Siddur, at the conclusion of the Torah service.

clean...Come and hear: Although Beth Shammai and Beth Hillel are in disagreement on [many related questions], they nevertheless, did not abstain from marrying women [of each other's houses]...

This is to teach you that they showed love and friendship towards one another, thus putting into practice the Scriptural text, Love ye truth and peace.¹⁷

As this text suggests, pluralism means concentrating foremost on areas of commonality without ignoring differences.

Pluralism within pluralism: Exploring the espoused religion and the practiced religion within denominations (–or- A practical guide for decision making: negotiating practices and principles.)

R. Hamnuna (further) said: If one sees a crowd of Israelites, he should say: "Blessed is He who [holds the] wisdom of secrets."

[What does this mean?] Our Rabbis taught: : "If one sees a crowd of Israelites, he says, 'Blessed is He who [holds the] wisdom of [inner] secrets,' for the mind of each is different from that of the other, just as the face of each is different from that of the other.: "¹⁸

R. Yannai said: The Torah which the Holy One, blessed be He, gave to Moses was delivered to him in forty-nine aspects of uncleanness and forty-nine aspects of cleanness.¹⁹

R. Abbahu stated in the name of R. Yohanan: "R. Meir had a disciple of the name of Symmachus who, for every rule concerning ritual uncleanness, supplied forty-eight reasons in support of its uncleanness and for every rule concerning ritual cleanness, forty-eight reasons in support of its cleanness."²⁰

¹⁷ Talmud Bavli, Yevamot 13b-14b. It is also interesting to note that so many traditional texts supporting and describing pluralism and conversion centers around marriage and divorce (they are either used as an example or they appear in those sections, such as here Yevamot 13b. This suggests it has been a source of tension and concern in the tradition from the beginning.

¹⁸ Talmud Bavli, Brachot 58a, as the appropriate response of awe in recognizing the infinite multiplicity of inner possibilities and personalities within humanity.

¹⁹ Talmud Yerushalmi, Sanhedrin 4:2, asserting that the initial revelation itself provided the justification for flexibility in interpretation. 49 is the number of unlimited possibilities (7x7); 7 as completion, perfection.

²⁰ Talmud Bavli, Eruvin 13b. 48 is the number of almost unlimited possibilities (7x7)-1.

Both these texts celebrate complexity and diversity as part of the divine plan for people and Torah. The first text illustrates the uniqueness of each person. Each Jew's unique way of seeing and being in the world makes creating categories and divisions in which every one should fit impossible. The second text makes a similar pronouncement as it relates to the criteria for evaluating practical divisions within Torah.

While every teacher fields questions about how “the very Orthodox do things” (i.e., the Haredim) as if a benchmark of authenticity, mostly they are asked because students are looking trying to understand the various boundaries of Jewish thought and expression. While they appreciate and want the pluralistic perspective, they are also are looking for real practical benchmarks and norms to place in neatly tied-up denominational boxes. Of course the answer is that “very Orthodox” expression is not monolithic, just as “non Orthodox” expression is not monolithic. Students learn that while each community has boundaries, there are ranges of interpretation and expression within each subcategory of thought, principle and law. Similarly, we also find a wide range of belief and attitude within denominations.

These questions underscore an important Jewish reality. While there are very Jewishly sound philosophical reasons that a pluralistic approach should be taught in such a class, there are also very pragmatic reasons. One is the reality that there are many (even most) people who affiliate and even identify with denominationally affiliated communities who do not agree with or follow all the philosophical and practical tenets of that

denomination. This is the case even within clergy²¹, who are the seen as epitomizing the tradition. It means they learn that:

- Not everyone who belongs to a Conservative congregation understands the Hebrew language in which they pray or keeps kosher (either in or outside of the home).
- Not everyone who affiliates with an Orthodox shul refrains from driving or shopping on Shabbat. Even when they do, some believe that the Written and Oral Torah was given to Moshe on Sinai; others (especially in private) may not.
- Some Reconstructionist congregations recognize patrilineal descent and are comfortable with traditional God language; others are not.
- Some Reform synagogues allow non-Jews to the *bimah* for an *aliya* and observe two days of Rosh Hashana; others don't.
- Some Reform synagogues only allow the clergy physical access to the Torah on Shabbat and regularly remove significant parts of central prayers from Shabbat or holiday services, unheard of in the rest of the Jewish world.
- That despite its accessibility and outreach and the fact that Reform rabbis *may* perform an interfaith ceremony, many will not and fewer still will co-officiate with non-Jewish clergy.

Learning the truth of this state of affairs is often a shocking relief. It means that they, too, don't have to have things so neatly tied up to fit in; now or ever. If it were taught

²¹ I often use the example of two rabbinic colleagues. One is Reform and one is Orthodox. My Reform colleague proudly refers to himself as a Reform Jew maintaining his right of personal choice in determining his own halakhic practice, which is orthoprax for all intents and purposes. Aside from regularly praying without a mehitza, his practice is indistinguishable from Orthodoxy. Conversely, I have an colleague with Orthodox smicha and practice who openly affirms Gay and Lesbian Jewish marriage and the ordination of women as well as openly holding and teaching other opinions either at odds with or controversial in Orthodox scholarly circles.

that everyone had to believe and follow their denominational line (or hold it as a goal) to affiliate, we would either be encouraging hypocrisy or non-affiliation. It also helps them feel less judgmental about choices others make; it helps them to understand that all Jews making different choices are similarly multidimensional in their thinking. Further, they are often making complex choices for themselves and their families and thus may not be as judgmental toward them as they imagine. Of course, this also solidifies the notion of belonging to one people, not a denomination.

At the same time it leaves students unsettled with a perhaps more complex decisions to make as to the criteria for deciding where they fit best. Do they affiliate based on their ideal if they are not (yet) living it? Alternatively, do they affiliate with a community of like minded and practicing fellows, even if it does not support a Judaism to which they are completely attracted? This is often an opportunity to discuss the irrational nature and emotional ties to one's Jewish practice. While there are often sound theological and intellectual rationales for one's Jewish expression, it is also important to acknowledge the emotional. There is comfort in reaching for a Judaism that feels familiar in times of distress and in times of joy; how it connects one to one's childhood, parents, grandparents and on; and to God as a force in that chain of tradition. For example, while there may be very good rational and philosophical reasons to pray in and affiliate with a Reform synagogue, it may feel too unfamiliar for some with more traditional backgrounds to be comfortable and vice versa.

What's off the Jewish charts? What is out of bound and what are the ramifications of going there/living there?

*Hillel taught: Do not separate yourself from the community...*²²

Because students are exploring how they might change, the teachers encourage questions as to where and how far the tradition can bend and stretch before it snaps. The balance between particularism and universalism is admittedly weighted more to the universal than other programs. At the same time, that perspective does not mean *Derekh Torah* does not express an outer (or inner) limit to Judaism's boundaries.

Within the pluralistic perspective of *Derekh Torah*, personal choice is acknowledged as a factor. At the same time, being a Jew also means finding your place within a community. A Judaism that is not recognized by or shared with other Jews is arguably not Judaism. Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik suggests that there are two ways in which people become a group, community, society, nation or people. One is by being bound by a covenant of fate. The other is through a covenant of destiny. Applying this model:

...would rule out Jews for Jesus (as Judaism) because by joining Christianity they have separated themselves from the Jewish fate. It would also suggest that the Satmar Hasidim, Naturei Karta, radical assimilationists and anti-Zionist universalists be excluded because of their disassociation from the fate of the Jews in Israel.²³

Two dynamics are at play here. Regarding particularism; the question for the students is whether his/her (or their, as a couple/family) level of particularism can find like company in the Jewish community. Regarding universalism, the question is how much of it can be

²² Mishnah Avot, 2:5

²³ Dorff, Elliot, quoting Simon Greenberg in the (Pluralism chapter from) *The B'nai Brith History of the Jewish People: Frontiers of Jewish Thought*, B'nai Brith Books, Washington DC, 1992, pg 222

absorbed or retained before it is no longer within the boundaries of the Jewish map? In weighing these factors, students are exploring the ramifications of each.

In attempting to address this, two ramifications of choosing a direction outside the Jewish mainstream are typically explored in the context of *Derekh Torah*. One is feelings of religious loneliness or disconnection from the Jewish people and Jewish world. (Could this be a modern definition of *Karet*?) The other is the impact of their decision on their children's Jewish identity and the nature of their Jewish heritage and connection. Since, if students intend to raise Jewish children, they will want an appropriate and accepting community in which to live and raise children.

