

## Chapter 1

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# Beginnings

An appropriate starting point for this inquiry is to consider the recollections of the upbringing and early experiences of the forty-eight interviewees who became *baalei teshuvah*. In this chapter, I describe the participants' constructions of their family backgrounds and religious experiences; their earliest memories of thinking about God, spirituality, and religion; personal-familial challenges; and the people and experiences that inspired their spiritual development while growing up.

Most developmental theories acknowledge the importance of childhood experiences in shaping individuals' lives. As mentioned in the introduction, Erikson (1968) asserted that faith development is rooted in his first stage, *trust versus mistrust*, and expands in later stages. Likewise, the formation of identity is a lifetime project that begins in childhood, comes to the fore during adolescence, and undergoes modification in the process of development (Erikson, 1959/1980). Parents and other caretakers provide the primary influence on young children, but as children develop, other relatives (e.g., grandparents, aunts, and siblings), neighbors, peers, and teachers become increasingly important (Erikson, 1959/1980). The social-cultural, environmental context is of fundamental importance in Erikson's psychosocial theory, as well as theories of Levinson and his colleagues.

Parents are also the primary agents of religious socialization of children and adolescents, but extended family, religious leaders, and other community members play a role in this area, too. For Jewish children, religious socialization includes the ways in which they identify as a Jewish ethno-religious group as well as formal instruction, attendance at religious services, travel to Israel, home observances, and participation in Jewish camps and youth groups. Jewish

religious socialization takes place within the home, synagogue, and neighborhood. Children learn their parents' attitudes toward religion and the rituals they practice, and observe the consistency between what they profess and how they act. Children and adolescents also discern the attitudes of peers and others in their neighborhood and schools, and ways in which their parents' attitudes and practices are congruent or incongruent with those of other children's parents. Considering the developmental and socialization influences, I will start with a description of participants' background characteristics.

### Research Participants' Family Backgrounds

In Table I.1, I described the socio-demographic characteristics of the forty-eight men and women who were interviewed for this research (referred to as participants, interviewees, *baalei teshuvah*, and BTs). Here I will provide more information about their families based on the accounts in their interviews.

The BTs were diverse with respect to their socioeconomic backgrounds and places in which they lived. Although it was required that research participants spend most of their formative years in the United States, one emigrated from Europe and another from Israel as young children. They grew up in many sections of the country—the South, Southwest, West, Northeast, and Midwest—before moving to the cities in the Northeast where we found them. Some grew up in large urban environments where there were many Jews, whereas others lived in communities in which they were part of a small Jewish minority. Several spoke of their families' economic difficulties during their childhoods whereas others portrayed growing up middle class or financially privileged. No specific social profile fit all.

Most of the forty-eight interviewees were raised in intact families, with eight having parents who were divorced.<sup>1</sup> A few from intact families spoke of dissension between their parents or between themselves and one parent whereas others reported that their families were close, warm, and loving. Four spoke of traumatic experiences growing up, such as abuse. One of the key informants, a rabbi/educator, talked about the importance of the BTs' relationships with their parents. In his opinion, having a poor relationship can block growth toward becoming *frum*. He said that some people have difficulty with the idea of a loving, compassionate God, but that emotionally balanced healthy people move ahead smoothly. He added that the more selfish a person is, the harder it is for the individual to do *mitzvot* (commanded obligations) which are, in essence, acts of selflessness. People with good *midot* (character traits),

he said, do better in terms of changing and making the transition. The lack of such qualities pushes people away from the process.

The focus group discussions were primarily about adult experiences, but members' timelines pointed to significant childhood experiences. Timelines from Focus Group 1 noted bar mitzvahs, a serious surgery, parents' divorce, learning about the Holocaust, cultural affiliation, parental resistance to their wanting more Jewish involvement, and youth group membership as salient experiences. The timelines of the Focus Group 2 highlighted losses (e.g., death of a sibling, parental divorce), day school, Jewish camp, a youth group, Hebrew School, bat mitzvahs, and awareness of the Holocaust. The experiences identified in the timelines of the two focus groups echoed each other and the individual interviews.

Most of the 48 study participants spoke of having had close relationships with grandparents and other relatives. In contrast with the traditional Orthodox grandparents referred to in Danzger's (1989) study of *baalei teshuvah*, the grandparents were relatively secular. Still, the extended family got together for Jewish holidays and other occasions. There were traces of Orthodox Judaism in the grandparental, parental, and other relatives' homes.

