

## Conceptualizing Reform Judaism In An Age of Religious Pluralism\*

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### Introduction

The acculturation of Jews in the United States has been both a blessing and a curse. As Jews have become more accepted in American society, the rates of intermarriage have increased while religious observance has decreased. Intermarriage has created much conflict within the Jewish community because many fear that the children of intermarried couples will not be raised as Jews and the continuity of the Jewish faith and people is under threat. As Egon Mayer writes, "The potential for extinction this time, however, is not the result of hate and persecution but rather of love and absorption-by-matrimony into a benignly accepting majority."<sup>1</sup>

Not only are Jews intermarrying in large numbers, many are also marrying converts to Judaism. This development has alarmed many Orthodox and Conservative Jews who fear that these converts are choosing Judaism for romantic reasons rather than for spiritual convictions. Immanuel Jakobovits writes that most people convert "not because they fall in love with Judaism, but because they fall in love with a Jewish person."<sup>2</sup> He concludes that "conversion for the sake of the family" rather than spirituality is harmful to Judaism.<sup>3</sup>

Both intermarriage and conversion have been viewed as the result of assimilation and secularization. According to secularization theory, modernity has dramatically altered the function and significance of religion. This does not mean that religion holds no importance today, but that the institution of religion no longer holds the same authority as it once did over economic, political, and social structures. Bryan Wilson writes:

By the term *secularization*, I mean that process by which religious institutions, actions, and consciousness lose their social significance. What secularization does *not* imply is that all men have acquired a secularized consciousness. It does not even suggest that most individuals have relinquished all their interest in religion, even though that may be the case. It maintains no more than religion ceases to be significant in the workings of the social system.<sup>4</sup>

This secularization thesis has been attacked by sociologists who argue that while modernity has altered the role of religion, it has not diminished the need for religion. Stephen Sharot points out that secularization theory—as it pertains to the Jews—has been challenged on four grounds.<sup>5</sup> According to Sharot, the first challenge to the argument is that there has been a decline in religious practice and argues instead that today there is more emphasis on beliefs and ethics. It also argues that secularization theory equates Orthodox Judaism with religiosity and Reform and Conservative Judaism with secularization.<sup>6</sup> The second challenge, according to Sharot, claims that instead of focusing on God and the supernatural, there is more emphasis in Jewish culture today on collectivity and community.<sup>7</sup> The third response acknowledges that there is secularization within Judaism but argues that since Jews are turning to new religious movements, such as cults, the need for religion remains intact.<sup>8</sup> Lastly, Sharot says, there is not “a single straight-line secularization thesis according to which there is a continuous decline and foreseeable disappearance of religion.”<sup>9</sup>

Instead, we are living in a spiritual marketplace, where religious seekers can select from an array of religious and spiritual choices. Rather than this being a sign of secularization, the commodification of religion is a result of the commercial culture.<sup>10</sup> Roof argues that “the new spiritual suppliers—inside and outside the religious establishment—cater to this more open religious climate. The suppliers take religious pluralism for granted and play to the themes of choice, individuality, and the desirability of a cultivated and spiritually sensitive self.”<sup>11</sup>

Therefore, the distribution of religious ideas needs to be studied through a new lens. This qualitative study explores how the rabbi and teachers of a “Welcome to Judaism” class, a prerequisite for individuals seeking conversion to Reform Judaism, conceptualize Reform Judaism in a marketplace of religious pluralism.

The potential converts who took the “Welcome to Judaism” class were disillusioned by the religious doctrine and political and social agenda of the conservative Christian movement. On one hand, they sought a lifestyle that stressed Americanization and individualism, yet on the other hand they did not want to live in a totally secular manner. While they wanted to be connected to a religious community and traditions, they wanted this religion to add to their life, not control their life. With this in mind, the rabbi and teachers structured the class to fit the needs, beliefs, and concerns of potential converts. The rabbi and teachers compared and contrasted Reform Judaism to both Orthodox Judaism and Christianity and suggested that Reform Judaism is the most realistic, progressive, and egalitarian religion for modern-day Jews.

This paper explores how the rabbi and teachers of the “Welcome to Judaism” class dealt with the threat of intermarriage and symbolic religiosity by responding to the needs and desires of the potential converts. The lessons taught by the rabbi and the teachers not only shaped the conversion experience, they also defined what it means to be a Reform Jew. As Lewis Rambo claims, all conversions are “influenced by a matrix of relationships, expectation, and situations,” and “all conversions (even Saul’s on the road to Damascus) are mediated through people, institutions, communities, and groups.”<sup>12</sup> Under this principle, identity construction is a process of social interaction in which the concept of one’s self is dependent on the interpretation of and interchange with others.<sup>13</sup>

### **Methods**

This paper is part of a larger qualitative study on identity construction and conversion to Reform Judaism. From November 1997 to March 1998, I conducted 20 observations of a “Welcome to Judaism” class at a Reform synagogue in central New York. The class was part of the outreach movement of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations—now known as the Union for Reform Judaism. Any individual who wanted to convert to Reform Judaism was required to take this course (offered by any Reform congregation). The purpose of the class was to provide a basic understanding of the history, theology, ritual observance, and literature of Judaism.

The class in New York also catered to intermarried couples, striving to create an atmosphere inclusive of non-Jews. Class organizers hoped that prospective converts would consider becoming Jewish or at least raise children born to interfaith couples as Jews. Most of the members of the class fit this profile. The others were Jews or non-Jews who attended the class to learn more about Judaism.