Therefore, rather than questioning if boundaries are appropriate, the debate in *Derekh Torah* as a subset of pluralistic Jewish circles is where and how those boundaries are drawn:

Pluralism itself does not mean that whatever anyone does or says or believes is an authentic expression of the values of the community. Our community- the Jewish people in general and the Heschel School in particular- holds fast to certain core values. When those values are violated, a person leaves the camp. In his recent article, *Respecting the Limits of Pluralism*, "[Eugene] Borowitz writes: "For many Jews, God not only has a vote, but a veto, and monotheistic pluralism never included both God and idols. Committed pluralist that I am, I will defend my sense of proper limits, and deny Hebrew Christians an equal voice in the Jewish conversation." (Sh'ma, 29:561, pg. 3) In other words, a person cannot say, "Here I am. I am an idolater; accept me!"²⁴

This balance is not unique to institutions espousing pluralism. Representatives of all groups are trying to be flexible while retaining Jewish integrity as they see it. They are

²⁴Lerea, Dov, *The Abraham Joshua Heschel School Educational and Religious Policy Handbook*, 2004, written in his capacity as Director of Judaic Studies.

attempting to address the reality of their adherent's worlds while holding fast to the underlying principles which gird and support the tradition. It is not limited to the liberal segments of the Jewish community. This traditional author offers the following disclaimer in his guide book for people finding their way into the traditional Jewish community:

This book may be used as a halakhic source book only by ba'alei teshuvah who are confronting the unique challenge of observing halakha while living in a secular environment, and are trying to maintain a warm and friendly relationship with family and friends who are non-Observant. There is only one Shulhan Aruch which is binding upon every Jew. However, under extenuating circumstances (such as time of distress, sickness, or great financial loss) certain lenient halakhic opinions may be followed, which under *normal*²⁵ (italics: LM) conditions are forbidden. Therefore, much of this book is only applicable to ba'alei teshuvah, in recognition of their particular needs. Someone whose situation is not similar to that of a ba'al teshuvah (e.g., his family is Observant, he lives at yeshiva, etc.) is, in general, FORBIDDEN to rely on halakhic decisions intended for a ba'al teshuvah. The halachos that are discussed here apply only to the unique circumstances of the person being described.²⁶

Bringing in different voices, identifying your own.

How were the witnesses inspired with awe?... (They were told...) For this reason was man created alone, to teach you that whosoever destroys a single soul of Israel, Scripture imputed [guilt] to him as though he had destroyed a complete world; and whosoever preserves a single soul of Israel, Scripture ascribes [merit] to him as though he had preserved a complete world.

Furthermore, [he was created] alone for the sake of peace among men, that one might not say to his fellow, 'My father was greater than yours, and that minim [non-Jews] might not say, there are many ruling powers in heaven; again, to proclaim the greatness of the Holy One, blessed be He: for if a man strikes many coins from one mold, they all resemble one another, but the Supreme King of Kings, the Holy One, Blessed be He, fashioned every man in the stamp of the first

²⁵ Conditions described as "normal" by and presumably to the author are not universally shared. This vision of "normal" (i.e. from an observant family, lives at yeshiva) would be greatly disputed in the context of a Derekh Torah class.

²⁶ Becher, Mordechai (with Newman), After the Return: Maintaining Good Family Relations and Adjusting to Your New Lifestyle- A Practical Halakhic Guide for the Newly Observant, Feldheim, 1994, pg. 9

*man, and yet not one of them resembles his fellow. Therefore every single person is obliged to say: The world was created for my sake.*²⁷

This classic text and others above²⁸ underscore much of what has been discussed while adding something Derekh Torah teachers must always remember: to recognize and remain grounded in their core beliefs while discussing the merits or rationales of different or opposing beliefs. They are never to shy away from who they are or what they believe, only to frame those beliefs sensitively as personally their own. Such is a key element of reaching students “באשר הוא שם,”²⁹ from where they are on every level, with the aim of guiding them on their most authentic and informed path. The charge is for the Derekh Torah teacher to be both uninvested and supportive of their students’ choices while remaining passionate, committed, honest and realistic about the subject.

Similarly, although the teachers may *be* rabbis, their function in Derekh Torah is as a teacher and, to an extent, counselor. Their role in the program is in contradistinction to that of a rabbi sponsoring someone for conversion who is asked a halakhic question or making an individual or communal judgment. Under these latter circumstances (s)he is more of a decisor or gatekeeper. This is the main reason why it would not be suitable for a Derekh Torah teacher to sponsor a student for conversion during the class. Another reason is to avoid favoritism or the appearance of a closer relationship with some students over others. While it is natural that closer relationships can form with certain students,

²⁷ Talmud Bavli, Sanhedrin 37a-b/ Mishnah Sanhedrin 4:5.

²⁸ Notably, see the text from Eruvin 13b “These and These are the words of the living God,” in section 2 page 1-2 of this work.

²⁹ Genesis 21:17

sustaining an even-handed policy keeps this in check. Students are naturally sensitive to anything that can feel like favoritism or its flip side, judgmentalism.

Not all Derekh Torah teachers are rabbis or rabbinic students, but most are. Those teachers on that professional trajectory come as *musmachim* or students from almost every rabbinic seminary in New York. Unfortunately, except for Yeshivat Chovavei Torah, from where we have had some excellent teachers, successful Derekh Torah teachers have not come from other Orthodox seminaries. I'm sure they would come from Boston Hebrew College, the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College or the Academy in Los Angeles if they were geographically closer.

While most Derekh Torah teachers can comfortably define themselves by denomination, they must be unabashedly willing and enthusiastic about teaching beyond the boundaries of that denomination in an even-handed validating manner. Further, they must be able to demonstrate familiarity and comfort with modern interpretations and tangible experience with multiple expressions of Judaism. (I.e., knowing about the Reform Movement's "treife banquet" or reading Mordechai Kaplan is not sufficient experience with contemporary Reform or Reconstructionist thought or practice.) In fact, it is not difficult to find such educators.

On the theory that there is no such thing as being entirely objective about anything, teachers are encouraged to think deeply about their personal biases in Judaism when they are first beginning to plan their class. The biases they are asked to identify include but go

beyond the denominational: i.e., do they tend to see Judaism in the light of or shy away from feminism, mysticism, sociology, rationalism psychology, history, culture, commandedness, practice, ethics and *tikkun olam*? Do they tend to see/define God in the transcendent or immanent? They are asked to identify these proclivities and honestly share them with the group from the beginning of the class--not offered as the right or only way to approach Judaism. Rather, it is shared as an honest accounting of where their teacher is most grounded in his/her Judaism so that students are able to evaluate their teacher's responses accordingly and begin the dialog as one with multiple perspectives.

These proclivities are also the place from which the teachers are told to build both their reading list and syllabi. For the teacher this cuts both ways. They are asked to build a syllabus that creates a step-by-step foundation of knowledge in a way that they best understand it. They can go in essentially any order they like. They can start where it makes the most sense for them to start, i.e. with Torah, God, Shabbat, the calendar, revelation, history, etc.. It doesn't matter where it starts and how subjects are combined as long as a holistic vision has been presented by week 30. Conversely, they need to take their personal proclivities and biases into consideration in order to augment and supplement (rather than reinforce) their perspectives with readings and texts that offer different tones and views. The teachers are instructed to inform the students of this in general and with each author specifically when introducing the books and readings.

This is often a tricky balance for teachers, but important work: to be passionate and honest about teaching and living the subject while remaining dispassionate about the

outcome. For the teacher, it can sometimes be a challenge to Rabbi Akiva's lesson³⁰ on:

"love your fellow as yourself"³¹, as Elliot Dorff notes:

[as] the underlying principles for all the commandments, [it] requires a person to go beyond biologically rooted self-love, pluralism requires a person to escape egocentricity. It is not possible for a human being totally to love their neighbors as themselves, and neither is it possible to be totally pluralistic; we are by nature too self-centered fully to achieve either goal.³²

Good teachers always invite the perspectives of students with differing views as they get to know them. Until they find the right balance, new teachers often find themselves sharing less about what they personally do and believe than their students would like to hear (and what they could offer) in an effort to sustain a fair and balanced perspective. Hopefully this passes. This is understandable, however, as teachers do not want to appear biased or worse, to unwittingly – either subtly or overtly-- insult or discount a student's belief, etc.

It is not difficult to unintentionally make such a slight. Unless it has been specifically invited and established as a ground rule of the class, open dialog and feedback in such a situation can often be too uncomfortable for a student to express. (S)he may be hesitant to communicate discomfort with something said by the teacher (especially) or a fellow student. Thus, the teachers knows it is important that (s)he creates an atmosphere conducive to honest reactions and feedback to maintain a healthy class dynamic.

