

THE Inclusive



NEWSLETTER OF THE JEWISH OUTREACH INSTITUTE

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The JEWISH OUTREACH INSTITUTE (JOI) is the only independent, national, trans-denominational organization reaching out to unengaged and intermarried Jewish families, and helping the organized Jewish community better welcome them in. JOI conducts research, runs programs, and serves as a national training institution and network for outreach professionals, guiding and supporting innovative outreach in communities throughout North America.



Unsung Heroes

RABBI KERRY OLITZKY, *Executive Director*

These are the unsung heroes of our generation: women who have taken it upon themselves to raise Jewish children despite being of a different faith. Today women of a variety of religious and ethnic backgrounds are doing the work of creating a Jewish home and instilling a sense of Jewish identity in their children. Some are wistful about the religion they left behind. Some continue to practice their religion on their own. Others fully participate in the synagogue and the Jewish community. These are the women of JOI's Mothers Circle—women who are making a gift to the Jewish community by helping to build a Jewish future while sacrificing the continuity of their own beliefs. We thank them. We support them. We welcome them.

This is far from the first time that women outside the faith have helped maintain the Jewish people. The Bible recounts the story of Pharaoh's daughter who waded into the River Nile to save—and care for—the baby Moses. At about the same time, the midwives Shifrah and Puah refused the Pharaoh's orders and con-

tinued to deliver Jewish children at the risk of their own lives. And during the Holocaust countless women sheltered—and even raised—children that were not their own so that they might survive.

Our contemporary circumstances are different, but the heroism is no less poignant. Fortunately, we live in a place and time in which people from other backgrounds nourish the Jewish community as an outgrowth of loving relationships, rather than due to war or fear. And today these Mothers Circle women are raising their own Jewish children, not the children of others given over to their care.

Some years ago, with the support of seed funding from JOI through its Jewish Connection Partnership project, Atlanta Jewish educator Debbie Antonoff brought together a group of women in Atlanta to share their unique experiences with each other while learning about the Jewish religion, heritage, and community. This course was originally named Building Blocks because it provided these women with the *building blocks*—the social, intellectual, and practical founda-

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“...today these Mothers Circle women are raising their own Jewish children, not the children of others given over to their care.”

tion—with which to build a Jewish home for their young families. In doing so, we identified an unmet need in the larger Jewish community. For there are some 250,000 women across North America from other faiths that have agreed to raise Jewish children. We have learned, however, that they are often not getting the support they need from their spouses or other family members. Nor are they always recognized by the organized Jewish world. Mothers Circle has already helped to change this.

Following the initial years of formation, helped by the support of the Marcus Family Foundation in Atlanta, the Jewish Outreach Institute worked to expand this project. This has occurred in three phases: further expansion of the Atlanta-based groups (now called “Mothers Circle: The Course”), which now includes a program for alumni and drop-in opportunities (called “Coffee Talk”); a current expansion of the program into ten additional communities; and a national listserv, which offers connection and information for those outside the pilot communities (and where the community may not be large enough to support the full program.) The program also offers the chance to consult, work with, or simply talk to the Atlanta-based Mothers Circle Rabbi Alvin Sugarman or the program’s national Rabbi Melinda Zalma. Avoiding the therapeutic model that had been the mainstay of the community’s approach to interfaith families, these rabbis are there to guide, affirm, and nurture rather than counsel.

The Course, derived from what we have learned about how newcomers—particularly those with young children—navigate the Jewish community, forms the educational core of the program. In addition to basic holiday and life-cycle material, the class also addresses such challenging subjects as what to

tell your children when they ask about God or death. The Course helps to create a bank of Jewish memories for participants who until now had none.

The format is designed to fit the way women learn and relate to one another in group settings. In our experience, men require a different approach. We are in the process of developing a model that will reach men of diverse faiths raising Jewish children in a similarly effective way. In Mothers Circle, however, male spouses and partners are invited to participate in parts of the program like Shabbat dinners or *havdalah*, where program leaders can model rites and rituals that can be replicated in the home. Children, too, join their parents for Hanukkah parties and the like.