Several BTs spoke of anti-Jewish attitudes on the part of a parent, extended family members, or peers that raised questions for them about their Jewish identities. A few mentioned that their families had Christmas trees or exchanged Christmas presents, indicating that the families were assimilating into the larger society. In contrast, others grew up in families that conveyed positive feelings about being Jewish and held traditional Friday night Sabbath meals, kept kosher, and attended synagogue as a family on the Sabbath and/or holidays. A few described their families as Zionist or spoke about attending Zionist camps, youth groups, or religious schools. Typically, the participants went to Reform or Conservative Hebrew or Sunday Schools, which they liked to varying degrees, and had a *bar* or *bat mitzvah*. More male than female participants recalled disliking Hebrew School, because, they said, it kept them away from sports and was disorderly. Six interviewees continued their religious studies during high school in post-bar/bat mitzvah or confirmation classes. Another six attended Jewish day schools. Ten said that they went to Jewish summer camps.

Based on the interview participants' descriptions, I was able to identify three types of Jewish religious orientations of the families of origin. The first of these are the *Minimalists* (n = 7). Participants in this category came from families that did not affiliate with a synagogue, send their children to a Jewish camp, or enroll them in Sunday or Hebrew School (except for short periods,

or a minimum required for a *bar mitzvah*). The families of an additional three participants fit the criteria for Minimalist, but in these cases the BTs had some supplementary religious education. Influenced by relatives and others, two attended Jewish day schools and the third went to Hebrew School. I call these three families *Minimalists Plus*. For the most part, the BTs whose families were Minimalists or Minimalists Plus had some exposure to Judaism through Passover seders held at a relative's home or minimal celebrations of their *bar mitzvahs*.

Next were the *Mainstreamers* (n = 24). These came from families that attended synagogue a few times a year and enrolled their children in Sunday School or Hebrew School at some time. Generally, these families did not keep kosher. On the other hand, a mother may have been active in a Jewish women's organization or the parents may have participated in synagogue activities or Jewish charitable or Zionist organizations. One Mainstreamer family sent their child to a Jewish day school while several others enrolled their children in a Hebrew high school, a confirmation class, and/or Jewish camp but were otherwise modest participants in Jewish religious life.

The *Modern Traditionalists* (n = 14) took Judaism seriously within the parameters of Reform or Conservative Judaism. The families attended synagogue more frequently than the Mainstreamers, in some cases weekly or biweekly. They had some home observances such as a traditional Friday night family meal, lighting Sabbath candles, keeping kosher, and changing dishes for Passover. Three of these families sent their children to Jewish day schools and three enrolled them in Hebrew high school or post-bar or bat mitzvah seminars. One father reportedly attended religious services every morning.

These categories suggest that the BTs have different levels of family socialization and educational preparation for becoming Orthodox. Those from Modern Traditionalist families had a taste of religious observance but did not find these practices consistent. The seven from Minimalist families that provided little exposure to Judaism were disadvantaged. Those who attended day schools, went to Hebrew School, and participated in post-bar or bat mitzvah classes or seminars were better positioned to raise the level of their learning later.

Although there was variation in the extent to which Judaism was imparted, for the most part the families can be described as "culturally Jewish" in a number of senses. They saw themselves as Jewish regardless of the extent to which they were observant. They celebrated selected religious holidays (especially Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, Chanukah, and Passover), at which times they enjoyed being together as a family and eating Jewish ethnic dishes.

Some marked the Sabbath by lighting candles and having a special meal or by attending services, but they did not abide by the restrictions of this day (e.g., not using electricity). They gave little attention to Jewish law. The BTs emerged from their various families identified as Jews. A common statement was “I knew I was Jewish.”

To the extent that education, academic achievement, and community service are part of Jewish culture, the families seem to have embraced these values. Considering that the *baalei teshuvah* were well educated (see Table I.1) and many were professionals, families seem to have encouraged achievement and success in the secular world. A high level of education also suggests that they were socialized to think scientifically, that is, guided by observation, logic, and concrete evidence. Although this could be problematic to them when they were exploring Orthodox Judaism, their secular education led them to enjoy philosophical arguments, intellectual challenges, and novel interpretations. During the interviews, they used their intellectual skills as they reflected on the past.

### Earliest Memories

As a means of starting the interviews without imposing our own perspectives on participants, we asked about their earliest memories of thinking about God, spirituality, and religion (see Appendix A). These questions helped prepare the participants for the rest of the interview while their responses showed where they were coming from before they became observant.