In addition to observing, I interviewed both the teachers and the students. Rabbi Shapiro was a personable, caring man in his early 50s. Raised as an ultra-Orthodox Jew, he was expected to study Torah, become a rabbi, and follow Jewish tradition. He realized that although he wanted to become a rabbi, he did not want to practice Orthodoxy, so he enrolled in a Reform rabbinical school. Yet, while Rabbi Shapiro is affiliated with Reform Judaism, he claimed his views often differed from the traditional beliefs of Reform Judaism. As a Reform rabbi, he rejected most of the ritualistic Jewish traditions. He explained:

I respect traditions if traditions respect me. But I think some traditions are absurd. There are specific historical reasons for keeping these traditions that are not necessary today... And no

one can follow all the traditions and rules. And all of traditions and rules, like everything else about Judaism, is open to interpretation.

When discussing the different positions held by Jews, he said, "Orthodox believe X, Conservative believe Y, Reform believe Z, but I believe this." Because many of the congregants held views different from the rabbi, he made sure the "Welcome to Judaism" class heard multiple Reform perspectives. Therefore, three converts to Judaism—Kelly, Kate, and Dan—helped teach the class and supplement the rabbi's views.

Besides teaching the weekly classes, the teachers all served as examples of conversion and were available as resources for the prospective converts. Yet they did not want to be role models, as each took a different route to Judaism and exhibited different levels of Jewish observance. Believing they might not be as zealous or knowledgeable as the class' teachers, they did not want to alienate potential converts.

In addition to the teachers, I interviewed 23 members of the class, including Jews seeking to expand their knowledge, non-Jews interested in learning about Judaism, and the spouses and future spouses of the prospective converts. All the members of the class were white and either came from a Christian (Catholic or Protestant) or Jewish background. Most of the Christians reported that they practices little religious observances, the major one being Christmas (which most did not consider it to be a "Christian observance"). Only one said he came from a strict religious background, including forced weekly church attendance and bible schooling.

The ages ranged from mid-20s to early 60s, the majority being age 25-35. All but three had bachelor's degrees; eight had received graduate training. All except for three worked in professional fields including engineering, public relations, teaching, and medicine; three worked in occupations requiring physical labor or secretarial work.

### **Findings**

The potential converts who took the "Welcome to Judaism" class were disillusioned by the religious doctrine and political and social agenda of Christianity. On one hand, they sought a lifestyle that stressed Americanization and individualism, yet on the other hand they did not want to lead totally secular lives. Most of the converts wanted to raise their family with a religion that was flexible and appreciative of choice, enabling them to be comfortable with their religious practice.

Throughout the class, the potential converts emphasized that their decision to become Reform Jews was just an extension of their old self, not a radical reconstruction of a new self. They insisted that they did not change to fit their new religion; rather, they found a religion that suited their particular needs and lifestyle. Thus, the potential converts argued that their decision to become Reform Jews was an extension of their personal religious beliefs and not a fundamental change in their belief system. As Jane proclaimed, "I basically believe in the same things. I haven't changed for anybody. I've just learned more...I'm not being dishonest to myself. I haven't changed in any way for this class. I'm not going to change."

With this in mind, the rabbi and teachers structured the class to fit the needs, beliefs, and concerns of the potential converts. Since they wanted to help people not affiliated with a religion find a religious home in Reform Judaism, they encouraged the potential converts to make the choices that would make the transformation easier. The rabbi and teachers compared and contrasted Reform Judaism to both Orthodox Judaism and Christianity. By presenting Reform Judaism as an ethical and modern alternative to the beliefs of Christianity and the traditions of Orthodoxy, the rabbi and teachers tried to sell Reform Judaism as a better choice for modern living.

They did this by teaching the Reform movement's position on the basic tenets of religion, and the holidays and rituals practiced by Jews. In doing so, they portrayed Reform Judaism as a more modern, egalitarian, and accessible way of life than Orthodox Judaism and Christianity. In addition, the practices and rituals that Rabbi Shapiro embraces and rejects are in part a reaction to what the rabbi perceives as the rules of Orthodox Judaism. Thus, the teachers encouraged the potential converts to perceive becoming a Reform Jew as taking the best of what religion has to offer and ignoring the rest.

### **Reform Judaism has Realistic Beliefs**

The potential converts believed that Reform Judaism was more practical and ethical than Christianity and more modern and flexible than Orthodox Judaism. By taking the "Welcome to Judaism" course, they affirmed their belief that they already think like Jews since they rejected the fundamental tenets of Christianity. All of the potential converts claimed that they never considered Jesus to be the messiah and that they felt more comfortable with the Jewish perception of Jesus as a leader and a teacher, not a prophet or son of God. As one of the potential converts stated:

I've had a difficult time with the basic tenet. The most profound tenet of Christianity is the divinity of Christ. In the beginning I thought, take a leap of faith. So I thought, leap of faith, leap to faith...what is a leap? I defined leap and went through a very Judaic kind of thinking. A leap is defined as leaping from where you are to someplace else, moving from here to there, some blind time, there is some blind feeling. In leaping there is a physical movement from here to there. I thought to myself, Oh, what's going on. You are just not buying that Jesus Christ is the messiah.

The rabbi emphasized that the fundamental difference between Judaism and Christianity is the belief in God and the messiah. According to Kelly, Jews believe in one God, even though there are multiple ways of defining this God.

We often talk about what God isn't, not what God is. God is not an idol, God is not more than one, God is not a person. To be Jewish is to believe in one God. But other than that, you can really believe in anything you want: You can question God, you can get annoyed with God, you just cannot deny God.