Ironically, the more time a teacher has spent immersed in the Jewish/seminary world, the

³⁰ Sifra to Leviticus 19:18

³¹ Leviticus 19:18

³² Dorff, Elliot, (Pluralism chapter from) *The B'nai Brith History of the Jewish People: Frontiers of Jewish Thought*, B'nai Brith Books, Washington DC, 1992...pg 223

more likely they may be unaware they have said or allowed a comment that could be off-putting. Like Shammai in Talmud, Shabbat 31a (see endnotes to chapter 3), they are so steeped in a particular Jewish perspective, they are not always aware their perspective is not universally shared or immediately understood. This is one reason that a unifying trait of successful Derekh Torah teachers is time spent living and/or working in the secular/non-Jewish world. Such life experience tends to bring perspective, sensitivity and an ability to frame concepts in commonly shared “language.” Building conceptual bridges for those for whom a traditional Jewish outlook is new and foreign is often harder for teachers who have exclusively attended Jewish schools and camps from childhood through seminary and have only worked in the Jewish community.

Pluralism in the definition of religion itself.

When Mordechai Kaplan referred to Judaism as an evolving religious civilization, he expanded the definition of the tradition’s boundaries. With that statement, he was also redefining religion itself in Jewish terms. It is in that expansive way that Derekh Torah seeks to define Judaism. While those familiar with Kaplan’s writings or living Judaism may viscerally understand this definition, many secular Jews and almost all non-Jews do not. To them, religion is expressed in or through the heart/”faith” or in the church/synagogue. Additionally, being “religious” is often offered in a derogatory or ambivalent tone with connotations of blind faith or the suspension of the intellect and reason. Given the nature of the society in which we live, that may be healthy.

Nonetheless, part of a pluralistic teaching of Judaism is helping students expand their own “religious” vocabulary; to teach them that in a Jewish framework, religious expressions include many other things outside this narrow definition of religion as faith or belief in God. By defining Judaism as striving for a life of holiness (holiness as a concept generally needs to be explored and defined in a Jewish context in *Derekh Torah*, too.) a goal comes into view. That is for students to recognize that many different foci of Judaism (that they may even already embrace to varying degrees) are included in a “religious” Judaism. A definition of a Jewish holy life might be framed by social action, study and education; the value and sanctity of the home and family, giving alms, volunteering, and creating sacred time. This certainly would not exclude more typically understood expressions of religion such as prayer and ritual. So while Jewish religiosity may be expressed in the heart and in the synagogue, limiting it to those realms cuts off its arms and legs. It is also expressed in the kitchen and bedroom; the boardroom and meetings; the supermarket the mall; on the phone and countless other places.

It also may or may not be connected to a notion of commandedness, acceptance of the notion of God’s will or a religious or faith based intention. Peoplehood, Jewish ideas of morality and behavior and Jewish spiritual practice are other examples of motivations. Within this, exploring multiple names, understanding and metaphors for God and holiness are certainly part of a pluralistic exploration of Jewish religious expression. In a tradition singling out holiness as a value, in *Derekh Torah*, we would explore: How does this perspective relate to holiness?

I close with an important pluralistic teaching by my teacher, Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi which puts Jewish pluralism in the context of religious pluralism in the world for the goal of *shalom* and *tikkun olam*. Rather than debating who has the most complete and authentic vision of or monopoly on holiness, he teaches that all the religions of the world can be likened to the organs of the body in which all of the organs are necessary for the health and functioning of the organism as a whole. Further, he reasons, for the organism to function, each organ needs to function in a healthy manner at its highest capacity, or he has alluded, cancer arises. He writes:

Today, I feel more than ever that we Jews are integral and necessary to life in the larger body of nations on planet Earth, that we need to be the healthy vital organ of the whole Earth that we are meant to be. By being the best and most enlightened Jews we can, we place ourselves at the service of all other beings with whom we share the here and now.³³

Doing so goes beyond tolerance. It recognizes the interdependence of all people and traditions. It also suggests the intricate elements and functions of any individual organ. As difficult as it is and has been, we are and have been strengthened through adversity and diversity.

The masters of assemblies: these are the disciples of the wise, who sit in manifold assemblies and occupy themselves with the Torah, some pronouncing unclean and others pronouncing clean, some prohibiting and others permitting, some disqualifying and others declaring fit.

Should a man say: "How in these circumstances shall I learn Torah?" Therefore the text says: "All of them are given from one Shepherd." One God gave them; one leader uttered them from the mouth of the Lord of all creation, blessed be He; for it is written: "And God spoke all these words." Also do thou make your ear like the hopper and get thee a perceptive heart to understand the words of those who pronounce unclean and the words of those who pronounce clean, the words of those who prohibit and the words of those who permit, the words of those who disqualify and the words of those who declare fit.³⁴

³³ Schachter-Shalomi, Zalman, (with Joel Segel) *Jewish With Feeling: A Guide to Meaningful Jewish Practice*, Riverhead Books, 2005, pg. xvi

³⁴ Talmud Bavli, Chaggiga 3b

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Various acquired and altered translations of:

- **Torah**
- **Siddur**
- **Talmud Bavli**
- **Talmud Yerushalmi**
- **Mishna**
- **Midrash Rabba**
- **Sifre/Sifra on Torah**
- **Avot D’rabbi Natan**
- **Shulhan Aruch**

(Translations are originally taken from various sources including Davka/Soncino, Siddur Sim Shalom, Jewish Publication Society, Book of Legends, quoted authors and changed as needed.)

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Derekh Torah Syllabus
December 4, 2006

Leana Moritt
Monday evenings, 7.30- 9.30pm
212.415.5767 (o)/ 201.567.4660 (h)
lmoritt@92y.org / leana@optonline.net

Please make sure you are subscribed to our Yahoo group:

LeanasDerekhTorahDecember06-subscribe@yahoo.com

Our contact info, syllabus, readings and other assignments and goodies will be posted there.

The web address is: <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/LeanasDerekhTorahDecember06>

Readings should be read in advance of the class under which they are listed.

- 1. December 4 Orientation: who are we and where are we going?**
For next week: please purchase books and read those
Readings listed under week 2 and the:
Parashat Hashavua: Vayishlach
- 2. December 11 Written Torah**
Dosick, chapter 3.1-5
Ariel piece, "The Meaning of Torah"*
Hirsch piece, "Our Literary Legacy"*
Parashat Hashavua: Vayeshev

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|--|
| This week: Hanukkah begins Friday night December 15. Light the first candle before sundown |
|--|

- 3. December 18: Crash course in Jewish History and the history of Judaism/
Introduction to Oral Torah**
Dosick 3.7-16, pgs 357-374
Telushkin SCAN 64-180 (esp. sections 64-86; 85, 86, 94-104, 107)
Basic Judaism, The Law In Judaism*
Parashat Hashavua: Miketz

| |
|--|
| <p>No class Monday, December 25, January 1 & January 8 (3 weeks.) Read the weekly <i>Parshiot</i> (<i>Va'yigash, Va'yechi, Shemot</i>). You'll be glad you did. ...While you are at it, Read from the beginning of Genesis/ chapter 1 to chapter 32, verse 4. That will bring you up to where we started reading at week 1, connect you with the stories of creation and the Patriarchs and Matriarchs and put the rest of the book of Genesis in narrative context. Also read Milgram chapter 3; scan Telushkin, sections 14-63.</p> |
|--|

4. January 15

Way of the Temple/Way of Mitzvot,

Ariel piece on Mitzvot*

Dosick, pgs. 2-7, 201-202, chapter 1.4-1.9

Milgram, chapter 4, esp. pgs. 166-167, 180-198

Parashat Hashavuah: Va'era

5. January 22

Jewish Time / Tu B'Shevat

Cardin, chapter 2, 5 & 10

Dosick chapter 4.1-4.10

Parashat Hashavuah: Bo

6. January 29

Shabbat (Bring a recording device)

Cardin, chapter 4

AJ Heschel, The Sabbath, (intro)*

Check our Yahoo site for additional readings.

Dosick, chapter 4.5, 4.11

Parashat Hashavua: Beshallach/ Shabbat Shira

The holiday of Tu B'Shevat begins the evening of Friday, February 2

7. February 5

Shabbat (Bring a recording device)

Check our Yahoo site for additional readings,

Parashat Hashavua: Yitro

Friday, February 9

Shabbat together as a class.