#### *Earliest Memories of Thinking about God*

Participants reported that they found it challenging to recall their earliest memories of thinking about God. Some reported that in their families there was no talk about God, whereas others spoke of being made conscious of God. Exemplifying the latter, Elliot said, “I just grew up with an awareness of God. My grandfather prayed, and my mother would talk about God.” Others who reported growing up in families that spoke about God mentioned that their parents had their children recite prayers. Sherry’s earliest memory was of her father’s teaching her the *Shema*, a prayer affirming the oneness of God. She recalled, “He said that it was important for me to talk to God about how I was feeling and what I was doing.” Allison recalled reciting the *Shema* with her sister at night “and of course when you do something like that just

before you fall asleep, I think it triggers a whole presence of God.” On the other hand, Paul was encouraged to recite the Christian prayer “Now I lay me down to sleep” before he went to bed. This prayer ended with, “And if I die before I wake I pray the Lord my soul to take.” Fearing that he would die in his sleep, Paul added an additional line, “But don’t let me die.” Nora said that her mother modified the same prayer so that it included blessings for “all the people in my family and all the people that I loved.” Rather than feeling frightened, Nora felt that God was protecting her.

Some BTs recalled thinking about God after the death of a grandparent, other relative, or friend. They wondered what happens to a person after death. Did he or she go somewhere, like heaven? What would happen if their parents died? Participants who grew up in Minimalist homes found talk about God puzzling. Maya, for example, was surprised when her mother told her that God did not want her to waste the bread that Maya had discarded. She said she was not accustomed to hearing discussions about God in her family.

A number of participants shared their earliest perceptions of God. Their varied responses included the following:

It’s generally been a God as a creator, as a giver, as the creator of all that is of the world . . . like this thing that was bigger than life that was outside of the world that created everything. The trees, the grass, you know, my family, life. (Batyá)

I definitely thought about God a lot as a child. I definitely believed that there was this sort of huge formless spirit that was looking after me and was taking care of me. (Erica)

You know, I kind of think of this grandfatherly figure sitting on a big throne kind of thing. I guess somehow the image that I’ve also always had has not been of this loving father type figure, but more of the judge. (Annie)

When I was a little girl and I used to go outside and sit on a lounge chair and look up in the sky, in the clouds, and think that God was there, was watching me, and I just wanted to be in the clouds. Like I just wanted to transport myself into the sky. (Nora)

I knew that there was something that I couldn’t explain that somehow things seemed to work out right. (Jerry)

It was a Santa Claus view of God—that God takes care of you and does good things for you, but you have no obligations. (Paul)

I always felt close to God. I grew up going to the beach very frequently, and going on my grandfather's boat on Sundays, and I always felt close to God. I love being outdoors, and I love looking at the moon and the trees and the plants, and listening to birds. And I always felt that *Hashem* was close. (Ellen)

These images suggest a powerful being that created the world, hovers above and within nature, and is protective but controls and judges. Other images, not quoted here, described a God that aroused their fear of punishment or guilt.

Two children of Holocaust survivors, both from Mainstream families, spoke of the presence of God in their lives. In one case, the family emphasized God but not religious practice. As Deborah said, "God was always important in our house, because it was God that saved her (my mother) and her family." The other child of a survivor who spoke of God's presence said:

I was bewildered. I didn't understand God. And I knew that God kind of saved our lives. I didn't know why He would allow the world to be operated this way, I guess. I was three years old, I don't know how complicated I could have felt about it. (Ezra)

Several interviewees recalled learning about or discussing God in Reform Sunday school, discussions that seemed to arouse skepticism. Karen recalled:

You know, somewhere between second and sixth grade, sitting in Sunday school with this teacher, I don't even remember who the teacher was. And I remember this boy. . . . We must have been talking about God, and I remember he said, he was like questioning her about the existence of God, and I remember he said something to her like, "If God exists, I'm gonna put this stapler down on the table, and why can't He lift it up or something." And I remember looking at him, thinking, and saying to him out loud, "Do you think if there is a God, He has time to like deal with your nonsense of lifting up the stapler? You know, like, come on." And, so I guess, that would be my earliest memory.

Others, who attended Conservative Hebrew Schools and religious services, regarded their upbringing as more culturally Jewish than God-centered. As Lauren explained, “God was mentioned in *davening* (reciting prayers) but we didn’t think too much about God. We just thought, “This is what Jewish people are supposed to do. And this is what we’re going to do and this is the way it is.”

Overall, the participants had some concept of God gleaned from family members, prayer, and religious school. Their recollections of their child’s eye views reflect their young ages (mostly preschool or early school age). Although their ideas about God incorporated Christian and pantheistic elements, for the most part they were consistent with Jewish characterizations of God as powerful, just, compassionate, and awe-inspiring, and their age-related view of God as parental. God, however, was not the focus of the Jewishness with which they grew up.