In order to convert, the rabbi insisted that adherents believe in God and reject the notion that Jesus is the son of God, or the messiah. Rabbi Shapiro made this quite clear on the first day of class: "If you believe that Jesus is the savior, that Jesus is Christ, that Jesus is the son of God, don't convert," he said. Kelly explained to the class why Jews do not consider Jesus to be the messiah: "Jesus is not the messiah. Specific prophecies were made that said what would happen when the messiah comes: peace, no war, nations will get along and all will recognize one God." Unlike their perception of Christianity and Catholicism, the potential converts respected the emphasis placed on multiple interpretations and the questioning of ideas. Many of them had problems with the process and content of Christian prayers. As Terry stated:

Some of the stories read during the Christian services of the New Testament is like idolization, it doesn't give you any meat. It's like, praise him, love him, and that to me is not the way that's right. I just don't feel that. I want to think about, talk about ideas... You know, the New Testament is read from

in its entirety, there's no synopsis, no interpretation. It's hard to understand.

In fact, one of the potential converts stated that the feeling of being "at home" with Judaism was highlighted by the way one is supposed to question, analyze, and interpret the Torah.

One of the first things that happened is you take up the Torah, statements, and you discuss them. And essentially the rabbi said, "You are acting as Jews." In other words, it's not a preach-to in the beginning. This is the heart of Judaism—discussion, analysis and thinking. I might cry, I'm a crier, so I warn you. So I sat there as he said this and I said, "My God, I'm home." It was very simple. It wasn't the light came down and God told me, it wasn't that Christ walked away from me or any of that. This was what my place is about. I would go as far as saying, this is what Christianity is about. This is where I'm at. The phylactery, the wearing, the details, no, it's foreign to me. But I believe that the experience I'm having at [this Temple] is the most religious Christian thing I've ever had. But I'm using that word in a complete different manner now. Religion is much better now.

As Rabbi Shapiro distinguished between Christianity and Judaism, he also noted the differences within Judaism. Class discussions often focused on the differences and tensions between Reform and Orthodox Judaism, the main difference being Reform's emphasis on choice and Orthodoxy's devotion to tradition. The rudimentary differences stem from beliefs relating to how the Jews received the Torah's commandments, and he explained how and why Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform Jews interpret the Torah differently. The rabbi explained the multiple views:

While the Orthodox believe that Moses went up to Mount Sinai with thousands of Israelites around him and received the Torah (written law), they believe they only received one half of the Talmud (oral law). Conservatives believed Moses received most, if not all, of the Torah, and about one half of the Talmud. Reform Jews believe that Moses received the Ten Commandments. God inspired people to write the Torah (divine inspiration) and none of the oral law at Mount Sinai. Reform Jews believe in prophecy (divinely inspired revelations). I believe that Moses, or someone like Moses, was

at Mount Sinai. But the Torah was divinely inspired, not written by God, but written by men and women. I believe divine inspiration can happen today, but not directly. So, Orthodox believe that the Torah is *halacha*, Conservatives believe it is historical (and historically specific), and Reforms believe it is prophetic, which is why we reject aspects of Judaism and still have a religious home. We focus on social action and the need to correct the world [*tikkun olam*].

The rabbi told the class, "From Reform to ultra-Orthodox, we read the Torah and question it all. The difference is, in Reform, you decide whether to follow it or not. In ultra-Orthodox [sic], you need to follow so you need to find it somewhere in the tradition." The rabbi and teachers tried to emphasize that while choices are a blessing to Reform Jews, it is not something that should be taken lightly. It is the Reform Jew's responsibility to make choices based upon careful study and interpretation. They informed the students in the class that Reform Judaism does not claim to have all the answers. That is why the movement is called "Reform Judaism" and not "Reformed Judaism."<sup>14</sup>

The Reform movement takes offense at Orthodox claims of superiority. Because Reform Jews do not follow *halacha* in a traditional sense, Orthodox Jews often view Reform Jews as "less Jewish."<sup>15</sup> According to the rabbi, Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, and Reconstructionist Judaism are placed in a hierarchy with Reform Judaism at the bottom of the ladder. Yet, the rabbi and teachers rejected the notion that Reform Judaism is an easier or a "watered-down" version of Judaism. In fact, the rabbi claimed, being a religious Reform Jew is the hardest kind of Judaism to practice. "I want you to know that the easiest form of Judaism to practice is ultra-Orthodox. The second easiest form to practice is Orthodox. The hardest is Reform Judaism. Why? Because ultra-Orthodox has strict rules which you must follow. But Reform Jews have to make lots of choices." Unlike a priest, a rabbi is not going to tell you how to act or think, he said. As the rabbi described:

In Christianity, a priest and the Pope is the go-between. The clergy has a special relationship with God. He can give sacraments and forgive sin. If you go to a rabbi about a sin, he will tell you to make amends and then talk directly to God. He does not dispense a blessing or forgiveness. He, as I like to call it, is not an eternal vending machine.



A rabbi is a learned person and a teacher, not a mystical figure. He or she does not possess special powers, nor does he or she have a special relationship to God, the rabbi explained. Shapiro said, "There is nothing that cannot be done by any knowledgeable Jew." Nonetheless, a Reform rabbi's role is different than the role of an Orthodox rabbi, he said:

[My] primary role is like a preacher and teacher. In Orthodoxy, [the rabbi's] role is more of a judge than a teacher. It would not be strange to go up to an Orthodox rabbi and ask, "Rabbi, can I eat this can of tuna fish." He'd look at the ingredients on the label and say yes or no. You'd then follow his order. If you came to me and say, "Rabbi, can I eat pork?" I'd say, "the law says no, but you need to make a choice about that."