Services begin at approximately 6.00pm, followed by dinner.

Exact times and locations to be determined.

8. February 12

Jewish Identity & Purim

Milgram, chapter 6

Dosick 2.1-2.6, 4.12

Cardin, chapter 11

Telushkin, sections 109, 176

Stephen Wylen, What is a Jew?*

Check out www.kulanu.org

Parashat Hashavua: Mishpatim/Shabbat Shekalim

The Book of Esther

No Class February 19: President's Day

* Text posted on our Yahoo site

9. February 26

Jewish Ethics

Dosick, chapter 6.3-6.4

Telushkin sections 253-282, 246

Milgram 238-241

Melziner, Outlines of Talmudical Ethics*

Pirkei Avot "Ethics of the Fathers" (Skim/this is in a siddur)

Parashat Hashavua: Tetzaveh/ Shabbat Zachor

The holiday of Purim begins Saturday night, March 3

10. March 5

Kashrut

Dosick, chapter 6.5

Blu Greenberg Piece*

Bring your favorite restaurant menus or recipes!

Parashat Hashavua: Ki Tissa/Shabbat Parah

11. March 12

Passover

Dosick, chapter 4.13

Cardin, chapter 12

Par.Hashavua: Vayakhel/Pekudei/ Shabbat Hahodesh

Song of Songs (Shir Hashirim)

12. March 26

God

Ariel piece on God*

Dosick, chapter 1.1

Milgram, chapter 2

Parashat Hashavua: Vayikra

Passover break. No class April 2 (night of the first seder) & April 9.
Yom Hashoah (Holocaust Remembrance Day) begins the evening of April 15

13. April 16

Jewish Denominations: Jews in Modernity

Dosick chapter 5.17

Telushkin, sections 116-121; 203-207; 216, 218; 221-227

Parashat Hashavua: Tazria/Metzora

14. April 23

Eretz Israel, Modern Zionism & the State of Israel, Holidays

Dosick, chapter 8, 4.16-17

Cardin, chapter 13 & 14

Telushkin, sections 133-144; 150-153; 159-168; 178-180

Essay, Israel and the Meaning of Modern Sovereignty*

Parashat Hashavua: Acharei Mot/Kedoshim

Yom Ha'atzma'ut (Israel Independence Day) begins Sunday evening April 22.

15. April 30

Brit Milah, Birth, Jewish Education and Bar/Bat Mitzvah

Dosick, chapter 7.1- 7.5

Cardin, chapters 17, 18, 19

Parashat Hashavua: Emor

16. May 7

Marriage, Sexuality, Divorce

Dosick, chapter 7.6-7.12; 6.6.-6.7

Blu Greenberg*

Cardin, chapter 20

God in the Bedroom

Parashat Hashavua: B'har/B'hukkotai

No Class May 14

17. May 21

Shavuot & the Omer; Denominations (catch up)

Dosick, chapter 4.14-4.15;

Cardin, chapter 15

Torah: Exodus, ch.10:1-20:23, esp. Exodus, ch 19:1-20:18

Bible/Tanakh: The Book of Ruth

Parashat Hashavua: Naso

Bible/Tanakh: Book of Ezekiel, ch. 1-3

The Festival of Shavuot begins Tuesday evening May 22 and ends the evening of May 24.

No Class May 28: Memorial Day

18. May 31

Death & Mourning

Dosick, chapter 7.13-7.25

Cardin, chapter 21

Parashat Hashavua: B'ha'alot'cha

18. May 21

Death & Mourning

Dosick, chapter 7.13-7.25

Cardin, chapter 21

Parashat Hashavua: Naso

The Festival of Shavuot begins Tuesday evening May 22 and ends the evening of May 24.

No Class May 28: Memorial Day

19. June 4 **Prayer and Blessings I: Its structure and how we do it.**
Dosick, chapter 5.1-5.28, 3.18
Devar Tefilla/bring a recording device
Parashat Hashavua: Sh'lach

20. June 11 **Prayer II: its meanings and why we do it.**
Cardin, chapter 3
Milgram, chapter 1
Devar Tefilla/ bring a recording device
Parashat Hashavua: Korach

Saturday, June 16
Shabbat together as a class.
Services begin at approximately 9.30am, followed by lunch.
Exact times & locations to be determined.

21. June 18 **Hanukkah and the December Dilemma**
Dosick, chapter 4.9
Cardin, chapter 9
Readings from Marc Angel book*
Parashat Hashavua: Hukat

22. June 25 **Chosenness & Choosing, Conversion: Messianism and the Afterlife/The World to Come**
Reading from Marc Angel book*
Telushkin, sections 283, 284
Article from Jewish Action, Messianism
Dosick 1.2, 1.3, 2.7,
Parashat Hashavua: Balak

23. July 2 **Tisha B'Av & The Three Weeks/ The Shoah and its Atermath**
Dosick, chapter 4.18
Cardin, chapter 16
Telushkin, sections 181-202, 241-244
Parashat Hashavua: Pinchas
The Book of Lamentations (Eicha)

Tuesday July 3 is the 17th of Tammuz/minor fast day.

24. July 9 **Choosing a Community & The Jewish Home**
Dosick, 6.1, 6.2, 6.9
Parashat Hashavua: Matot/Massei

25. July 16

Jewish Mysticism and Kabbalah

Dosick, chapter 3.17

Telushkin, sections 250, 111, 114

Parashat Hashavua: Devarim/Shabbat Hazon

| |
|-------------------------------------|
| No Class July 23: Tisha B'Av |
|-------------------------------------|

26. July 30
ISRAEL?

Destruction, Redemption and Repentance/Teshuvah/(catch-up)

Milgram (separate reading)* 11-37

Telushkin, sections 281, 282

Parashat Hashavua: Ekev

27. August 6

Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur

Cardin, chapters 6 & 7

Dosick, chapters 3.19, 4.6, 4.7

Parashat Hashavua: Re'eh

The Book of Jonah

28. August 13

Sukkot, Shmini Atzeret & Simchat Torah

Dosick, chapter 4.8

Cardin, chapter 8

Parashat Hashavua: Shofetim

The Book of Ecclesiastes (Kohelet)

29. August 20

The Hebrew Language and Prayer accessories

Milgram, chapter 4

Dosick, chapter 5.29, 5.30 & 5.31; 6.10

Parashat Hashavua: Ki Tetze

30. August 27

Siyum (Conclusion): Pathways

Parashat Hashavua: Ki Tavo

Leana Moritt, Derekh Torah beginning Monday, December 4
212.415.5767 / 201.567.4660
lmoritt@92y.org / leana@optonline.net

Requirements:

Each week...

- *Come to class.* If you don't come, we will miss you and the perspective you bring. If you can't come, please send word, or we'll worry.
- *Do the reading.*
 - From the required texts list and downloadable/emailable readings. The syllabus outlines the book reading for the week, listed in priority order. Yahoo site posting alerts will be emailed to you. This is the background reading for the discussions we will have in class. Only if you do the reading will the class really make sense.
 - The weekly Torah portion
- *Experience/see/do/learn/notice something Jewish unrelated to class.* This is not about doing a lot of researching. It's more about keeping your eyes open in new ways. Bring your observations and questions to class.
- *Check our Yahoo site* for reading or informational postings.

Two or three times during the course...

- *Give a d'var torah.* A reflection of the weekly Torah portion. More on this the first class.
- *Host the group* (if you have a place in Manhattan/this might be more frequent, depending on our collective geography.)
- *Bring snacks* (that conform to all our dietary needs, i.e., kosher/vegetarian)
- *Attend our Shabbat "field trips."*
- *Help with the organizational stuff.*

Required Texts: (You do not have to bring these texts to class.) Other Readings will either be emailed, posted on our Yahoo site or handed out in class.

- **A Jewish translation of the Bible (Tanakh).** I recommend Tanakh: A New Translation of the Holy Scriptures, The Jewish Publication Society.
- **The Tapestry of Jewish Time**, Rabbi Nina Beth Cardin, Behrman House, 2000
- **What do Jews Believe?**, David S. Ariel, Schocken, 1995
- **Living Judaism**, Rabbi Wayne Dosick, HarperSanFrancisco, 1995
- **Jewish Literacy**, Rabbi Joseph Telushkin, Morrow, 1991
- **A Siddur** (Jewish Prayer book). There are many, usually associated with specific denominations. Spend some time in a Jewish bookstore (where you'll find the greatest selection) and flip through them and find the most user-friendly for you.
 - **Artscroll** (Orthodox. Most complete. Most extensive commentary)
 - **Sim Shalom** (Conservative. New editions are gender sensitive.)

