Creative Decision-Making and the Construction of a Modern Jewish Identity

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As a consequence of modernity the center of Jewish identity shifted from being externally imposed to being voluntarily and internally determined. This has placed the act of choice, as well as an implied process of decision-making at the center of the construction of a Jewish identity. In a post-modern society an individual chooses whether or not to identify as a Jew. A person also determines what type of Jew he or she will be. Personal choice, in other words, is the fulcrum of a modern Jewish identity. This contrasts with the traditional Eastern European culture in which Jewish identity was formed by a mix of socialization, formal and informal education, and a host culture that typically restricted the activity and livelihood of Jews. For a person brought up, educated and socialized as a Jew, it is often the richness of relationships with family and friends, in addition to one's own religious education, that forms and structures Jewish identity. In a way, this background would seem to lessen the aspect of choice. However, both the fluidity of boundaries between groups and the emphasis on change and free-will that permeates all of American society make choice a clear option.

An extensive Jewish education is a critical determinant of a strong Jewish identity and serves as a deterrent to intermarriage; this finding indicates the importance of both a person's understanding of the whys and wherefores of his Jewishness, and of the cultural and social ties which are the context within which to be Jewish. For persons raised within a Jewish context, the emphasis on personal choice is not likely to be as strong as for those raised as secular Jews. Given a lack of outside constraints, and a culture that emphasizes personal choice, freedom and self-actualization, a modern or postmodern Jewish identity becomes completely dependent upon an individual's decision to define him or herself as Jewish, to live Jewishly, and to raise one's children as Jews. One lens through which to view this decision-making process is the choice of *ba'alei teshuvah* (penitent Jews) to be religiously observant of Orthodox Jewish law.

In this paper I examine the nature of the process of change experienced by *ba'alei teshuvah* using examples from interviews which I conducted during 1985-1986 in New York City and Jerusalem. Fifteen persons were interviewed: nine women and six men whose ages at the time ranged from 24 to 54, with an average of 36. Five respondents had masters degrees, and all but one had completed college. Thirteen were married, one was divorced, and one expected to marry soon. All had children except one woman who was expecting her first child and the unmarried man. All respondents but one had been born in the United States. The

exception was a woman from England. Eleven interviews were conducted in New York City, four in Jerusalem, Israel, and all were in English.

The snowball method was used to achieve a random sample in both Jerusalem and New York. In-depth interviews were conducted with each of the respondents. In most cases the interviews took place in the respondent's home, although office settings, the interviewer's home, and public settings such as a café or hotel lounge were also used. Interviews lasted from 1 ¾ hours to approximately four hours, using two sessions when required. All interviews were taped and most have been transcribed. To ensure the presence of radical change in both consciousness and behavior, only persons who had become religiously observant of Orthodox Jewish law were included in the study. Because of the potential for backsliding, only persons who had been living a religiously observant lifestyle for at least five years were chosen. Five years seemed a sufficient amount of time to ensure that a person was settled in a new way of life.

Traditionally, a *ba'al teshuvah* is someone raised within Orthodoxy who goes away and then returns. Of the fifteen persons interviewed, only one fit this category. She, in other words, was raised in an Orthodox family setting. Seven interviewees, five men and two women, were raised in Traditional or Conservative families. One person had a Reform background and six came from secular Jewish households. Eight respondents came from families with fairly strong connections to the Jewish world and six from families with far more tenuous Jewish connections, including one family in which the parents were Yiddish Bundists and another in which the parents were Trotskyites.

After beginning an interview one woman mentioned that she was really a convert and not a *ba'alat teshuvah* as most people assumed. I decided to keep this interview to see if her story differed in any significant way from the others. It did not, although, as was to be expected, several of the issues she raised were not addressed by the others. Most respondents were either second or third generation Americans or some combination of the two; a few were fourth generation. The Holocaust played an essential role in the journey of one *ba'alat teshuvah* and of the convert.

Because meanings emerge out of the particular context of a person's life and must be seen within this context I felt it essential that people tell their stories in their own words. In this way, the framing of the story conveys the meaning of actions taken and choices made (Langer, 1942, 1953; Bruner, 1990). Interviews were conducted with as little interference as possible. After ascertaining basic information, I asked the respondent to tell the story of how she or he became religious. Pseudonyms are used for all the interviewees.