### *Earliest Memories of Thinking about Spirituality*

Interviewees reported that their early thoughts about spirituality occurred, for the most part, when they were older, that is, in their teenage years, during college, or after they did *teshuvah*. A few, however, spoke of nascent spiritual experiences that arose during childhood. Several BTs offered unsolicited definitions of the term spirituality, for example:

spirituality for me would be feeling connected to God and feeling that there was a higher purpose than just living in the physical world. (Ezra)

a connection between myself and God. (Sarah)

I’ve always felt that you have to look beyond what is apparently in front of you. (Adam)

And only recently have I . . . figured out that it means a relationship with God. (Allison)

The term *connection* seems to encapsulate participants’ definitions of spirituality and the kinds of experiences they described. Interviewees provided numerous examples of early spiritual experiences in which they felt connected to God, *Hashem* (lit. the Name), or something vaguely meaningful:



I used to sleep with a prayer book in my bed. And I can remember that all the years, I needed some connection, even though I didn't know what it was at the time, I knew it was something. (Shifra)

I remember making a conscious decision in high school to light Chanukah candles because it was a connection to my ancestors. (Maya)

I would say probably the first time I really felt like I could have a connection to *Hashem* was that time that I prayed. That was really a big thing for me. It wasn't about community and it wasn't about heritage. It was about me talking with God. (Erica)

Probably my bar mitzvah. I mean, spirituality, the connection, a deep inner type of connection, or just a sense that, again, I always knew that there was Hashem. (Jerry)

Although they recalled discussing spiritual matters in Sunday School or Hebrew School, the spiritual experiences they described were in connection with the Sabbath, Passover, Chanukah, and attending religious services. They spoke about special feelings they associated with these occasions and the presence of immediate and extended family and friends. Ruth, whose family was Minimalist, recalled being exposed to her grandmother's Friday night dinners:

I have a lot of memories (of) my grandmother. Even though she wasn't observant, she always had Friday night dinner at her house with her whole extended family, which was, I think, this remnant of her religious life when she was younger. And so that felt, it felt like a spiritual feel to that in some way. It was like there was always *challah* (braided bread) and there was *matzah* ball soup, even though, again, it was not connected to ritual, but there was something spiritual about that experience for me. I think the family component and the Friday night ritual component was spiritual.

Although she described family visits rather than meals, Ellen spoke similarly about her grandmother, characterizing her as a good person who embodied spirituality.

Several interviewees mentioned the deaths of family members and friends as times of spiritual awakening and questioning. Arthur recalled learning about

the death of his grandmother when he was four years old, at which time he thought about where she would be going. Another participant, Gabe, reflected about his grandmother's unveiling:

I just began to think there was something very special about what was happening then; something other-worldly. For a six-year-old kid to think that . . . something out of the ordinary, spiritual, that there were spirits around that were (guiding her). I remember looking up in the trees nearby and seeing a bird fly and thinking to myself that bird must be Grandma. And that, that probably was my earliest introduction to thinking out of the box.

Gabe seems to have assimilated the concept of transmigration of souls or metempsychosis, whereby the soul of a deceased person takes the form of an animal or person. The concept is associated with Hinduism as well as other religions and cultures. In Judaism, the doctrine has been connected with adherents of Kabbalah, but it has been controversial (Kohler & Broydé, n.d.).

Some BTs described early memories of spiritual experiences that were secular or universalistic in character. They spoke of being moved by nature, music, or a baseball game and intrigued by study of Eastern mysticism. As Ben explained:

Being spiritual, I think, mostly had to do with maybe going to a concert that I liked, or maybe going with my dad to a baseball game. Or something that just was a . . . there was some kind of a transcending experience that was more than just a game itself. We went there, so it was something really nice, we could go to the game. Or when I got old enough to go to concerts . . . I'd get some kind of a good feeling. But it wasn't attached to any kind of religion.

This participant described a pleasurable, elevating experience. Other BTs later transferred the spiritual feelings that they had in relation to secular music to the chanting of religious prayers.

Several interviewees could not come up with an early spiritual experience or were puzzled with the term. A couple of them expressed negative or indifferent attitudes toward spirituality. One man was particularly critical of the idea:

Depending on how you define the word, spirituality tends to rub me the wrong way—even now. That comes up in the category of things which are nutty and crunchy. [Chuckle] So . . . I'm not necessarily sure what you're defining under the general heading of spirituality. I mean that's—that can be a big heading. I tend to lump that under the sorts of things where, in college, people would make these flaky, inventive services to better express their inner need to, whatever they were expressing. I mean, that sort of thing I tend to run screaming from. (Joel)

Although participants struggled with the term spirituality and with recalling an early experience, few responded cynically like Joel. They did have a range of responses to the question about their memories of their earliest thoughts about spirituality. Across groups (Minimalist, etc.) participants spoke of experiences in which they felt connected to God, family, their ancestors, Judaism, nature, other-worldly phenomena, and, as mentioned, death. Sometimes the connection was through a symbol, like Shabbat candles. They did not describe early spiritual experiences as solitary; they associated them with being with loved ones on the Sabbath and Jewish holidays and going to synagogue with family and friends.