(continued)

- **Gates of Prayer** (Reform. Various versions of services, new edition printing now.)
- **Kol Haneshamah** (Reconstructionist. Most creative translations and commentary; many transliterations)
- **Metsuda** (Orthodox. Translated line by line)
- **Likrat Shabbat/Siddur Hadash** (Conservative. Many transliterations.)
- **A Jewish Calendar.** Use the one I give you or download your own at hebc.com/hebc. Add options such as candle-lighting times for Shabbat and the parashat hashavua (weekly Torah portion.)

Highly Recommended:

- A Chumash with commentaries, e.g.:
 - Etz Chayyim, Jewish Publications Society (C)
 - The Pentateuch and Haftorahs, JH Hertz (C)
 - The Torah: A Modern Jewish Commentary, G. Plaut, ed. (R)
 - The Stone Edition Chumash/Tanakh, Artscroll (O)
 - The Living Torah, Aryeh Kaplan, trans, and ed. (O)
- A CD/cassette/ipod download of blessings and songs
- The Sabbath, Abraham Joshua Heschel
- Night, Elie Wiesel
- How To Run A Traditional Jewish Household, Blu Greenberg
- The Jewish Holidays, A Guide and Commentary, Michael Strassfeld
- Living a Jewish Life, Anita Diamant
- Choosing a Jewish Life, Anita Diamant
- A book on Jewish History.
- A subscription to a Jewish magazine or newspaper, i.e., Jewish Week, Moment, Jerusalem Report, Tikkun, Shema, Commentary, The Forward, Lilith

Jewish Sources:

West Side Judaica
2412 Broadway, between 88th & 89th Streets
212.362.7846

J. Levine
5 West 30th Street
212.695.6888

Barnesandnoble.com
Amazon.com

I respectfully request that all cell phones and blackberries either be turned off or set to vibrate, unless an urgent call is expected that particular evening and that we start promptly at 7.30.

Derekh Torah – Class beginning September 15, 2003

Rabbi Carol Levithan

219 West 81st Street, Apt 7K

595-1430 (h); 646-505-4405 (w)

clevithan@aol.com

No Class on 10/6, 12/22, 12/29, 4/5, 4/12; Class at the 92nd Street Y on 2/23 & 4/19

Class Shabbat Dinners on 11/7 & 3/19

9/15 1. Introduction

9/22 2. High Holidays: Rosh Hashanah

Cardin, chapter 6

Torah Reading: Bereshit, Genesis, pp. 3-10

9/29 3. High Holidays: Yom Kippur

Cardin, chapters 7 and 8

Torah Reading: Noah, Genesis, pp. 11-17

No class 10/6 – Yom Kippur

10/13 4. "Jewish Time"/Sukkot

Gordis, chapter 1, Cardin, chapters 1, 2 & 5

Torah Reading: Lekh Lecha, Genesis, pp. 18-24

10/20 5. The Hebrew Bible, Part 1

Look over Telushkin, pp 1 – 112 (browse)

Torah Reading: Vayera, Genesis, pp. 25-32

10/27 6. The Hebrew Bible, Part 2

Gordis, chapter 3

Torah Reading: Chaye Sarah, Genesis, pp. 32-37

11/3 7. The Oral Law (Rabbinic Literature)

Telushkin, pp. 113-58; Cardin, chapter 4

Torah Reading: Toledot pp. 37-43

11/7 Shabbat Dinner – 7 pm

Torah Reading: Vayetze, Genesis, pp. 43-51

11/10 8. The Sabbath

Telushkin, pp. 599-605; Cardin, chapter 4

Torah Reading: Vayishlach, Genesis, pp. 51-58

11/17 9. Kashrut (The Dietary Laws)

Telushkin, pp. 634-37

Torah Reading: Vayeshev, Genesis, pp. 58-64

11/24 10. Jewish Life Cycle: Birth, Bar/bat mitzvah
Telushkin, pp. 609-15; Cardin, chapters 18-19
Torah Reading: Miketz, Genesis, pp. 64-72

12/1 11. Jewish Life Cycle: Marriage, Divorce
Telushkin, pp. 613-24, 441-44; Cardin, chapter 20
Torah Reading: Vayigash, Genesis, pp. 72-78

12/8 12. Jewish Life Cycle: Death and Mourning
Telushkin, 206-8; Cardin, chapter 21
Torah Reading: Vayechi, Genesis, pp. 78-84

12/15 13. Hanukkah
Telushkin, pp. 575-76; Cardin, chapter 9
Torah Reading: Shemot, Exodus, pp. 85-91

No class 12/22 & 12/29

1/5 14. Jewish Identity and Denominations
Gordis, chapter 4
Torah Reading: Vayera, Exodus, pp. 92-98

1/12 15. Ethics & Mitzvot, Part 1
Telushkin, 495-552 (browse); Gordis, chapters 5 and 7
Torah Reading: Bo, Exodus, pp. 98-104

1/19 16. Ethics & Mitzvot, Part 2
Torah Reading: Beshalach, Exodus, pp. 104-112

1/26 17. Home Rituals, Jewish Ritual Objects & Garments
Cardin, pp. 247-69
Torah Reading: Yitro/Mishpatim, Exodus, pp. 112-123

2/2 18. The Synagogue & Prayer, Part 1
Telushkin, pp. 570-81; Gordis, chapter 6; Cardin, chapter 3
Torah Reading: Terumah/Tetzaveh/Vayakel/Pekudei, Exodus, pp. 123-133; 141-151 (gap is deliberate!)

2/9 19. The Synagogue & Prayer, Part 2
Torah Reading: Ki Tissa, Exodus, 133-141

2/16 20. Theology
Gordis, chapter 2
Torah Reading: Vayikra/Tzav/Shemini/Tazria/Metzora, Leviticus, pp. 153-180

2/23 21. *Class meets at the 92nd Street Y for panel on theology*

3/1 22. Purim & Tisha B'Av

Cardin, chapters 11 & 16; Book of Lamentations (Bible); Book of Esther (Bible)

Torah Reading: Aharei Mot/Kedoshim, Leviticus, pp. 180-188

3/8 23. Jewish History, Part I

Telushkin, pp. 161-223

Torah Reading: Emor/Behar/Behukotai, Leviticus, pp. 188-202

3/15 24. Jewish History, Part 2

Telushkin, pp. 227-55; 391-98; 425-32

Torah Reading: Bemidbar/Naso/Behaalotecha, Numbers, pp. 203-227

3/19 Shabbat Dinner – 7 pm

Torah Reading: Shelach lecha/Korach/Hukkat, Numbers, pp. 227-245

3/22 25. Passover

Cardin, chapter 10

Torah Reading: Balak/Pinhas/Matot/Maaseh, Numbers, pp. 245-271

3/29 26. Passover, Part 2

Torah Reading: Devarim/Ve'ethanan/Ekev/Reeh, Deuteronomy, pp. 273-301

No class on 4/5 or 4/12 - Passover

4/19 27. Program on the Holocaust at 92nd Street Y

Telushkin, pp. 345-388; Cardin, chapter 13

4/26 28. Israel

Telushkin, pp. 259-342 (browse); Cardin, chapter 14

Torah Reading: Shoftim/Ki Tetze/Ki Tavo, Deuteronomy, pp. 301-321

5/1 29. Festivals/Shavuot/Conversion

Cardin, chapter 15; The Book of Ruth (Bible)

Torah Reading: Netzavim/Vayeilech/Haazinu/V'zot Haberakhah, Deuteronomy, pp. 321-334

5/8 30. Summing Up; Ask the Rabbi

Class Procedure

The focus of each class will be discussion based upon the reading assignments and class handouts. The purpose of the class is **not** to review the readings but to deal with questions and observations as well as to look at each topic in greater depth from a common base of knowledge gained from the readings. Please try to keep up with the readings and please don't hesitate to raise any questions you may have or issues that are of concern to you.

Each class session will include a discussion of the Torah reading assigned for the week as outlined on the syllabus. Class members will take turns leading this discussion although it will be assumed, again, that everyone had read the portion assigned in preparation for class. If you can't get to class on the night you are leading the discussion, please arrange with a classmate to lead in your place. Each week's leader should think of questions for the group as well as comments and interpretations which will help guide the discussion. The purpose is **not** to summarize each portion. Please assume everyone has read it and focus on the difficulties you have with the text, the elements that are particularly striking or meaningful to you, or the questions that you have about it.