Lazerwitz, et al (1998, p. 81) find that 10 percent of Jews who have no denominational preference, i.e., secular Jews (Kosmin, et al, 1991), have switched to Orthodox Judaism. This means that they have chosen to live a life ruled by the strict observance of *halakhah*, Jewish religious law, which governs all the details of a person's life from the smallest to the largest. Having been raised as secular Jews, these *ba'alei tèshuvah* are unlikely to have strong Jewish ties, either social, familial, or organizational. They are also unlikely to have had much Jewish education. Thus, they may clearly be said to have made a radical life change.

Because of the radical nature of this change, within the literature on the Sociology of Religion, their change process is regarded as a conversion (Davidman, 1991).

Eight percent of Jews raised within the Conservative movement have also switched to Orthodoxy (Lazerwitz, et al, 1998). It is assumed that in most cases their change was neither as extensive nor as radical as the aforementioned ten percent. That is to say, they probably knew more about Judaism and were likely to have observed a greater number of Jewish rituals and to have observed them with greater frequency than the first group. In addition, their change was probably not as socially isolating since as Conservative Jews they were more likely to have established contacts within a Jewishly oriented and organized world. However, given the current flexibility of observance within non-Orthodox denominations (Wertheimer, 1993), *ba'alei teshuvah* raised as Conservative Jews can also be expected to redefine their world view and establish new social and organizational contacts. Thus, some will be properly regarded as having undergone a conversion process, whereas others are perhaps more appropriately defined as having "switched" denominations.

In both cases however, the type of Jewish identity and affiliation, as well as what this expresses, is a consequence of personal choice. The choice of *ba'alei teshuvah* is so interesting partly because it appears to move in a direction opposite to "modernity," signifying a return to the particularity of the Jewish People and away from the universality and subjectivity characteristic of post-modern belief systems. Inglehart (1990, 1997) notes that concern with spirituality and the meaning of one's life is characteristic to the post-materialist values that dominate postmodern societies. A return to religion can be regarded as an expression of such concern.

Nevertheless, the multiple constraints and regulations of Orthodox Judaism to which *ba'alei teshuvah* return seem excessive and self-contradictory since the decision appears to limit rather than expand choice. However, literature on the sociology of religion shows that the more demanding religious groups, like the evangelicals and fundamentalists, are increasing their membership and, because they employ more commitment mechanisms, have a higher rate of retention. Still, a person who chooses a belief system and way of life that seem to contradict the culture and education of his upbringing raises many fascinating questions, not the least of which is how a stable and coherent sense of self is maintained throughout the change. How does a person raised with one set of values, who radically transforms his life to reflect another set, retain a coherent inner core and self-image? The fact that the action is voluntary, motivated and achieved as a consequence of personal choice, suggests that the decision to change emerges from an inner perception of a need and or desire. But for what? What is the motive of the change and how is it expressed? Is there a motif, a theme to the change and if so, what is it? Might not this motif provide both the motive for change and the coherence of self needed for authentic self-definition and expression?

Kaufman (1993) found that women returnees *(ba'alot teshuvah)* reinterpret the values, regulations, and constraints of Orthodox Judaism in feminist terms, thus linking the "old" and "new" cultural frameworks. Davidman (1991) found comparable results in her study of *ba'alei teshuvah.* Interestingly, a similar

observation about the return to Catholicism in Cuba is made by Lorenzo Albacete (1998, p. 36), a reporter for *The New Yorker*. He writes:

> [W]e were introduced to half a dozen novices, who had been born under the Revolution. All of them had come from nonbelieving families and were college-educated. Each told us basically the same story: she had met Catholic students at the university, had been struck by their sense of social mission, and had ended up deciding to devote her life to social service through contemplation in the cloister. "It became clear to me that the strength of revolutionary ideology was weakening — that it could no longer demand the kind of sacrifices it once did" one of the novices, a former sociology student, said. "I became fascinated by the notion of an absolute that inspired people to help others." Indeed, every time I spoke with young Cuban Catholics, even the seminary students in Havana, they used this sort of revolutionary language to describe their faith.

These studies suggest that what appears to be a radical contradiction in lifestyles is perceived by the individual as a continuum in terms of a core set of values, ideals and ideas. In the process of change, particular ideals or ideas from one context or conceptual framework are transferred to another in the hope that they will offer more effective actualization. Thus, the change process can be conceptualized as the consequence of a classically defined rational decision (Simon, 1957) in which the effectiveness of one framework for action is evaluated for its ability to accomplish an intended mission and found lacking. The new framework is adopted specifically because it is more effective for the implementation of core values and ideals.