### *Earliest Memories of Thinking about Religion*

When it came to describing earliest thoughts about religion, the core idea was *differentness*. Participants recalled knowing that they were Jewish and that being Jewish was different from being Christian. They felt different from neighborhood children who went to Catholic school or attended Protestant churches—but also different from Jews whose level of observance was less extensive than theirs. In addition to discussing their differentness in terms of religious identity, they also discussed their holiday celebrations, religious school attendance, synagogue life, and home observances.

Most of the participants attended public school, and even if they lived in predominantly Jewish neighborhoods, they had Christian neighbors and friends. Joshua said that he was cognizant of being different from his closest friend, especially around Christmas time, while Allison spoke about being attracted to her Catholic friend's Christmas tree:

and I loved that tree! I mean it was a classic American tale. And my mother, going out and getting as many Chanukah decorations

as she could find. The apartment became solid Chanukah. And you know, it was incredible! And then every night was the gift, and each night the gift got bigger and bigger, and that kind of thing. And really trying to compensate and push that. . . . You know, because it wasn't a religious home but a very Jewish home.

Even though Chanukah is not a major Jewish holiday in the way Christmas is to Christians, Allison's mother tried to compensate for any deprivation her daughter might have felt through an embellished celebration of Chanukah. Mark, whose family had been celebrating both Christmas and Chanukah, recalled his discussions with his classmates about religion and his parents' similar response:

I think that when I was . . . in second grade, that some of my classmates and I were trying to figure out what religion was about. I presume from the discussion that they didn't have any more clues than I did. We celebrated both Chanukah and Christmas. That is to say, we got presents on both Chanukah and Christmas, I think. And I remember the discussion was . . . okay, there's three religions. There's Judaism, and there's Protestantism, and Catholicism. Well, what are the differences? And one of them suggested, well, I guess it's Jews celebrate Chanukah and Catholics celebrate Christmas and Protestants must celebrate both. So I said, "Oh, then that must be what we are." I told my parents that and I think that's when they enrolled me in Hebrew school. (Mark)

Batya spoke of celebrating Jewish holidays as a means of differentiating oneself from Christians:

Religion, I think, was celebrations . . . Religion was identity. Family. . . . Food, certain kinds of food, Jewish food, Jewish people, Jewish faith. It definitely had a sense of difference-ness, you know, like one of maybe my earliest remembrances is like Passover and not celebrating Easter, and Chanukah and not celebrating Christmas.

As suggested by Batya and sixteen other participants, celebrating Jewish holidays was a way of affirming one's Jewish identity. By partaking of some traditional aspects, like eating special food, families asserted their Jewish cultural identity in contrast with what they were *not*. It is notable that two of the most frequently

celebrated Jewish holidays, Chanukah and Passover (National Jewish Population Survey, 2000–2001), occur around the same time as Christian holidays. Other ways of affirming their Jewish cultural identities that they described were participation in social action activities and demonstrating sensitivity to those who were discriminated against or suffering in some other way.

Despite a common perception that religion is equivalent to culture, many interviewees described their experiences within Jewish religious institutions and their home practices as meaningful in themselves. As mentioned in the introduction, the term religion is linked with institutions (Pargament, 1999). Among the Jewish institutions or organizations that the interviewees mentioned were synagogues and religious schools (Talmud Torah, afternoon supplementary or Hebrew schools, Sunday schools, and Jewish day schools), as well as Jewish youth groups and summer camps. Even though participants' synagogue attendance tended to be a few times a year, seventeen people referred to going to synagogue or *shul*. Lauren's parents were officers in their Conservative synagogue, which was "a very big part of our life," and Nora recalled loving her synagogue and Hebrew School:

Well, I didn't think about religion per se, but . . . I went to Hebrew School from a very early age, and I loved being in the synagogue with my parents on the High Holidays and I loved the cantor, so I guess I loved religious practices, the feeling surrounding religion, and being in the synagogue from the time I was a young girl and going to Hebrew School, and, looking back, being in the synagogue with my parents and feeling safe and secure.

For Nora and others, the synagogue was a safe haven, a home away from home. Eli said that what he liked best about going to synagogue was the socializing. Dov spoke positively about learning about Torah in Hebrew School, studying for his bar mitzvah, and attending Hebrew High School afterward. Dov, who came from a Minimalist Plus family, had convinced his parents to send him to Hebrew School and have a bar mitzvah when he saw that his friends were participating in these activities.