The rabbi tried to portray a realistic expectation of rabbis and laypersons: rabbis are human and all Jews have access to God. The idea that all individuals can have a direct relationship to God is logical and pragmatic, he said. The idea that a Reform rabbi will not tell congregants how to act makes Reform Judaism more attractive to these converts.

### **Reform Judaism has Progressive Politics**

All of the participants made it clear that while they were comfortable with Reform Judaism, they were not as comfortable with Conservative or Orthodox Judaism. They found Orthodox and Conservative Judaism to be too rigid, too formal, and too conservative politically. As Amy explained, "What I do like about what I've experienced so far in the Jewish religion [is that] I feel like I'm presented with things to think about. And I understand that's the Reform [way]. And I don't know if I would be comfortable with Conservative [Judaism], definitely not Orthodoxy." Liz agreed: "I'm not as comfortable with some of the more conservative teachings even in the Conservative synagogues, especially in terms of women's rights, rights of gay people. I'm more comfortable with the Reform views than the more conservative views."

The potential converts said they believed that Reform Judaism empowers them with the ability to make choices regarding political positions, religious beliefs, and cultural rituals. Almost all the converts described their negative feelings toward the politics of the Catholic Church and the so-called Religious Right. These men and women seriously disliked the conservative and forceful political stance of these religious organizations and movements. The prospective converts

consistently claimed that the conservative Christian and Catholic Church's views on divorce, abortion, birth control, women, and gay and lesbian rights offend them. They found the liberal stance of Reform Judaism exciting, refreshing, and liberating. Debbie left the Catholic Church because she was aggravated by its conservative views:

A lot of the rigidity in the Catholic Church really bothered me...I've gotten into very heavy disagreements with priests about abortion, divorce, illegitimate children, gay and lesbians, and about how rigid they were. I did not understand how they can be so selective, so judgmental. At that point, I didn't not want to be Catholic anymore. I just said I don't need to go, because I don't need to go there and sit there and have someone tell me that because I think if a woman gets raped she should be able to have an abortion, and if I think that, then I should go to hell. And that ticked me off. And the fact that if I take birth control or something, that I'm not going to procreate, and I should go to hell for that. And one of the last times I went, they had somebody up there who was pro-life and he was preaching to us, and I thought this was no place for this, in a church, during service. You know? Not at all. Afterwards the priest came up and announced this is our belief, if you don't [believe this] you'll go to hell.

Debbie contrasted the experience at her church with one of her first experiences at a temple service:

It happened to be one of the first services that Rabbi Shapiro did. And he happened to say something about gay and lesbians, and it was an issue—I can't remember where he was coming from—but the basic point he said, was, you know, I believe in accepting anybody and if you are gay and you sit here I will not think twice about who you are or what you do at home. And I was, like, wow! And that was probably the first point in my head saying that, well, this was different and I thought this was really kind of progressive.

Rabbi Shapiro and the teachers often engaged in a dialogue that stressed liberal and egalitarian views and distinguished them from Christians and Orthodox Jews.<sup>16</sup> Reform Judaism believes in abortion rights, gay and lesbian rights, and women's rights. Women in Reform Judaism have all the same rights and responsibilities as men. They claim that this is quite different from the division of religious labor,

which relegates distinct duties and responsibilities to men and women in Orthodox Judaism. According to Kate and Kelly, Orthodox men pray and participate in the public life of the Jewish community while Orthodox women manage and maintain a pious home.

According to Orthodox Jews, this division of labor does not lead to unequal status among women, as they are revered in their role as housewife and mother. "Within the Jewish tradition women enjoyed a position of respect and honor. The virtuous woman was extolled; for her the *Eshet Hayil* was recited every Sabbath evening. Within her sphere, the home, the Jewish woman was placed on a pedestal."<sup>17</sup> It is considered a "women's mitzvah" to lead the life of a good Jewish wife and mother.<sup>18</sup> Defending the position of Orthodox women, while still distinguishing Reform women from Orthodox women, Kate said: "They like doing this. They want to do it." Kelly chimed in and said, "Yes, the Orthodox are not feminists like us. They don't see it as a burden. It's a part of their life."<sup>19</sup>

While the teachers believed that Reform Judaism stresses egalitarian roles in the home, potential converts complained about the amount of work placed upon women during the holidays and Shabbat. Kelly responded thusly: "Well, you learn how to do it. You do it in advance. It is done throughout the week. So it's not done all at once. And you learn to do Shabbat a little at a time." One of the members of the class did not like this response because it still made women responsible for the work involved in preparing Shabbat. She argued, "Women have so much to do already, it's a double day. While men have the time to be spiritual, women don't have the time." Kelly continued to emphasize Reform's position on equality: "Well, it's not like that in Reform Judaism.

We have egalitarianism. It's not like Orthodoxy."<sup>20</sup> Another way Reform Judaism differs from Orthodoxy is that in Reform Judaism women can participate in all the same religious rituals as men. Women have been ordained as rabbis since 1972. Since women can do mitzvahs and can wear the *tallis* (prayer shawl), gender is not seen as an "issue" in Reform Judaism, the teachers said. As Kelly said,

I think in Reform Judaism there's more egalitarianism, so the gender roles are not as much of an issue...although in some ways, about making *Shabbat* dinner and things like that, there is somewhat of a gender thing. But we try to point out that with most of the *mitzvot*, women can do them as well as men. For instance, women are not forbidden from wearing *talises*. It's just that they are exempt in Orthodox Judaism from a time-bound commandment.<sup>21</sup>

When I asked Kelly, who happens to study with a Lubavitch rabbi, to comment on how she feels about women being exempt from these commandments, she responded:

You have to get into the Orthodox mindset to understand where they're coming from. And I have a biblical commentary written by an Orthodox feminist. And it's very interesting, in a lot of ways she's very Orthodox, but she's very much a feminist in the sense of explaining why these things are... Her belief is that women are more spiritual, and therefore do not need some of these *mitzvot*. How do I feel about this? I think at times this being exempt from them is beneficial. But I think at other times being exempt and being forbidden are two different things. I don't want to be forbidden from wearing a *talis* or I don't want to be forbidden from saying the morning service. But do I necessarily want to be bound into that? In traditional Judaism, there's very strong role models and very strong gender differences. And that's her point. I don't necessarily agree with it but that's where they're coming from, and I respect that, and I understand it.