In this context, the quest motivating a *ba'al teshuvah* to act can be seen as one of self-actualization. This would be consistent with post-materialist values such as a concern with the meaning of life, prevalent in a postmodern society. What is so interesting in the case of *ba'alei teshuvah,* as in the examples given by Albacete, is that the move is from a system in which the goal of self-actualization is defined by subjective, individual judgment to a system in which self-actualization, though still central, proceeds in accordance with carefully structured guidelines. The authority structure, in other words, changes very dramatically and very radically.

One may visualize this change as a person transposing core values from the center of one circle to the center of another. This core is a person's central or fundamental life motif, and it remains that, but in order to be more effectively actualized it is placed within a radically different framework of action. The center remains, in other words. What changes is the framework or context within which action occurs. It is, of course, appropriate to argue that once placed within a different framework for action, the ideal itself is transformed and or redefined. Nevertheless, from an individual perspective this core meaning constitutes the connecting link between the new framework of action and belief and an authentic sense of self. This center links the underlying motivation of the change with its destination, guides the person through the change process, and provides a measure against which to evaluate whether or not the original goal has been fulfilled as a result of the change.

The nature of the change as outlined above is analogous to processes of creative development and also to the process found in adult development. Creative development is motivated by an inner vision or knowledge intuited by the artist or scientist. This inner vision provides the motive for the creation, guides its process of development, and determines whether or not the final work accurately expresses the inner vision. The philosopher of aesthetics Susanne K. Langer calls this inner vision the "commanding form" of the work. Referring to the development of a musical composition, she writes:

> Music is an occurrent art; a musical work grows from the first imagination of its general movement to its complete, physical presentation, its *occurrence*. In this growth there are, however, certain distinguishable stages — distinguishable, though not always separable.
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> The first stage is the process of conception, that takes place entirely within the composer's mind (no matter what outside stimuli may start or support it), and issues in a more or less sudden recognition of the total form to be achieved. I say "more or less sudden," because the point of this revelation probably varies widely in the typical experience of different composers and even in the several experiences of any of them.... But however the total *Gestalt* presents itself to him, he recognizes it as the fundamental form of the piece; and henceforth his mind is no longer free to wander irresponsibly from theme to theme, key to key, and mood to mood. This form is the "composition" which he feels called upon to develop. (It is significant, at this point, that one speaks of "composition" in painting in an analogous sense; the basic form of the picture, which is to be developed, and by which every line and every accent is controlled.)...
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> Yet in the whole process of subsequent invention and elaboration, the general *Gestalt* serves as a measure of right and wrong, too much and too little, strong and weak. One might call that original conception the *commanding form* of the work (Langer, 1953. pp. 121–122).

Other kinds of creative work confirm this same process of development in which an inner knowledge motivates, guides, and evaluates its construction (Ghiselin, 1952). The perceptual structure of such inner knowledge as the *commanding form* is non-discursive (Langer, 1942; 1953). That is, its meaning is holistically perceived, with parts which are intricately related to one another, and cannot be taken from the whole without losing their meaning. Nor can the meanings of this perceptual form be generalized. The creative development process can then be said to begin with a non-discursive type of knowledge. In order to turn that knowledge into concrete reality, the composer, artist, or scientist experiments and analyzes the effectiveness of various possibilities. The process then returns to the initial conceptualization to guide the choice process. According to Langer, it is

in the sensing of an intuitive click that the composer confirms that he has matched the "commanding form."

The idea of non-discursively structured knowledge that inspires and guides a person throughout his or her life is used by Daniel Levinson in his study of adult male development. He calls this form the Dream and describes it in terms strikingly similar to Langer's description of the *commanding form:*

> In the course of our study, we have discovered another factor that plays a powerful and pervasive role in early adulthood. This factor, often portrayed in mythology and literature, is rarely considered in academic research. We call it "the Dream." (We use the initial capital to identify and emphasize our specific use of the word.)
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> In its primordial form, the Dream is a vague sense of self-in-adult-world. It has the quality of a vision, an imagined possibility that generates excitement and vitality. At the start it is poorly articulated and only tenuously connected to reality, although it may contain concrete images such as winning the Nobel Prize or making the all-star team.
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> Whatever the nature of his Dream, a young man has the developmental task of giving it greater definition and finding ways to live it out. It makes a great difference in his growth whether his initial life structure is consonant with and infused by the Dream, or opposed to it. If the Dream remains unconnected to his life it may simply die, and with it his sense of aliveness and purpose (Levinson, 1978. pp. 91–92).