The BTs also spoke of home religious observances. Several of their families had kosher homes and adhered to some eating restrictions during Passover. Shimon remembered that in his home, his mother kashered chicken that previously had not been soaked in salt water and the family had two sets of dishes. Batya said that when it was Passover, "We eat *matzah*, we have seders, we don't eat bread, we don't eat corn." Another BT, Seth, recalled his

mother's cleaning the house before Passover and eating *matzah* during the holiday even though the family engaged in few other rituals. Others remembered their mothers' lighting Sabbath candles and their families' having a traditional meal. Cheryl said that she loved everything about being Jewish—"The more ritual, the more observance, the better"—and pushed her family to do more religiously. On the other hand, when Eliza was eleven, she started lighting Sabbath candles herself. As she explained, "My mother didn't light them, so I took that on. I also took on . . . doing (a) *yahrzeit* (memorial) candle for my aunt because nobody did that. And I've been doing it ever since."

BTs from Minimalist families had some awareness of Judaism as a religion and identified as Jews. As Marilyn recalled, "I've always known I was Jewish, I've always known that Jewish people do certain things, don't do certain things. But as for . . . I don't think there was ever a time when I didn't know that there was a religion there." Two BTs from Minimalist backgrounds recalled that their early feelings about Judaism were negative. Maya had thought it was "too organized," had "too many restrictions," and was "something for older people." Ruth thought it was too insular. Another BT from a Minimalist family, Howard, who said that he was aware of being Jewish as a label but was not exposed to Judaism in any form, recalled:

I was brought up in a totally secular home. My parents identified . . . themselves as Jews. There was no spirituality in the house. There was no religion in the house. You know, it was no particular practice other than they were Jewish. Certainly, (they) weren't Christian. So I'd say that my actual first thoughts of religion, like they were of God, was by watching the religion of my friends who were mostly Christians where I was brought up.

Nevertheless, Howard, like other male participants who were raised with little or no exposure to Judaism, had a *bar mitzvah* for which preparation consisted of memorizing from a recording the traditional reading.

In contrast, some participants had a relatively large amount of knowledge of Judaism as a religion. This included the six individuals who attended Jewish day schools. Nora, whose family fell into the Mainstream category, recalled that she benefited from learning Hebrew, hearing about Israel, and having a close friend whose parents observed the Sabbath. Nevertheless, Nora left the day school in ninth grade to follow friends who were switching to public school. Jacob, from a Modern Traditionalist family, expressed mixed feelings about being different from his Jewish peers:

having gone to a Jewish day school and growing up in a neighborhood that was Jewish but totally secular, the kids used to sort of make fun of me, acted as though I was the rabbi, I was the local Jewish kid. So I was very much aware that I was different and that I had this Jewish religious training, and at times, you're ashamed a bit and at times you're also awkward, but on the other hand there was a certain pride in being a little bit more Jewish than the next kid, and having a little Jewish background.

As mentioned at the beginning of this section, the core theme is *differentness*. The *baalei teshuvah* were cognizant that Judaism was different from Christianity based on their celebrating different holidays, eating special foods, affiliating with Jewish institutions, and having some home observances. The feelings of those who were middle and high school age when they experienced this differentness were probably heightened, and possibly negative, because of sensitivity to peer group opinion during those ages. Awareness of Judaism as a religion was greatest among those who attended synagogue, day schools, and Hebrew School and had some home observances. Yet many responded to the question about religion by affirming their Jewish identity, conflating religion and ethnic identity. These responses are in keeping with Danzger's (1989) observation that *baalei teshuvah* begin their journeys by identifying with Jews as an ethnic group and later with Judaism as a religion. We turn now to a discussion of the special challenges or obstacles some participants faced while growing up.

### Personal-Familial Challenges

In a previous publication, Danzig and Sands (2007) described early experiences that challenged *baalei teshuvah's* spiritual-religious development as a "spiritual eclipse of the soul." As we defined it, the term refers to "the muting, silencing, or blocking of spiritual needs as a consequence of adverse or non-supportive experiences" (Danzig & Sands, 2007, p. 33). This occurs when a person's interest in religion or spirituality is not recognized or is invalidated by a parent or other significant early figure or by negative interactions in the neighborhood, school, or community. The challenges I focus on here consist of adverse events and conditions within the family and community that seemed to impede not only their spiritual development but also their psychological and social development.

A number of participants mentioned stressful life events that occurred when they were children. It was already mentioned that eight participants grew up in homes in which their parents divorced. At least three of them said that they were surprised and shaken by this experience and that conflict continued after their parents parted. One said that in the aftermath he began “acting out all over the place.” Others spoke of changes in their living arrangements and difficulties with step-parents. A few spoke of abuse—emotional and physical—but were vague about what specifically had occurred. Two BTs spoke of the challenges they faced growing up with a parent with mental illness, and another talked about a sister with mental health problems. These painful situations can create a need for spiritual help, but none of these individuals spoke of turning to religion when they were children and these situations were affecting them.