Through the technology of a listserv, women have the additional opportunity to express their concerns and solicit advice, as well as share their personal solutions to the challenges they face in this not-uncomplicated life they have chosen—and do so without the limitations of time or place.

What distinguishes this program, however, is not its innovation or demographic reach. Its uniqueness is in the women who participate in it: women who have added their individual hues to the tapestry of Jewish communal life. Because of these women, Jewish life resounds in homes where it otherwise might have lain dormant. Through these women, we see promise for tomorrow and a brighter future for the North American Jewish community.

Please note: Should you want to bring Mothers Circle into your community, or would like to participate in the Mother’s Circle national listserv, please let us know. Contact us at info@TheMothersCircle.org.

Kathleen Rutte Schoenblum

I am fortunate to be the mother of eight-year-old fraternal twin boys and a “Jewish Mother-in-Training”. Though I grew up the middle child of five in a devout Roman Catholic, Irish-German household—with all the life-cycle rituals that entails—I am married to a Conservative-raised Jewish man, and we are committed to raising the children as Jews.

Since I was born in the Midwest, I had little exposure to Judaism until moving to Miami, Florida as a high school student. Once there, I made a number of Jewish friends and was exposed to synagogues, Bar/Bat Mitzvah celebrations, lox and bagels, and of course Passover, Yom Kippur, and Hanukkah. I deeply respected the intense connection to history, family, and rituals that I saw in the Jewish celebrations, since these aspects so closely mirrored my own religious upbringing.

When I married my husband we had had endless discussions on how we would raise any children we might be blessed with. After much soul-searching and prayer I realized that in a “split” spiritual household, it would be difficult for children not to feel they were being disloyal to one parent if they chose or practiced the other’s belief system. Since Catholicism fully embraces the historical significance of Judaism, it felt more natural for me to compromise in that direction.

However, my first interactions with newly acquired Jewish family members and the Conservative Jewish community at large were dreadfully disappointing. They were outwardly suspicious and generally unsupportive of our union. I was lucky that my own family was supportive and non-judgmental—largely due to the fact that my brother was already married to a Reform-raised Jewish woman.

By the time my children were four, I was very anxious about the role I would play in their spiritual development. Anxious, because I lacked any experience to draw from. A chance reading in the *Atlanta Par-*

ent magazine in the Fall of 2002, alerted me to the “Building Blocks” course at Marietta’s Temple Kol Emeth. Coincidentally, this was the same synagogue that my brother and sister-in-law belonged to. So I called immediately and joined the program just as it was getting underway.

The program greatly exceeded my expectations for information, support, community, and a general life-changing realization that “you too can do this”. More than anything, it



“I am married to a Conservative-raised Jewish man, and we are committed to raising the children as Jews.”

helped ease the overwhelming fear of trying to create a Jewish home life when nothing in my Roman Catholic past had prepared me. The course was, quite literally, my “passport” into Jewish family life and turned out to be the single best preparation for the journey. I learned that Jewish life is richly built on endless tradition, covering everything from cleaning and cooking to marriage and mitzvahs. This can seem overwhelming from the outside, but this course and the facilitator, Debbie Antonoff, helped me to see that we could open the “treasure chest” of Jewish traditions and take what we were ready for. We could always go back to for more as our understanding and involvement in all things Jewish continued to grow.

The course greatly changed how I

viewed the larger Jewish community, as it taught me that Reform is my home. As a movement, Reform Judaism recognizes our varied backgrounds but indicates that it is as glad to include my children and me as we are to be a part of it. And that without JOI and programs like this one, the Jewish community would likely be without some of its greatest advocates and students of all things Jewish!