Finally, the rabbi noted one last gender distinction between Reform and Orthodox Judaism. Due to the belief that the sight and sound of women will distract men from their prayer, Orthodox women are forced to sit behind a *mechitza*, a partition that separates the men from the women, during prayer in *shul*.<sup>22</sup> Joseph Telushkin explains why Orthodox Jews require this seating arrangement:

God is abstract, and it is an effort for people to focus on an abstract Deity while praying. For me, and I think for many other men, it is a natural reaction to look around when a group of women is present and let one's gaze rest on a pretty woman... In the "battle" between an intangible God and a tangible member of the opposite sex, Jewish law assumed that the tangible is more likely to win. Hence, physical separation can help bring about spiritual concentration for both sexes.<sup>23</sup>

Joseph Telushkin defends the *mechitza* by arguing that it is the result and not the intent of the *mechitza* that discriminates against women:

...it is by no means clear that the *mechitza* is, or was, intended to be discriminatory... It must be acknowledged, however, that the *mechitza* is something used to discriminate against women. I have been to Orthodox synagogues where the *mechitza* was so remote that women were effectively cut off from

participating in the service. Not surprisingly, women in such congregations often spend the service talking and gossiping, and then are condemned by the men for not praying.<sup>24</sup>

The rabbis and teachers took pride in Reform Judaism's egalitarian structure.<sup>25</sup> They stressed the progressive views on women and heterosexuality by talking to the class about the differences between Reform Judaism and Orthodox Judaism.

### **Reform Judaism allows for choice in practices**

Most of the potential converts claimed that they wanted a religion that fit their current lifestyle and did not plan on attending services on a regular basis or observing the holidays strictly. They admitted that they probably would be "twice-a-year Jews"—Jews who attend synagogue only during the High Holidays. While they will celebrate Hanukkah and Passover annually, they probably will not observe Shabbat regularly. Debbie explains why:

I can't see myself coming home from work at 5:30 every day, coming home to this big dinner. It's possible it could happen, but I don't see it. Working a 60-hour workweek, the last thing you want to do is come home and cook. I want to go out to dinner. I think if there's such a thing as a traditional Reform, and then a modern Reform, I'd climb on the modern end of it, because I will acknowledge a lot of it, but I won't do it. It's not a lack of wanting to, but unfortunately on Friday night, the last thing I want to do is cook. I've never cooked. Not even at home. When we went through that class, I'm like, Matt, don't expect this every week. I just don't think it's happening. I mean, I'll go to services because that's at 8:00. Usually we can get ourselves together and have dinner and stuff, then, but like that part of it would be unrealistic in our lives. Maybe when I'm like 50 or 55 and I'm at a point where I can retire, my kids are gone but for someone 20, 30, 40, you're trying to raise your family, you're two busy career people, I think it's quite impossible.

All of the potential converts mentioned that the ability to make decisions on how observant they want to be was central to their decision to convert to Reform Judaism.

Traditional and ritualistic aspects of Judaism not only distinguish Jews from non-Jews, but also differentiate Reform Jews from Orthodox Jews. This is not to deny the importance placed upon the holidays or the

validity of Reform practices. In fact, Shapiro and the teachers spent much time encouraging potential converts to embrace the Jewish holidays, particularly Passover and Shabbat. Because Passover and Shabbat are two of the most difficult holidays to prepare for and practice, Kelly and Kate constructed versions of these holidays that emphasize family and new traditions and accommodate secular needs.

The teachers reminded the potential converts that while Passover is a family affair revolving around food and two *seders*, it also is a holiday of restriction and remembrance. We are restricted from eating leavened products in order to remind ourselves of the struggle of our ancestors, they taught. In addition, they said, Passover teaches us that we should take the lessons learned from the tragedy our ancestors experienced and work toward peace and freedom for all who are oppressed today. Kelly explained:

It's also a time to remember the phrase "Let my people go." What's really important is that it is *our* story; it is not in the past. Things are in the present tense. "For *we* were strangers in Egypt." There are lots of lessons drawn from this holiday. "As we were treated as strangers in Egypt," we learn how to treat others, with compassion. The parting of the Red Sea, where it parted for the Jews to cross and then drowned the Egyptians. The Jews started to rejoice and God stopped them. We learn we can't rejoice because people are drowning. We empty our glasses to remind us that we don't rejoice when others are suffering, even when these people are our enemies.

During Passover all leavened products must be removed from the home and are avoided in one's diet for eight days. Shapiro and the teachers realized that it is unrealistic to expect most Reform Jews to adhere to these strict Passover kosher regulations. Most will not use separate dishes and cookware or refrain from eating unleavened bread. So instead of focusing on the dietary restrictions, they encouraged the aspects of Passover they believed instill Jewish identity.

For example, children were encouraged to participate in the Passover *seder* and search for the *afikoman*, the "hidden" *matzah*, which concludes the ritual meal.