Although a minority of study participants mentioned abuse or other difficulties while they were growing up, a member of one of the focus groups commented on the perception in the secular and Orthodox worlds that individuals who become Orthodox do so because they have emotional problems stemming from growing up in dysfunctional homes. As Edward said:

there’s a sense that I get, I could be wrong, my own projection is that there’s something wrong with us, and that’s why we’ve glogged onto *yiddishkeit* (Jewishness), and I would really hate for any of this study to focus on anything, well, the reason these people became this was because . . . they came from these homes, or these situations, and there must be something (deficient) about (us).

So far as I could tell from the interviews, the *baalei teshuvah* in this study did not become Orthodox as a way to cope with emotional problems or dysfunctional family histories. It is more likely that those who had such difficulties growing up were attracted to Orthodox Judaism as a positive framework for raising a family.

In their oral discussions of their timelines, many individuals described desires they had as children to increase their level of religious observance and their knowledge—aspirations that were thwarted by family members and mocked by peers in their neighborhoods. Annie is an example of a participant who felt inspired to keep kosher after learning about it in Hebrew School:

I was coming home and telling my mother, “Oh, we learned you have to keep kosher. So now you have to keep kosher.” And my



mother went to the principal and my Hebrew teacher and said, "Look, whatever you want to teach her in school, that's fine. But I'm not doing this in my house. So I don't want you to go and tell her that this is what she should be telling me. I don't like it." You know, my mother said to me, "Some day when you grow up if you want to keep a kosher home (you can)," never dreaming in a million years that that would ever be the case.

Eliza made a similar request of her mother and she, too, was rebuffed. Ellen spoke of her parents' preventing her from going to Torah Camp and their complaining about her involvement in a Jewish youth group. Similarly, Jacob's mother complained to the rabbi at her son's day school about the school's practice of checking whether the boys were wearing *tzitzit* (traditional undergarment with tassels), which Jacob never wore. The message that these young men and women received from their parents was that it was okay to be Jewish but not too Jewish.

In their retrospective reconstructions of their engagement with Judaism during childhood, some participants, particularly those from Minimalist families, expressed the sentiment that there was a Jewish void in their lives. Brian described his religious upbringing this way:

Well, basically, I was raised in a non-religiously affiliated family. Religion, spirituality, God, nothing of the sort was ever discussed. . . . There was some very faint recognition of being Jewish at all. There was really no significant practice. . . . (I had) a very short stint at a Reform Sunday school, maybe a year or less as a child, I think five years old, six, seven, somewhere in that period. Didn't last; there was no pressure to continue. There was [*sic*] no Jewish names in our family given to my parents or the children. There was no celebration of holidays of any kind. No bar mitzvah or bas mitzvahs.

Others, who had more family exposure than Brian, were critical of their parents' and relatives' religious behavior, such as attending synagogue only a few days a year and celebrating Passover by having a family meal without reading the story behind the holiday that is recorded in the *Haggadah*. The BTs viewed these observances as superficial and lacking in meaning, and they depicted their families as inconsistent. Maya, whose Minimalist family offered her hardly any exposure to Judaism, lamented:

I felt so cheated in a sense. That there was this whole part of who I was, or who I could be connected to, that was kept totally away from me. I mean, and it wasn't that my parents said, 'Keep this away from her,' it's just that my parents didn't know either, and they didn't participate in any of this, so it wasn't anything that . . . I was exposed to, and I felt very curious about all that. . . . Why is that something so alien to me, and people around me are going to synagogue on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, even if nothing else, and we didn't even do that.

Not only did Maya feel deprived of part of her identity; she and the others from Minimalist backgrounds were unprepared to enter Orthodoxy.

A more blatant disturbance in the childhoods of some participants was exposure to anti-Jewish attitudes in their peer group and within their families. A number of BTs mentioned that they grew up in neighborhoods and attended schools in which they were the minority religion. Jerry spoke of being called names and being excluded from activities by his friends: "My mother had our rabbi come and talk to me one day because I was really hurt." Ariella said that her maternal grandmother was a "Jew hater" and that her mother had internalized Jewish self-hatred.

In some families, anti-Jewish attitudes were applied to Orthodox people. Parents conveyed the idea that Orthodox Jews were dirty, smelly, and antediluvian, portraying them as old men with beards who observed strange and outdated customs. Another participant from a Minimalist family, Paul, spoke about the message his father expressed when he was a child:

And he was very, very, negative on Orthodox things and things like that. I still remember that when I was little he would drive back from Manhattan sometimes, and he would sometimes drive through Williamsburg [an Orthodox section of Brooklyn] and he would point out the Hasidim on the street, and he would say, "Look how they live," with just disdain.