As Levinson suggests, not everyone fulfills or actualizes and concretizes the Dream in his or her life. Its very presence however, affects one's life in that it provides a standard against which the accomplishments of a person are measured. Like the *commanding form* in the creative decision-making process, a consequence of experiencing "the Dream" is the responsibility to actualize it, to give it concrete form. The close analogy between the *commanding form* and the Dream suggests that the use of non-discursive presentational structured knowledge to guide personal identity construction and life development is not unusual. In fact, it may be its absence that would require explanation.

For *ba'alei teshuvah* this Dream, or *commanding form*, is found to be best fulfilled when living an Orthodox Jewish life. Since the development process of *ba'alei teshuvah* leads to a new life, I would expect a "life motif" to emerge from the stories of *ba'alei teshuvah* that works in the same way as the *commanding form* and the Dream. This life motif will both motivate and guide, and the process of change will be evaluated according to it. Once he has perceived it, a person must strive to express the motif in the concrete forms of his or her everyday life. To do this is never an easy task. An inner struggle ensues because of the dissonance between everyday reality and the desire to give this goal a concrete reality.

The motif is first known in its perceived non-discursive form which means it cannot be clearly articulated and requires that the individual struggle to understand it. Understanding, however, is achieved primarily or even exclusively by giving it concrete form, which for *ba'alei teshuvah* require the experiencing of alternative

lifestyles, or other life commitments until the one that matches the governing life motif is found. The sense of 'coming home' and familiarity that *ba'alei teshuvah* often note when encountering Orthodoxy, whether at a Sabbath meal or when learning in a Yeshivah, can be explained in terms of Langer's sensing of an intuitive click. There is a sense of recognition that makes the situation or event familiar even though experienced for the first time.

Davidman and Greil (1993, pp. 87–88) endorse the use of the term "conversion" in their study of *ba'alei teshuvah*, even though the reference is to persons who are "converting" to their own religion. This is because a Jewish Orthodox lifestyle is radically different from all other Jewish or secular lifestyles. The nature of the change a *ba'al teshuvah* experiences is both attitudinal and behavioral. Within the sociology of religion the definition of conversion generally follows that of William James: "To say a man is 'converted' means...that religious ideas, previously peripheral in his consciousness, now take a central place, and that religious aims form the habitual centre of his energy" (James, 1929, p. 193).

Contemporary studies of conversion within the sociology of religion focus on the rationality and intentionality of a convert's action. This is a major change from the earlier conversion model which derived from the experience of Paul on the way to Damascus. In this model, conversion was conceptualized as a passive response to the miraculous presence of God, inexplicable and indescribable in normal, everyday terms. There was no choice but to conform to the requirements made clear in the vision. The process of change, in other words, lacks independent analysis and thought. It is this model which governed the perception of persons who converted to cults during the sixties as being brainwashed. However, closer investigation suggested that these people were neither passive nor brainwashed, but rather were searching and making choices (Richardson, 1985). Thus, the theoretical shift to a focus on the intentionality and rationality of the person who converts.

The format of a search followed by choice suggests that a rational decision model is appropriate but problematic, since as a consequence, the role of non-rational ways of knowing in the conversion process are rejected. Important life choices like conversion are rarely, if ever, achieved through a discursively based cost-benefit analysis or a listing of pros and cons. Instead, choice is usually based on the intuitive "gut feeling" one gets after a discursive analysis. This is not unlike the sensing of an "intuitive click" to which Langer refers. It would seem to point to an inner perception of the way in which our lives should unfold — not the events, over which we often have little if any control, but rather something more basic, something closer to what Taylor (1991) defines as one's authentic self.

It is my thesis that this authentic self is what *ba'alei teshuvah* seek to actualize in their process of change. Thus, the process of change proceeds in accordance with and is governed by this intuitively known self. Langer's analysis finds that the meanings of a non-discursive symbolism or expressive form, like the *commanding form* or Levinson's Dream, or the life motif I suggest, is known through feeling, which she understands to be, like thinking and analysis, a rational way of knowing. It seems reasonable to assume that the reference to what "feels right" or "feels like

me," which is often made by *ba'alei teshuvah* to explain their pace of change, is a reference to a non-discursive perceptual understanding of this inner authentic self.