Text for Class

1. Nina Beth Cardin, *The Tapestry of Jewish Time*, Behrman House
2. Daniel Gordis, *God Was Not in the Fire: The Search for Spiritual Judaism*, Touchstone Books
3. Joseph Telushkin, *Jewish Literacy*, William Morrow
(There is apparently more than one edition of this book in circulation so please make sure that the pages assigned are the correct pages in the edition you have based upon the week's topic.)
4. The Jewish Publication Society, *Tanakh: A New Translation of the Holy Scripture* (available in both hard cover and paperback and in both an English and English/Hebrew version; the pages on the syllabus refer to the English version)

You may be able to find all of these books in Barnes & Noble or online at amazon.com or barnes and noble. You can also find them in Jewish bookstores such as:

West Side Judaica
2404 Broadway (between 88th and 89th)

J. Levine
5 West 30th

The survey and its results are the property of the 92nd Street Y.
All data and analyses are preliminary and not fully analyzed or
verified at this time. Any usage of this survey or its results
requires prior approval of the 92nd Street Y.



92ND STREET Y

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1395 LEXINGTON
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212.415.5500
www.92Y.org

The 92nd Street
YM-YWHA is an agency
of UJA-Federation.

Members of the Derekh Torah family:

For more than 20 years, the 92nd Street Y has been the proud home of the Derekh Torah program. To this day, we remain committed to creating the best possible program for our students and we would like your help to assure the continued success of the program.

The best way to accomplish this goal is by going directly to the source – our students. As graduates of the Derekh Torah program, we are reaching out to you to learn about what has gone on in your life since participating in the program and about how the program has influenced your life, family, and choices.

Included in this letter is a short survey for you to complete (one each for couples who both enrolled). Please fill out as much of this survey as you feel comfortable sharing. (*All of your information will be kept strictly confidential.*) We hope that through this initiative, we will gain better understanding of the impact that these courses have had on the lives of the participants. (If you prefer, this survey also can be filled out online at:

<http://www.surveymonkey.com/s.asp?u=636341610316>)

In appreciation for your time and thoughtful answers, everyone who submits a survey will receive **a \$25 gift certificate that you can redeem toward any Bronfman Center lecture, workshop, or class at the 92nd Street Y.** (Please note that if you choose to fill out this survey confidentially, we will be unable to send you the voucher.)

Thank you again for taking the time to assist us in this process and we wish you the best of luck in all of your endeavors.

Sincerely

Leana Moritt
Director, Jewish Outreach
Bronfman Center for Jewish Life
92nd Street Y

Derekh Torah Survey

Please fill out as much of this survey as you can. Thank you again for your help in this important project. *All Information will be kept strictly confidential.*

In what year were you enrolled in the Derekh Torah program? _____

When I enrolled in the program... (check all that apply):

- _____ A) I was planning on/thinking about converting and my significant other was Jewish
- _____ B) My significant other was Jewish and although I had no intention of converting, I wanted to learn more about Judaism
- _____ C) I was Jewish and took the course with my non Jewish significant other.
- _____ D) I was Jewish and wanted to explore my Jewish heritage
- _____ E) I belonged to a synagogue
- _____ F) I actively practiced a religion that was not Judaism
- _____ G) I thought of myself as culturally Jewish
- _____ H) I gave money to Jewish causes
- _____ I) I knew nearly nothing about Judaism
- _____ J) I struggled with my faith

Since I completed the Derekh Torah program... (check all that apply):

- _____ A) I converted to Judaism
- _____ B) I am not Jewish
- _____ C) I married a Jewish person
- _____ D) I am married/committed to a person currently of another faith/religion
- _____ E) I am raising/plan to raise Jewish children
- _____ F) I am considering conversion to Judaism
- _____ G) Jewish learning has influenced my dietary practices
- _____ H) My children do go/will go to a Jewish Day School
- _____ I) My children do go/will go to a Jewish camp
- _____ J) I/my family affiliates itself with Jewish organizations
- _____ K) I belong to a synagogue
- _____ L) I still attend programs at the 92nd Street Y
- _____ M) I have no connection to Judaism whatsoever
- _____ N) I am no longer with the person with whom I took Derekh Torah
- _____ O) I identify myself as a Jew
- _____ P) I am now more committed to my non-Jewish faith
- _____ Q) I make Shabbat into a unique day of the week
- _____ R) I give money to Jewish causes
- _____ S) I practice my Judaism (circle those that apply) daily/weekly/monthly/annually
- _____ T) I identify myself as a committed Jew
- _____ U) I believe in God

OVER→

How has enrolling in Derekh Torah affected your life?

How has taking Derekh Torah affected your relationships with significant others in your life?

Would you be interested in participating in Derekh Torah Graduate Shabbat programming? Y / N

What, if any, Jewish programs or organizations do you participate in?

Which, if any, other programs have you participated in or attended at the 92nd St Y?

Do you receive information about upcoming events at the 92nd Street Y? Y / N

If yes, please indicate what you receive: catalog Y / N other direct mail Y / N
eNews Y/N

Would you like to receive information about upcoming events at the 92nd Street Y? Y / N

Would you like to be on our email list for updates on new programs, discounts and other special events? Y / N Please be sure to provide us with your email address below if you wish to be on the eNews list.

Personal Information (optional):

Name:

Current Address:

Daytime Phone Number:

Email:

Profession:

Marital Status:

May we contact you for elaboration on your answers? Y / N

¹ Reminder: Unfortunately, we will only be able to send vouchers to those people who relay their contact information.

Longitudinal Study of the impact of
Derekh Torah
on the
Jewish lives, identity and practice over a 16 year span

Survey and study

Designed, compiled and analyzed by

Leana Moritt, Director of Jewish Outreach

Bronfman Center for Jewish Life, 92nd Street Y

Under the direction of Martin Maskowitz, acting director,

and with help of Eytan Kenter & Teresa Whitesell Snyder, JTS Graduate School interns

I am delighted and gratified to present the first long term analysis of the Derekh Torah program over 16 years, the number of years for which mailing lists are available¹. The purpose of this survey was to measure the impact of Derekh Torah on the Jewish lives and identities of the participants after they finish Derekh Torah. This survey was not to examine the content² of the program. Rather, the survey was specifically designed to measure, as broadly as possible, the impact on the participants Jewish cultural, familial, communal and religious lives. While this survey was not commissioned or conducted by a professional survey organization, I believe there is enough information to confidently back-up what we have anecdotally heard for many years; that Derekh Torah is a program which is making a difference; stemming the tide of Jewish assimilation in the thousands of young people we encounter.

We were overwhelmed with the responses. At the very minimum, we estimate between a 7-15% response rate³, phenomenal by any objective measure within a standard which accepts a 3% response as successful. This information, combined with the overwhelmingly positive responses, empirically confirms what we already know; that the Derekh Torah program as it exists is a proven force for strengthening and rejuvenating the Jewish people. Not only does the high response rate itself suggest this. The nature of the responses themselves confirm this. Most of the respondents took the time to write personal responses as well as the "check that most apply" section of the survey⁴.

Who are our students when they arrive?

Of those responding to the survey (173 responses representing 181 individuals in total⁵), they characterized their identity at the *beginning* of their Derekh Torah class as follows:

¹ Derekh Torah Came to The 92nd Street Y in 1987 after running at Ansche Chesed since 1984. We have registration information from 1990.

² Evaluations measuring the content of the program are completed by students at the end of their course.

³ See appendix one for the numerical detail of mailing and response.

⁴ The actual survey is attached as an appendix.

⁵ Although surveys were sent out with requests to be complete individually, some (approximately 8) included information about 2 people in a household. Adjustments in the analysis were made accordingly and should be interpreted within the standard margins of error.

- 39% were not Jewish, in interfaith relationships with Jews and were exploring conversion
- 8% were in interfaith relationships and, although had no intention of converting, wanted to know more about Judaism.
- 26% were Jewish and took the course with their non-Jewish significant other.
 - 73% were part of an interfaith couple before taking Derekh Torah
- 17% were Jewish and were not part of an interfaith couple, taking the course to explore their Jewish heritage.
- 10% other, i.e., exploring Judaism as individuals, presumed not to be Jewish

In describing their knowledge or involvement in Judaism or the community *before* taking Derekh Torah:

- 22% characterized themselves as knowing nearly nothing about Judaism,
 - 45% of those characterizing themselves in that way were Jews.
- 18% belonged to a synagogue.
- 4% Actively practiced a religion that was not Judaism
- 27% thought of themselves as culturally Jewish
- 21% gave money to Jewish causes
- 13% characterized themselves as struggling with their faith.

Who are they now?