This statement is not surprising considering that Paul's parents and grandparents were in the process of assimilating to American society and wished to avoid reminders of past generations that lived in poverty in *shtetls* (small villages in Eastern Europe). The disdain produced a desire to distance themselves from people who looked like their European forebears and to assimilate further. Allen recalled, "My mother's grandmother said it was better to marry

a Christian than an Orthodox Jew.” Participants heard these negative attitudes from close family members and, for the most part lacking close contact with Orthodox Jews, did not have firsthand experience that would provide evidence to dispute them.

Seven participants were children of Holocaust survivors; the father of an additional interviewee took part in the liberation of one concentration camp where he experienced a traumatic shock. Most of these participants referred to their family member’s history a few times during their interviews, reinforcing how important this was to them. Growing up in a home in which parents experience or repress traumatic memories is an especially trying situation that is likely to trouble the younger generation.

In her writings on *baalot teshuvah*, loss of a mother during childhood, and defectors from Orthodox Judaism, Davidman (1991, 2000, 2015) uses the term “biographical disruption.” She describes this as a rupture that is so deep and profound that it marks a significant change in one’s life course afterward (Davidman, 2015). The negative experiences described in this section can be considered biographical disruptions, but they were not experienced by all the *baalei* and *baalot teshuvah* and they do not account for the whole of participants’ experiences. They had other experiences that drew them toward Judaism.

### Inspiring Experiences

The other side of the challenges that thwarted the spiritual and psychosocial development of *baalei teshuvah* was the experiences that fostered their Jewish spiritual and religious development and promoted their psychosocial maturity. Danzig and Sands (2007) called these positive experiences “spiritual imprints” or impressions that may have left people with residues of spirituality. These included warm relationships with parents and grandparents, family religious observances, religious education and teachers, synagogue involvement, bar and bat mitzvahs, summer camp, and trips to Israel. Encounters with charismatic leaders and rabbis also were inspiring. Annie, whose family background was Mainstream, captured the meaning of spiritual imprints in her statement about a former Hebrew School teacher: “You plant this little seed and you don’t think that it’s bearing fruit but it’s just in there and it just has to be nurtured.”

Sherry, from a Modern Traditionalist family, described her early life as one in which she was given a positive foundation upon which she could build as she got older. She came from an intact, nurturing family that was active in the local Conservative synagogue and other Jewish organizations, kept a kosher

home, traveled frequently to Israel, and sent the children to Hebrew School and Jewish summer camp. Following her parents' example, Sherry assumed leadership roles in a Jewish youth group. Her family attended services on the major Jewish holidays and got together with extended family for Passover. Sherry described her father as having a Jewish *neshamah* (soul) even though he was not religious. She said that her parents were accepting of Sherry's and Sherry's siblings move into Orthodoxy.

A number of BTs were raised in families that supported the Jewish community—locally, nationally, and internationally. Their parents were active in Jewish organizations such as B'nai B'rith, Hillel, and Hadassah and took their families to visit Israel, where some relatives lived. As Tamar explained, her family emphasized Jewish values, that is, being “active in Jewish organizations and Jewish youth groups. Certain mitzvahs were kind of just understood: being close with family, grandparents, visiting family.” She was told it is important that Jews mingle with Jews, marry a Jew, and perform acts of loving-kindness (*chesed*). Eliza recalled that as a teenager she was sensitive to human rights. Arthur used the term *tikkun olam* (repairing the world)<sup>2</sup> to describe Jewish values. As he explained, “Judaism was doing things to right wrongs in society and look out for the people who didn't have anyone else to look out for them.” The BTs whose families emphasized community service came from all three family categories.

In a survey on Jewish values among a national sample of Jews (Jones & Cox, 2012), some 84 percent of respondents stated that the value of social justice was somewhat or very important to them, and 80 percent said that caring for the widow and orphan was somewhat or very important. In addition, some 72 percent said that it was somewhat or very important to heal the world (*tikkun olam*) and to welcome the stranger. The *baalei teshuvah* interviewed for this study seemed to have assimilated these values along with feelings of solidarity with other Jews.

BTs whose families belonged to a synagogue reported that, for the most part, they attended services on the high holidays, Rosh Hashanah (1 or 2 days) and Yom Kippur (1 day). In contrast, Lauren said that her parents had a different perspective:

Both my parents said, “You see, why only be in *shul* on Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur when it's not fun, when you can go on Purim and Simchas Torah when it is fun?” So they picked up on that and that probably kept us also involved. It wasn't just hours and hours. So that was really where the foundation was laid.