Indeed, in interviews with *ba'alei teshuvah* I found that they use not only the processes of thinking and analysis, as advocated by the rational decision model, but they also use and may even rely on insight, inspiration, feelings, and mystical and or spiritual experiences. All of these latter forms of knowing are traditionally conceptualized as non-rational. Using Langer's conceptualization however, these ways of knowing are understood as rational. Nevertheless, it is important to note that in order to communicate the meanings of these non-discursive ways of knowing, the knowledge must be expressed in occurrent form. In other words, a process of development must attend this type of knowledge if it is to be shared with others. It is my understanding that this is the process by which *ba'alei teshuvah* become religiously observant of Orthodox Jewish law. Examples from the interviews are given below.

Leah said she came from a very Conservative upbringing, but always wanted to be more religiously observant. At summer camp, when she was thirteen years old, she had

> a very strong sense of God's presence.... I had never thought much about God before that but now I knew there was some kind of force or whatever in the universe and the experience made a very strong impression on me.... I was sitting on a bench and recall feeling totally at peace with myself. A little later, while I was sitting on the grass I wrote a poem. I was quiet and still; even though everything was going on around me. Camp had started, the kids were up. I wrote about knowing. Knowing, knowing, knowing. Not in terms of thinking about HaShem (God) specifically, but like knowing there was a certain purpose in life. The strong feelings of contentment and being at peace with myself came from knowing there was a purpose to the world. That I was being taken care of and had a certain destiny in my life. That feeling stayed with me for a long time but once I was home, gradually even that was lost and I remember feeling neither calm nor content. But I know it made a really big impression on me because when I returned home I wanted to be back in camp so I could have those feelings again. It was like this experience had become a real place for me. And as I got older I always referred back to it in my mind as something I wanted to achieve — that feeling of peace and contentment. But I didn't know how to achieve it or in which sense; I wasn't sophisticated enough to define the feelings. And even when I got older I didn't know what it meant until I became *frum* (religiously observant). What I did know was that I had touched something in myself I wanted to return to.

The above beautifully expresses the idea of a life motif, an experience that constitutes a "commanding form," or life Dream which then provides the direction and goal for a person's life. The challenge is how to actualize it. It might be assumed that since Leah came from what she described as "a very Conservative

upbringing," it would be easy for her to translate the experience into intensified religious observance. But for various reasons articulated in the interview, she didn't. Instead, among other things, Leah became involved in college campus politics, then dropped out of college, worked in an abortion clinic, and then became seriously involved with a non-Jewish man. A rabbi and a friend persuaded her to break off the relationship. A series of other experiences gradually led her to Israel where she attended a Yeshivah; she had great difficulty in accepting the teachings. Only after struggling with issues which defined her conflict between secularly based ideas, mostly concerning the role and behavior of women, and the ideas of Orthodox Judaism, did she accept the Orthodox approach. Here is what she says:

> For me the abortion question was all tied up in the meaning of a woman's identity. As I learned about *halakhah* (Jewish religious law) and the role of a Jewish woman, I saw it was true. That this way of life was true women's liberation and that the other was just a woman fighting against her nature, her true purpose in life. It wasn't just a question of having children. I mean, there's much more than that. Gradually, I understood how it all fit into place. This happened over a long time.

This second stage involved the struggle to concretely express the initial intuition, which she had when she was thirteen, of her life purpose, her life motif. It was only after a great deal of experimentation by trial and error in how she should live, and then the working through of the ideas and understanding how they affect her life, that she was able to see how all the parts fit into place. The search for purpose guided her path of return and provided an important measure against which she could evaluate whether or not her goal was achieved.

A very different story is told by Linda, a Yale graduate. Brought up in New Jersey by "non-practicing Reform Jews" Linda went Christmas caroling, decorated Christmas trees, and wished she "could be a born-again Christian though, intellectually, I knew I never could." But interestingly, she became aware of her life motif at an age similar to Leah's experience. In Linda's second stage of development she worked in various social activist movements and organizations; she travelled through Europe and then went to Israel. In Israel she attended Yeshivah where she, like Leah, confronted the conflict between the ideas of the secular world she knew and Orthodox Judaism. Here is what she says close to the conclusion of her story.