- 33% of all respondents converted to Judaism
 - Since 43% of respondents were Jewish before taking Derekh Torah, this means that:
 - 69% of respondents in (initially) interfaith couples converted
 - 57% of (initially) non-Jewish respondents overall converted
- 10% characterize themselves as not Jewish
- 36% say they married a Jewish person
- 15% say they are married/committed to a person currently of another faith/religion
- 60% say they are raising/planning to raise Jewish children⁶
- 1% are considering conversion to Judaism
- 22% say their Jewish learning has influenced their dietary practices
- 22% say their children go or will go to a Jewish day school
- 20% say their children go or will go to a Jewish camp
- 49% say they/their family affiliates with Jewish Institutions
- 60% belong to a synagogue
- 30% still attend programs at the 92nd Street Y
- ½ % say they have no connection to Judaism whatsoever
- 4% say they are no longer with the person with whom they took Derekh Torah

⁶ This number is confusing and contradictory based on the rest of the data, as will be spelled out in this analysis.

- 65% say they identify themselves as a Jew⁷
- 2% say they are now more committed to their non-Jewish faith
- 41% say they make Shabbat into a unique day of the week
- 51% say they give money to Jewish causes
- 74% say they practice Judaism
 - Of those responding positively to that question, they characterize their Jewish practice
 - 23% as practicing their Judaism daily
 - 32% as practicing their Judaism weekly
 - 20% as practicing their Judaism monthly
 - 11% as practicing their Judaism yearly
 - 14% either did not specify their frequency of practice (10%) or specified another frequency (4%)⁸
 - Weekly
 - Monthly
 - Yearly
- 46% identify themselves as a committed Jew
- 50% believe in God

Analysis

On the impact of interfaith couples.

Arguably the most powerful impact Derekh Torah has is on the interfaith couples that walk through the door of the 92nd Street Y. The survey shows that 73% of Derekh Torah students begin as a member of an interfaith couple.⁹

Of the couples who came to us as interfaith initially, the data shows that **88% are now Jewish couples.**¹⁰ Of the Jews who came to us as part of an interfaith couple, only 9% are now married to someone of a different faith. Of those Jews who come to us single, only 7% are now married to someone of a different faith. Of all the non-Jewish people coming to us to explore Judaism 72% have either converted or are considering conversion to Judaism. There were several respondents who are either raising or planning to raise Jewish children although they do not identify themselves as Jews/converted.

⁷ This is also curious. If only 10% of respondents characterize themselves as not Jewish, how is it that only 65% identify themselves as a Jew? At the same time 74% of respondents say they practice Judaism (none non-Jews). Therefore the majority of these 25% who do not identify themselves as Jewish must be Jewish, based on the data. Whether this is a semantic question or psychological/sociological phenomenon remains.

⁸ That 4% broke down to one person each indicating practice as: "A lot;" "Somewhere in between weekly and monthly;" "Passover, High Holidays and trips to Israel;" "on holidays" and "between monthly and annually."

⁹ Anecdotally, I would estimate that number is a little low. Based on my estimation of the people I speak with daily, it is closer to 80%-85%.

¹⁰ All denominations and reputable Jewish authorities agree that once a non-Jew converts, (s)he is considered and accepted fully as a Jew. No longer a non-Jew, the term "interfaith couple" no longer applies to a couple where one has converted.


9% of participants broke up or answered that they are no longer with the person with whom they undertook Derekh Torah. This underscores the sensitivity with which the Derekh Torah staff does its work. While some couples do find their differences irreconcilable and greater than they first anticipate, we support and encourage couples to explore Judaism as a couple. While any break-up is painful, we feel it is ultimately better to learn this before marriage than after.¹¹ This is while recognizing that a wide pluralistic spectrum of Jewish choices are available to them and helping to guide them to the place on the spectrum that fits them best.

This analysis, while preliminary, highlights the tremendous impact of this incredible program. It has and continues to impact Jews around the world and will for generations. The 92nd Street Y's ongoing commitment to its success and growth ensures the institution's role at the forefront of strengthening and energizing the Jewish people.

Respectfully submitted,

Leana Moritt
Director of Jewish Outreach.

¹¹ The vast majority of Derekh Torah students begin the program before marriage and certainly before children are born. Only a tiny fraction of students are parents.




92nd Street Y

derekh torah:

an introduction to
Judaism for adults


For over 20 years, New Yorkers have turned to us to explore Judaism. You can too.
For more information, call **212.415.5767**

Tying the knot? Have all your questions answered at "Rabbi, I Was Wondering...About Jewish Weddings." May 23, 7:30 pm.



Brantman Center for Jewish Life
Lexington Avenue at 92nd Street
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Media Partner





An Introduction to Judaism for Adults

Derekh Torah is a course for Jews who seek a deeper connection with their heritage, and for non-Jews who are considering conversion to Judaism or wish to have a greater understanding of Judaism while remaining in their own faiths.

This 30-week program focuses on the "hows" and "whys" of Judaism. Topics include ethics, the Sabbath and holidays, prayer, dietary laws, life cycle events (i.e. weddings, mourning rituals and birth ceremonies), the Jewish people and Israel. Jewish theology, history and the meaning and practice of Jewish living are studied and discussed.

Classes of approximately 17 people meet one evening per week, usually in a private home, with one instructor throughout the program. Sessions are supplemented with two Sabbath or holiday meals. The faculty is available to meet privately with those confronting questions of religious identity.

Derekh Torah can serve as preparation for conversion to Judaism. We do not require a commitment to convert at any point in the program, nor do we perform conversions. Conversions are supervised by rabbis in the community to whom we can arrange referrals.

For those enrolling in Derekh Torah within the context of a relationship, we recommend that both partners participate in the program.

Derekh Torah Class Schedule

Classes meet weekly from 7:30-9:30 pm,
beginning on the following dates:

| | |
|----------------------------------|--------------------|
| <i>Mon, Sep 10</i> | <i>Wed, Mar 26</i> |
| <i>Tue, Oct 2</i> | <i>Thu, Apr 17</i> |
| <i>Thu, Nov 1</i> | <i>Mon, May 12</i> |
| <i>Wed, Nov 28</i> | <i>Tue, Jun 3</i> |
| <i>Thu, Jan 3</i> | <i>Wed, Jun 25</i> |
| <i>Mon, Feb 4</i> | <i>Thu, Jul 17</i> |
| <i>Tue, Mar 4 (singles only)</i> | |

30 sessions

\$600 person/\$925 couple

(one registration fee per couple; price includes admission to one Shabbat event at the 92nd Street Y)

Payment plans and scholarship assistance available.

An informal interview is required prior to enrollment. For information, to schedule an interview or to confirm start dates, please contact Leana Moritt, director of Jewish Outreach in the Bronfman Center for Jewish Life, at 212.415.5767 or at lmoritt@92Y.org.

Tallit designed by Phyllis Kantor.



92nd Street Y
Bronfman Center for Jewish Life

Lexington Avenue at 92nd Street / An Agency of UJA-Federation

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To find out more, please call:

Leana Moritt, Director of Jewish Outreach in the
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or e-mail to lmoritt@92y.org



92nd Street Y
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www.92Y.org
An agency of UJA-Federation

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***For over 20 years, New Yorkers have turned to
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derekh torah *the way of torah*
an introduction to
judaism for adults



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The Jewish Week

SERVING THE JEWISH COMMUNITY OF GREATER NEW YORK

(02/02/2007)

Converting, On Their Own Terms

Conversions to Judaism — and not for marriage — seen on the rise.



Carolyn Slutsky - Staff Writer

After dating a Jewish man for nine years, Linette Padron decided it was time to make a change. Born Catholic and raised in a strong Dominican and Italian family, Padron had learned a lot about Judaism from her partner, but it was only after they stopped

dating that she thought seriously about converting to the religion.

Converting for marriage felt wrong, she says, but Judaism had seeped into her consciousness, and she decided to continue her explorations on her own.

"I started to question my history and beliefs, started looking around for the right answers," says Padron, 29, of her process. "When I reached the beliefs and traditions I had grown to know for the past nine years, it began to seem like the place for me to be."

With increasing rates of intermarriage, it has become more common for people to convert to Judaism to marry a Jewish spouse or raise Jewish children. But Padron is one of a growing number of people studying Judaism formally, experiencing different services and rabbis and planning to convert not out of marriage plans but simply because a personal journey has brought them to embrace Jewish faith and practice.

Although exact numbers are hard to come by, area rabbis confirm the trend, which comes at a time when both the Reform and Conservative movements are more actively reaching out to interfaith families in the hope that the non-Jewish spouse will eventually convert.