*Shabbat* was one of the teachers' favorite holidays due to its emphasis on family and tradition. Given that most Reform Jews do not observe *Shabbat* in the traditional sense, Kelly tried to make the central observances of *Shabbat* sound enticing by making *Shabbat* seem less restrictive and more "doable" for the contemporary family.

A Reform *Shabbat* differs drastically from an Orthodox *Shabbat*. For Reform Jews, *Shabbat* accommodates accessibility, choice and modernity. Observing *Shabbat* for Reform Jews means doing something special to differentiate the day from the rest of the week. The main emphasis, they said, is eating a nice meal with the whole family, since this opportunity rarely occurs during the workweek for most families. Kelly shared her *Shabbat* rituals:

I started by lighting candles. You may want to start by having a special dinner or flowers, or eating together as a family. You can have anything for dinner. It doesn't have to be a gourmet meal. It could be anything that separates out the week, like pizza. You can have pizza. In my family, we could never all eat together because my daughter is a swimmer and always had practice. On Friday, she was allowed to miss *Shabbat* dinner if she had a practice or a game during the varsity season, but for the rest of the year we all ate together. And if she could, we encouraged her to be there to light the candles. Any other Friday, if she wanted to go out on a date, she could but she had to have dinner with us. That's how we do it.

In addition, Kelly showed how a tradition that can seem so antiquated and restrictive actually is beneficial and uplifting in modern life.

Unfortunately, we see *Shabbat* as a day of restriction. But this is the wrong way of looking at it. I like to think of it as instead of human doing, I'm a human being. I think of all the things I can't do like laundry, or cleaning. That really got me into *Shabbat*...*Shabbat* is wonderful because we work too much and too hard. This gives us a break from all work. We work too much overtime and don't have enough time. With the overtime, we have money to buy more things to cut down on time, but we still don't have enough time. This makes us take time.

By choosing to observe *Shabbat* as a Reform Jew, the teachers informed the potential converts that they were choosing a sane and healthy way of life that emphasizes spending time with family rather than wasting time working or consuming. Reform Jews thereby reap all the benefits of *Shabbat* without suffering from Orthodox restrictions.

**Reform Judaism Provides a Sense of Community**

One of the reasons these individuals were converting to Reform Judaism was to have a sense of community while raising a Jewish family. Yet, at the same time, they felt very disconnected to much of the Jewish community. The teachers said it is common for converts to feel uncomfortable as Jews at the time of conversion, because they naturally do not feel a cultural connection to other Jews. Kelly explained:

I think the hardest thing, and I know because I experienced it myself, is, number one, building history, and number two, feeling culturally comfortable. You know, it's not just a religion. It's like a religious cultural civilization—all sorts of things. So these people are going to feel a little uncomfortable for a while until they come and become used to things. But they're going to get used to Yiddish, everyday language, or talking about holidays or food. That's what they're going to find the most difficult. It's like becoming a citizen of a new country. The acculturation does not happen overnight. The more they become involved, the easier the process.

Kelly explained that confidence is gained when one constructs a history and becomes comfortable with cultural aspects of Judaism, such as the language (Yiddish sayings or Hebrew terms) and food. Kate agreed. But she said that while converts can learn the cultural aspects of being Jewish, it is more difficult to make connections with other Jews:

The cultural connection is the hardest thing for that convert to get. They can get the ritual stuff, they can learn to do the holidays. But if they don't simply spend time living among other Jews and making that kind of connection, which is probably the way for them to make that connection, they're really not getting the whole thing. So from the point of view of outreach, if I worry about the converts at all, I worry whether they're going to get that. I don't know how to give it to them. But I do think it is very, very important to have the outreach, because I would like to avoid having these people feel isolated, and I think the convert often does feel isolated.

Therefore, the rabbi and teachers reminded potential Jews that feeling like a Jew does not begin at conversion; instead, religious conversion is a starting point to gaining entrance to the Jewish community. Religious conversion is the start rather than the end of a lifelong process. As Kate, one of the teachers, said, "At whatever point you convert, you're only



going to be at the beginning of the journey. The idea is to try to give people a solid foundation.” Kelly highlighted the process involved in feeling like a Jew and emphasized that the conversion ritual was just a legal procedure. A convert needs experience as a Jew in order for the label “Jew” to feel authentic, she said.

Now conversion leads to a process of resocialization. Not just learning—there are major changes in lifestyle, in beliefs, in ethnic relationships. It’s a commitment to lifelong study...So becoming Jewish is a process, there’s no specific period in which you feel a Jew. No one is a Jewish expert. Conversion is just the beginning of Jewish study. A 15-week class will not make you an expert. The conversion is only a ritual, only one step in the building of a Jewish identity.

Both born Jews and converts have different commitments to religion at different points of their lives. The teachers claimed that lifecycle events such as bar and bat mitzvah, marriage, the birth of a child, or the death of a loved one alters the state of affiliation and sense of belonging.

One aspect of Jewish life the converts felt very disconnected to was the State of Israel. As Amy explained, Israel was too abstract, and she was unable to comprehend fully the significance of the land:

I have to admit that that’s the hardest part for me to really grasp. This fight over this place, you know what I mean? Like, to me, it’s very abstract. And I think that probably [Mitch] and I will go visit. That’s when it will become real to me. I’ve been to other countries, and once you’ve been someplace and seen it, then it starts to make an impression.

In addition, Amy found it hard to understand the history of the Middle East conflict. “I listen to the issues, but I don’t really comprehend them, and I don’t necessarily have all the history to understand it,” she said.