> I knew that just as there's a physical order in the world, there must be a moral order as well. It's possible to establish a logical basis for this idea but my feeling about it was purely intuitive. In other words, I didn't formulate this idea in terms of a physical order because I'm not a scientist. I didn't believe that because everything else in the physical realm interacts so perfectly, the human being should do the same. Rather, I felt that our purpose is to create a moral harmony to parallel the harmony found in the physical realm, taking into account the profound difference between the two realms: in the physical world there are rules, whereas in the moral realm we have choices. In

> the physical world, gravity is gravity and you can't choose in or out of it, but you do choose whether or not to conform to an existing moral law....
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> I really always felt that way but I first became aware of this thought when I was about fifteen years old and applied it to the idea of littering....but when I came of age and could consciously choose, like at fifteen, I remember saying that I wanted to be the kind of person who, if everybody did what I did, the world would be a better place.... My parents tell me I said this all through my teens. Then, I started to feel this way about all of my actions. Like I wouldn't be able to live with myself if somebody, by imitating me, if the whole world imitated me, the whole world would be worse. Littering is a minor thing, but it was symbolic of how an individual's actions have the potential to transform an entire society, an entire world.
>
> So really I was always searching for the right structure within which to become a good person. The key to the structure's working was that it had to account for and acknowledge the importance of personal action. It had to recognize that as a result of personal action, society could be transformed. Intuitively I knew this structure existed. I was looking for it when I worked for those organizations after college, but I didn't know where to find it. So, from that perspective, I can say that all my life I've been searching for Torah. I just didn't know it.

We see that Linda had an initial vision of the way things should be which functioned as her life motif. It established a goal which she sought to implement and actualize in her everyday life. Searching for it, Linda became involved in various organizations and movements which she eventually rejected because they failed to measure up to her standards as defined in her life motif. This trial and error experimentation eventually led her to study in a Yeshivah in Israel. But only when she was struggling with the Torah perspective and encountered people living a Torah life, did she feel that she had found that for which she had always been searching.

Naomi was already in her fifties when she became a *ba'alat teshuvah*. Her background was that of

> a completely absorbed, assimilated British Jew; so absorbed that I knew Christmas and I knew Easter. And I only knew about Judaism that I was Jewish; that I was different. I knew I was different because in school they told me I was different. For instance, "Would Jewish girls please leave the hall until the prayers are over." And if they hadn't told me I was different I probably wouldn't even have known it. So every school I ever went to, we Jewish girls always walked out. That made me feel pretty good. I don't know why but it made me feel pretty good.

She described an unexplainable attraction to being Jewish, expressed while she was still a young girl.

> And whenever I went past a synagogue my soul was tugging. I could feel it. It was yearning. It was a yearning to go in. And whenever I came across anything Jewish, a challah in a shop window for instance, this soul would activate itself and I would feel hungry. Not physically hungry, but spiritually hungry, like I've got to go in because that belongs to me. Not as if I'm starving hungry, no. Rather, this is mine; this is me. But I couldn't have it because we didn't observe Shabbat.

The feelings described above constitute Naomi's life motif which engenders a search to move closer to Jewish observance but, because of various obstructions, like marrying someone who came from a religious family but did not want to be observant, the search continued most of her life. Once her children were grown, she found a path that took her to a Yeshivah in Israel where she learned how to observe Jewish law and make it the basis of her everyday life. Only in so doing, she stated, was she able to appease the restlessness of her soul that caused her great hardship and pain throughout most of her life.

Another example was David, who was thirty-two at the time of the interview. He was brought up in a Conservative home in which his mother lit candles every Friday night but, after having a nice meal, "things went back to normal." Although his parents weren't as observant as he would have liked them to be, he did live in a religious neighborhood and remembers seeing people walk back and forth from the synagogue on the Sabbath and holidays. He remembers wanting to be like them.

David traces his desire to be religiously observant to a Sunday School experience in which he and one other boy in his class said they wanted to wear *tzitzis,* the fringed garment that Orthodox men wear, usually but not always, under their shirt. In retrospect, David understands this as a clear indication that he always wanted to be religiously observant but his family did not. This thwarted desire was expressed in his behavior with his *tefillin,* the phylacteries worn by men during their morning prayers once they have reached the bar mitzvah age of thirteen.