Most of all, the course taught us that we needn’t fear raising our children Jewish because, while there are proper ways of doing things in the home, there is really no

“right” or “wrong” way to honor Jewish traditions. By simply trying to incorporate them into our lives, step by step and day by day, we can make them intrinsic to our core and to our children’s experience and memories.

The greatest development since taking the course? Three months ago I started taking Adult Hebrew at our new synagogue and now genuinely look forward to learning (and understanding!) the weekly Shabbat service we attend. But most profoundly, it will make me a part of my sons’ Bar Mitzvah preparations. Three years ago I wouldn’t have dreamt I would be so thirsty to learn Hebrew. So you see, JOI programs are nurturing, supporting, and deepening our appreciation of Judaism, long after the courses are over.

Mary Litman

When I read an advertisement for Building Blocks in my local (Atlanta) newspaper, I knew this was the perfect class for me—the Alef-Bet of creating a Jewish home for my kids. What a great concept—teach me the ABC’s! In my previous life (before motherhood) I had taken other classes and read books, which laid a good foundation for understanding basic Judaism, the Jewish calendar, and the cycle of events. However, Building Blocks hit on the one area in which I knew I was lacking: how do I raise my children as Jews and ensure a strong Jewish identity when I was raised in a Christian family? Raising children is difficult enough without the pressure of instilling in them a “foreign” religious identity.

Sitting in a room full of moms with chil-

to voice our concerns and ask practical questions. Because the non-Jewish partner is not always welcomed by the broader Jewish community and because Judaism is matrilineal, I felt I needed to do everything I could to make sure my children would be accepted. Building Blocks provided a setting where I could learn how to bring Judaism into my home without feeling intimidated or judged.

One area where I felt different from some of the women is the degree of involvement, knowledge, and commitment from my husband. He was raised in a Conservative home, and it was important to his family that he marry a Jewish woman. It was important to him that his children be raised as Jews. At first his family didn’t even want to get to know me. I wasn’t Jew-

discussions about our future and I was left with the decision of whether or not I could raise my children in a different religion. At the time I didn’t see it as a big deal—children were a distant thought. My husband never pressured me to convert, but was very open about his feelings regarding our family’s religious unity. I chose to do all that I could to raise our children Jewish and he promised to do all he could to support my efforts. We have overcome some obstacles and it has been at times a bumpy road, but I feel that our children will be able to identify as Jews just like their peers.

My husband also understands that it was difficult to give up religious customs and traditions that were important to me, and tries to help me find ways to replace them. It seems that many Jews wish to practice Judaism in their homes, but when asked why can say no more than “just because”. He feels strongly about the perpetuation of the faith and we strive to give meaning to all that we do. We both work to find the reasons for what we do and to convey them to our children. I think my participation in Building Blocks helped us put into perspective our family’s place as members of the Jewish community.

Today I am much more confident about the choices I have made for my family. I enjoy learning the customs and traditions and look forward to starting new ones with my family. I have made valuable friendships and now have a network of people who know what I am going through. As my children grow and I approach new milestones in their religious education, I know that I have someone to turn to that has been there already.

Building Blocks was an extremely informative and rewarding experience. The fact that we could all be so open and forthright with our feelings was invaluable. It is comforting to know that someone wanted to reach out to us and help us find our way through the Jewish year and life cycle events. That really demonstrates that there is a part of the Jewish community that cares about interfaith families and doesn’t want to see the children disappear into a religious void.



“I chose to do all that I could to raise our children Jewish and he promised to do all he could to support my efforts.”

dren of various ages—from infants to teenagers—talking through the issues made the task seem a little less complicated. Here was a group of women with different backgrounds brought together by a common goal—to figure out a religious path to follow. The forum was the ideal way for each of us

ish; therefore, I did not meet their approval. Up to that point I had not encountered very many Jewish people, so my first real impression of the Jewish community was not a positive one. The relationship remained tense until after we were married.