Not only did the potential converts not understand the Middle East conflict, they also had not fully grasped that the political orthodoxy in Israel and in the United States that affects how other Jews view Reform converts. Shapiro and the teachers spent much time discussing the political and social status of Reform Jewish converts. Many born Jews do not recognize those who convert under Reform Judaism as real or legitimate Jews. This rejection is common not only in the Orthodox community, but by Reform and Conservative Jews as well.

Kelly explained to the class, “There is a legal distinction between born Jews and someone who chooses to be Jewish. There is no

theological difference. Judaism is not biological, it is a belief." Therefore, according to Kelly's interpretation of the laws of Judaism, converts are supposed to be treated like all other Jews and are not supposed to be singled out as converts. Kelly stated, "Converts are considered to be like newborn infants. They left their community so now we need to make them feel at home. You can never speak of a convert in a derogatory way. You can't say they are 'not really Jewish' or refer to marriage between a convert and a born Jew as an intermarriage." However, Kelly warned the class, Jews do not always practice what they preach: Some born Jews believe that new Jews are not good enough or are not "real" Jews.

Shapiro tried to downplay the conversion dispute in Israel while informing the class of the problem. The debate in Israel on who is a Jew came to a head during the 16-week course. Shapiro spent a lot of time discussing the issue and how it would affect those who choose Reform Judaism:

Remember: A conversion that I do is not recognized by an Orthodox rabbi in the U.S. and not by a conservative rabbi in the U.S. unless you had a *mikvah* and a circumcision/symbolic circumcision. A conversion I do will enable you to enter into Israel under the Law of Return. But beyond that, you are not recognized. If you want to get married, and your mother and your mother's mother are not Jewish, you have to get married in Jordan. And if you are a woman, your children won't be recognized as Jewish.

The converts were also told that individual Conservative rabbis may accept their conversions, although on a whole they will not unless they went through the *mikvah* and circumcision process. Finally, Rabbi Shapiro claims that Reconstructionist Jews will accept any Reform conversions.

While the teachers spent a great deal of time outlining the politics of Orthodoxy in Israel, the rabbi, and sometimes the teachers, de-emphasized these problems to refrain from scaring away potential converts. Dan explained:

In the Reform context, the rabbi has a difficult job. The rabbi has to convert you to his or her stream of Judaism, but they've got this disclosure they've got to make, which is not good. I mean, the only way they can sell it—I have to put it in commercial terms—is by de-emphasizing it. And say, hey, you know, it doesn't really matter. The only time it's going to

really matter is if you decide that you want to become a citizen [of Israel] and then you'll deal with it. But 99 percent of the people never do. I think part of it is that. That it's the job of the rabbi to de-emphasize it, especially in the Reform [movement].

The potential converts did not seem to care about Israeli policies and Orthodox concerns. Their response to this controversy was typically, "I know how I feel," "I know that I'm a Jew," and "It's personal." They were emotionally detached from the Jewish homeland, Israeli politics and American Orthodoxy because they are lands and lifestyles that are very distant from their own.

Kelly argued that this reaction was part of the reality of becoming a Jew. She believed they were not concerned with Israel because they could not see the big picture, which she argued would come with time and children:

Yeah, a lot of them really don't know what to expect. For most of them, this is really the first step in the door. I think that for now it's not important to them. This is one of the least important things to them. But as they move into Judaism, and as they grow with Judaism, it may become more important to them. It will become important in the sense of having children. For instance, my daughter, if she decided she wanted to marry someone who was Orthodox, she might have a problem. And, so that then could be something. I think as the person matures and kind of looks to the next generation and seeing what kind of impact their decision is going to have on the future, then it becomes more important. But for now, yeah, these people don't see it, because they don't, they can't see the big picture. They don't have the years of experiences of being in the community to be able to see the big picture.

### **Conclusion**

Shapiro and the teachers of the "Welcome to Judaism" class had to find a way to promote religion within a culture of secularization. This is a necessary strategy if they want to limit interfaith marriages by convincing future spouses to convert to Judaism. Intermarriage suggests that both parties are not religiously observant. Most born Reform Jews are not religious. They do not attend weekly services, observe Shabbat, or keep kosher. But many identify as Jews and have a blossoming commitment to the Jewish community. These sentiments usually are

expressed through a Jewish family and home, however they are constructed.

In many ways, potential converts are similar to Reform and secular Jews today. They want a religion that promotes equality, stresses individualism and choice, and is realistic for the modern world. They are not willing to make drastic changes in their lifestyle for religion.

By discussing Reform Judaism in relation to Christianity and Orthodox Judaism, the rabbi portrayed Reform Judaism as the most appropriate religion for modern-day American Jews. Shapiro and the teachers of the "Welcome to Judaism" course did not believe they were constructing a diluted version of Judaism. Rather, they believed they were keeping intact the fundamental aspects of Reform Judaism; they simply were reconceptualizing it to embrace an audience that has been influenced by the age of religious pluralism and the spiritual marketplace.

## NOTES

\* Thanks to Judy Long, Marjorie DeVault, Julia Loughlin, Amy Holzgang, and Sue Wasserman for their feedback and encouragement.

<sup>1</sup> Egon Mayer, "Why Not Judaism?" in *Readings on Conversion to Judaism*, edited by L. Epstein. (Jason Aronson, 1995) p.103.

<sup>2</sup> David M. Eichhorn, and Immanuel Jakobovits, "Shall Jews Missionize?" in *Readings on Conversion to Judaism*, edited by L. Epstein. (Jason Aronson, 1995) p.141

<sup>3</sup> Eichhorn and Jakobovits, *ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> Brian Wilson, *Religion in Sociological Perspective* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990) p.149.