Rabbi Ephraim Buchwald works with Jews by choice through the National Jewish Outreach Project, and says in addition to those people converting and marrying Jews, he sees many turning to Judaism for the sake of Judaism.

"I think there's a trend of very spiritual and intelligent non-Jews who for one reason or another have explored other faiths and decided to come to Judaism," he says.

Tara Fersko, another Jew by choice, says she never experienced the right religious fit until she found Judaism. Raised by a Catholic father and Congregationalist Protestant mother, she found herself disagreeing with the Catholic Church's teachings, and in college explored

Unitarianism, a faith she says encourages people to experience and celebrate everything. In that process she learned more about Judaism, and realized, "Judaism most closely matched what I believed internally."

Fersko was 24 and single when she began a Derekh Torah class at the 92nd Street Y, a program that covers the basics of Judaism in 30 weeks, including Jewish holidays and lifecycle events, Torah, the Holocaust, Shabbat, kosher laws, ethics and Zionism. The class is primarily attended by couples with one Jewish and one non-Jewish partner who is thinking about conversion, but Leana Morrit, director of Jewish outreach at the Y, who oversees the classes, says there are almost always single people looking to convert on their own.

"It's not just a neck-up experience," says Moritt, "people are actively questioning the why and how, where they fit in [Judaism] and where it fits in them."

For Fersko, the class and the mentoring she found at area synagogues helped cement her Jewish commitment, and she says she began to understand more of the reasons behind Jewish practice, like why to stand or bow during a service, than friends who had been Jewish all their lives. She started keeping kosher, flirted with keeping Shabbat and slowly built herself a Conservative Jewish life, converting within the traditional rituals of mikveh and bet din.

Today, at 34, Fersko has a Jewish husband (who she says has become more observant under her influence), a son and a daughter who attends kindergarten at a Conservative day school. The family lives in Washington Heights.

"I don't like being called a convert," she says, "because I converted and conversion was my process. But I think of myself as a Jew."

For people newer to the process, the logistics of conversion can be daunting. Amanda Melpolder is currently in a Derekh Torah class and says that, despite "shul-shopping" at various minyans throughout New York, she hasn't yet found the right person or place to cement her decision to convert.

Melpolder, 28, was raised in a strict Christian home; two sisters are missionaries and her mother is studying to be a Lutheran pastor. Religion was important in her family but she found she didn't believe as her family did. Working in politics, she was inspired by the lifestyle and attitudes of her Jewish colleagues and bosses and is now certain Judaism is her path.

"I think converting within a relationship is a very valid way to do it," says Melpolder, who ended a relationship with an Orthodox Jew in part because his parents did not support her Jewish journey. "It's the shorter answer to a lot of people," but not, she acknowledges, an option for everyone.

For many who come from other faiths one of the more challenging pieces of embracing Judaism has been their family's understanding and acceptance. Melpolder says her Christian mother had trouble understanding that Judaism was more than just the Old Testament, but that now they have good conversations about what each is learning in her religious pursuits. Fersko said her parents have been extremely

supportive of her decision, preparing kosher food when she visits and wrapping her children's presents in neutral, rather than Christmas, paper.

Moritt says many non-Jews who are exploring Judaism do so because of a Jewish person, like Melpolder's coworkers, who influenced them in their religious or cultural upbringing, someone who planted a seed that they want to grow.

"People are drawn to the openness to questioning that makes sense in a way that perhaps their faith traditions of origin never did to them," says Moritt of the people who take the Derekh Torah class and ultimately seek to convert to Judaism. "There's this thread that's intangible and their heart calls them."

Rabbi Allen Schwartz of Congregation Ohab Zedek, an Orthodox rabbi, actively helps people convert to Judaism, providing them with an intensive course of study. He says most people who come to him have already explored the less rigorous options of Reform or Conservative conversions, but want a halachic conversion recognized by all Jewish bodies.

"Conversion isn't just an election," says Rabbi Schwartz. "You become part of a family."

He says that follow-up is one of the greatest challenges with people who have converted outside a couple, making sure the person has a place to have Shabbat and holiday meals, and a comfortable community in which to pray.

"I don't go out proselytizing but once they express such a desire to get here, it's a mitzvah to work with them," says Rabbi Schwartz.

Kathryn Kahn, director of outreach and membership for the Union of Reform Judaism, agrees. "Very often the person who comes on their own, unless they have a Jewish support system, we need to make sure our congregational communities are the support system for these people, that they find mentors and teachers who will walk with them on their journey as they make Jewish choices."

For other people, converting to Judaism simply formalizes a process they have been engaged with for life. Sarah Zarrow, 24, was raised Jewishly by a Jewish father and non-Jewish mother, attending Hebrew school classes until 12th grade and becoming a bat mitzvah. She says she was always involved and interested in Jewish life, finding herself drawn to Orthodoxy for years before realizing that by those standards she was not, in fact, Jewish.

After exploring her options she began to study Maimonides with Rabbi Jeremy Kalmanofsky at Congregation Ansche Chesed on the Upper West Side, as well as engaging in tzedakah projects, until she felt ready to formally convert.

"I thought the day would come, I'd dunk, and I wouldn't feel anything," says Zarrow of her anticipation of the mikveh ritual that she undertook last month. "But I also knew somewhere that it wasn't like an exam, that it was more of a beginning than an ending."

"But the mikveh was really cool. I was terrified that I'd do something

wrong and that I'd nullify things, even if no one knew I did something wrong. It felt really good and when I came out and said the Shema, I started to cry."

Zarrow doesn't feel her life will change drastically, as she has long been Sabbath-observant and involved in the Jewish community, but she feels her conversion is a gift to her future Jewish self, giving her options and a solid connection to her long-held faith.

"Our Jewish history is replete with those who have joined us through conversion," says Kahn of the Union of Reform Judaism, citing Ruth, as many others do, as a prime example of a positive Jewish convert role model. "By following the mitzvah, we've reaped blessing."

Once her conversion is complete, Linette Padron, who is currently in the Y's Derekh class, says she would "love to meet someone, get married, have a family, everything a nice Jewish girl wants." But for now, she is happy to have found a place in her chosen religion, and to have the freedom to keep exploring.

"Once you've made the decision you belong," she says, "everything else falls into place."

Some Feedback

"I loved re-learning what I slept through in Hebrew School as a kid."

"Actually, it exceeded our goals. We were not even planning to take the class as a couple. I've had many years of Jewish education under my belt and was under the impression the Ken would be taking the class alone. After our meeting with Leana we were urged to register as a couple and that proved to be very important to our growth as both individuals and as a couple.. My experience in the class was a new vantage point into material that I was mostly familiar with. Ken was learning about Judaism for the first time. Both our teacher and our fellow classmates created a "community" for Ken, making such a positive and warm entrance. As a couple, the class opened conversation topics that we would not have thought of and allowed us to explore our minds and souls together. This became one of the most important experiences we've had in our relationship."

"It introduced me to the beauty of Judaism and introduced the idea of conversion. My teacher introduced me to the rabbi who supervised my conversion. My DT Teacher referred us to the synagogue where we became (and still are) members. I don't think I ever would have converted without DT because my husband was a non-observant Jew when I met him. Going through DT with my husband (then fiancée) was a great way for us to build a common level of observance and understanding. I think Judaism has only made our marriage stronger and been important for our children."

"It was a huge change in my life and I entered into conversion sincerely and seriously—however now, I'm more ecumenical in feeling as I'm not Ashkenazic by birth and have trouble still identifying myself as Jewish although I practice it. It's a religion to me, not all a culture."

"It changed how I thought of myself in relation to Judaism. It was as if I were waiting for permission to be fully Jewish. I took control of that part of my life. Now I teach at a Jewish high school and feel a part of the Jewish Community. I attend an Orthodox tefillah group and keep kosher. I'm a Jewish adult there, elder!"

"We have two friends who also took the class. We met there and I have no doubt we'll remain friends for our lifetime."

"Derekh Torah has had a profound impact on my life and my fiancé's life. We entered the class hoping to explore Judaism and discovered how much meaning it can and now does have on our life together."

"The biggest impact the course had on my/our life is the improvement in my father's attitude toward my marrying someone who is not Jewish. The investment my spouse and I made in learning about Judaism helped my father understand I am serious about keeping Judaism a part of my life and my spouse will be supportive and involved in that as we build our life together."

"It significantly increased my understanding of what it means to be Jewish. I got married, became kosher, celebrate Shabbot and love being Jewish."