Contrary to the required practice, after his bar mitzvah David never put on his *tefillin* again until he became Orthodox. Instead, he put his *tefillin* into a dresser drawer and every year took them out to look at them, promising that once he moved out of his parents' house he would become observant. This became a life motif for David in that part of the significance in the donning of *tefillin* when a boy reaches the age of bar mitzvah is that this is the age when he becomes responsible for what he does and does not do in his life. This is the same meaning attached to leaving one's parents' home. David promised himself that on leaving his parents' home he would become religious. This did not happen until he was twenty-eight years old.

Because he stayed at home, the second stage of the development process included less searching and trying out of alternatives than we saw in the earlier stories. Instead, David lived the life he saw his parents living (this was the alternative he tried out) and became more and more convinced that becoming a *ba'al teshuvah* would be the right choice for him.

> I said to myself, I've got one life, so I might as well live it as a Jew.
> You know, it's like sort of a buried treasure in my backyard. All I
> have to do is dig it up. I figured out there's such a small percentage
> of Jews in the world, it's such a miracle and it's such a waste to go
> through your life living like a non-Jew when you have these riches.
> That's the way I feel. You're just wasting your life if you don't live
> it the way you're supposed to....
>
> So, young people start really looking and questioning; is that what
> I'm going to be doing for the rest of my life? It's a crazy game where
> me and two million other people on the train are all going to the
> same place to get money to go home to buy food and strengthen
> ourselves so we can go to work. And people start thinking, people
> start really thinking as the months turn into years, start thinking that
> there's got to be more to life than three meals a day, going to work,
> watching Johnny Carson, going to sleep.

To take responsibility for his life, David made the radical change of becoming
observant of Orthodox Jewish law. In this way he demonstrated the fact that he had
considered the options, found the path of his parents wanting, and identified
another direction which for him was more purposeful and therefore, more
personally rewarding. His sense of personal responsibility extended to his role in
the community in his desire to give as well as take. For this, he had to find his
place. A piano tuner by trade, he found out about a local volunteer organization
that delivered food for the Sabbath and the holidays to the needy, and volunteered
to work for them.

> It's a tough job. Its up to the guys from the street, the guys who grew
> up on the street like me who could lift the thirty, forty pound boxes
> and lug them up stairs. I find that if guys like me can't do that,
> nobody could. You have to do what you can. I might not be able to
> give as much charity as I want. I might not be able to learn the way I
> want. But at least let me use my physical ability; you know, my
> ability to drive, my ability to lug heavy stuff upstairs. Let me use that
> and let the other frum people do what they do best. Let them, you
> know, if they don't get into such physical work, let them not. I find
> that job has to be for the guys that don't mind dirty work, like me, so
> I feel that it's my duty to do it.

In all these cases, we see the connection between a life motif, often envisioned
by a person in his youth, that is carried over to become the central idea or ideal in
the adult person's commitment to a new Jewish life. It is this central motif that
lends continuity to a process of radical change and transformation, thus providing
the important coherence of self. This central meaning then becomes the focal point
for expressing one's Jewish identity.

One of the consequences of modernity is a multiplicity of meanings that
emerge as central to one's formation of a Jewish identity. Since such meanings
must derive primarily from within, they will inevitably revolve around one's own

sense of self. This means that the study of Jewish identity needs to examine the variations in the focal points of commitment, even within the same denomination.

It is easy to think that persons turn to Orthodoxy because it offers a simpler world view, one in which many choices do not seem to be available. However, the fact that all Jewish identity emerges from an inner consciousness and understanding means that there are many paths by which to connect. To this extent, the process is similar to that of creative development and each person can be thought of as an artist who must construct his or her own Jewish identity.

The process, as outlined above, is analogous to that of creative development in that it emerges from an inner knowledge which is used to guide a person's life journey, and to evaluate alternative ways of actualizing the life motif and determining when and how it is correctly expressed. The processes of becoming religious, the construction of a modern Jewish identity, and creative development all seem to share these same characteristics. Clearly, not everyone will go through such a process. Some persons will be content to stay where they are, to follow in the footsteps of their parents or embark on a path which retains the same conceptual and action framework. But for those who do take the option of choice to fashion a life of their own choosing, this format will most likely be the one they will follow. The motive and motif come from an inner source and it is this same inner source that must be satisfied with the form that is chosen. Only then is the search concluded.

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