<sup>5</sup> Stephen Sharon, "Judaism and the Secularization Debate," *Sociological Analysis*, 52 (1991): 255-275.

<sup>6</sup> Frieda Kerner Furman, *Beyond Yiddishkeit: The Struggle for Jewish Identity in a Reform Synagogue* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1987).

<sup>7</sup> Jonathan S. Woocher, *Sacred Survival: The Civil Religion of American Jews* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1986).

<sup>8</sup> Rodney Stark and William Sims Bainbridge, *The Future of Religion: Secularization, Revival, and Cult Formation* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1985).

<sup>9</sup> Stephen Sharon, *ibid.*, p.272.

<sup>10</sup> R. Laurence Moore, *Selling God: American Religion in the Marketplace of Culture*. (Oxford University Press, 1994) and Wade

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Clark Roof, *Spiritual Marketplace: Baby Boomers and the Remaking of American Religion* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999).

<sup>11</sup> Wade Clark Roof, *Spiritual Marketplace: Baby Boomers and the Remaking of American Religion* (Princeton University Press, 1999) p. 91.

<sup>12</sup> Lewis Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion* (New Have, CT: Yale University Press, 1993), p.1.

<sup>13</sup> Robert Bogdan and Sari Knopp Biklen, *Qualitative Research for Education: An Introduction to Theories and Methods* (Allyn & Bacon, 1992); and Stephen Taylor and Robert Bogdan, *Introduction to Qualitative Research Methods* (John Wiley and Sons, 1984).

<sup>14</sup> Eugene Borowitz, *Reform Judaism Today* (Behrman House, 1978), p. 49.

<sup>15</sup> Joseph Telushkin, *Jewish Literacy: The Most Important Things to Know About the Religion, Its People, and Its History*. (William Morrow and Co., 1991), p.436-7.

<sup>16</sup> For a discussion and critique of liberal feminism see: Rosearie Putnam Tong, *Feminist Thought: A More Comprehensive Introduction* (Westview Press, 1998).

<sup>17</sup> Paula Hyman, "The Other Half: Women in the Jewish Tradition" in *The Jewish Woman*, ed. Elizabeth Koltun (Shoken Books, 197,) p.108..

<sup>18</sup> Sylvia Barack Fishman, *A Breadth of Life: Feminism in the American Jewish Community* (Hanover, NH: Brandeis University Press, 1993), p.146

<sup>19</sup> For a critical look at women and Orthodox Judaism see: Blu Greenberg, *On Women and Judaism: A View from Tradition* (Philadelphia, PA: The Jewish Publication of America, 1981).

<sup>20</sup> This implies that since women are now involved in the public sphere of religion, men are now involved in the private sphere. For a discussion and critique of equality and housework see: Marjorie Devault, *Feeding the Family: The Social Organization of Care as Gendered Work* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1991); Scott Coltrane, *Family Man: Fatherhood, Housework, and Gender Equity* (Oxford University Press, 1996); Arlie Hochschild, *The Second Shift: Working Parents and the Revolution at Home* (Viking Press, 1989); Kathleen Gerson, *No Man's Land: Men's Changing Commitment to Family and Work* (Basic Books, 1993); and Ralph LaRossa, "Fatherhood and Social Change" in *Men's Lives*, eds. Michael Kimmel and Michael Messner (Macmillan Publishing, 1989).

<sup>21</sup> For a discussion and critique of women's exemption of time bound commandments see: Blu Greenberg, *On Women and Judaism: A View*

from *Tradition* (Philadelphia, PA: The Jewish Publication of America, 1981).

<sup>22</sup> For a discussion and critique of the *mechitza* see: Ann Braude, "The Jewish Woman's Encounter with American Culture" in *Women and Religion in America*, eds. Rosemary Radford Ruether and Rosemary Skinner Keller (Harper & Row, 1981); Sylvia Barack Fishman, *A Breadth of Life: Feminism in the American Jewish Community* (Hanover, NH: Brandeis University Press, 1993); Blu Greenberg, "On Women and Judaism: A View from Tradition" (Philadelphia, PA: The Jewish Publication of America, 1981); Paula Hyman, "The Other Half: Women in the Jewish Tradition" in *The Jewish Woman*, ed. Elizabeth Koltun (Shoken Books, 1976); Letty Cottin Pogrebin, *Deborah, Golda, and Me: Being Female and Jewish in America* (Doubleday, 1991); Schneider 1985; Braude 1981. Susan Weidman Schneider, *Jewish and Female: Choices and Changes in Our Lives Today* (Touchstone Books, 1984; Joseph Telushkin, *Jewish Literacy: The Most Important Things to Know About the Religion, Its People, and Its History*. (William Morrow and Co., 1991).

<sup>23</sup> Telushkin, *ibid*, p.645. Pogrebin (1991:54) gives a good critique. She states, "If males are so spiritually superior—if they can be motivated enough to fulfill all 613 *mitzvot*, divine commandments—why can't they be held responsible for their own spiritual focus?"

<sup>24</sup> Telushkin, *ibid*, p.645.

<sup>25</sup> While Reform Judaism is at the forefront of egalitarian religions, it still mirrors the larger American society and thus is not fully egalitarian. As Aviva Comet-Murciano, "Religious Feminism and Assimilation in Reform and Conservative Judaism" *Jewish Social Work Forum*, 31(1995): p.76., states:

...the attitudes of the Reform and Conservative movements toward Jewish feminism are a function of their levels of assimilation. The greater the assimilation to American society, the greater the acceptance of religious feminism. As a result, the pace of Jewish feminist change is determined by the larger culture and religious feminism will not evolve any faster than its secular counterpart.