While we were dating, we had many

Holly Bendel

I was raised in the mountains of North Carolina, a predominately Southern Baptist area. Until I went to college, I had little exposure to other cultures and religions. My first encounter with Judaism was when I met my husband. We initially didn't discuss religion, but it did come up after dating a couple of months. He was raised by two Jewish parents, and both of their families are Jewish. We decided to raise our children Jewish while I was pregnant with my daughter.

The first encounter I had with a Jewish community was in Washington, DC. We joined a group called YPK for young Jewish professionals and participated in activities at the JCC and other venues. This was a positive experience, but then we moved abroad. We started visiting and went to a prospective member meeting for a temple in Tampa, Florida. We liked it, but weren't sure if it was where we belonged.

We strongly believed that children should be raised with some kind of religion, whether it is Judaism, Christianity, or something else. We also wanted to practice religion as a family. We feel that as parents we should set an example, and that what we regard as important for our children should be important to us. One of the deciding reasons for raising our child Jewish is that we want her to know her history and culture as well as a religion. We felt being Jewish is part of who she is, and we didn't want to deny her the opportunity to know her history.

I first heard about the Building Blocks program through the synagogue newsletter. (We were on the mailing list, since we had looked at the pre-school program.) When I called and talked to Debbie Antonoff about what the program was designed to teach, I knew it was exactly what I needed. Up to this point, we hadn't made any effort toward raising her Jewish. We didn't know where to start. My husband hadn't been actively Jewish since his Bar Mitzvah. I

decided this was a great opportunity for us both to learn and start raising her Jewish.

As we acknowledged in class, Judaism can be overwhelming to those new to it. The class helped us set a comfortable pace, to start small and build on the little things. One challenge for us was deciding how

toward Judaism. For me, this has been a tremendous help since we are about to have a second child. The prospect of a *bris* has been stressful for me and my teacher and classmates have helped. I always know I have someone to call. I have received help from our teacher, Lynnor Holder, without asking, which is when it means the most.

It is quite an accomplishment for us as a group to reach this point, considering



“We feel that as parents we should set an example, and that what we regard as important for our children should be important to us.”

much to do since we couldn't do it all. The class helped make clear that you can choose the things that fit your values and lifestyle. It also helped give us direction on where we wanted to go in the future and what we wanted our children to get from Judaism. It is helping to put to rest my concern about being “Jewish enough” and how much one needs to do to be a good Jew.

One unexpected result is that I finally feel comfortable at the temple and at services. I am more motivated to take other classes. I also found camaraderie and friendship. There is something incredibly comforting in knowing others who share the same struggles and questions and who have husbands with similar attitudes

where we began. Since the class started, we have joined the temple. We go to Tot Shabbat services every Friday. We are celebrating holidays and plan to join the sisterhood and brotherhood in order to become more involved. We are planning a *bris* for our son and a *mikvah* for both children within the year. Our daughter will attend religious school as soon as she turns five. I joined a Jewish playgroup, which I met through a student in our class. I have met wonderful friends, and it continues to surprise me how Judaism creates a strong common bond. One of the most wonderful things is seeing how much our daughter loves going to Tot Shabbat and how quickly she's learning about Judaism.

Empowering Ruth

Some women in interfaith relationships opt to convert. But how do such women integrate their knowledge of Judaism into their personal lives? And how do they develop and nourish their identities as new Jews? One way is through *Empowering Ruth*, a Jewish educational and experiential program designed for Jewish women who are new to Judaism and funded by the Jewish Women's Foundation and led by JOI's Rabbi Melinda Zalma. The program includes a classroom component, a practicum in Jewish living (cooking, home observance, and holidays), and group work in family dynamics. The classroom portion focuses on the role female Jews-by-choice have historically played in the Jewish community and the new responsibilities they are assuming today. The hands-on part goes beyond the basics of Jewish home practice and includes rituals that may be unfamiliar to recent converts, like *havdalah*, and those contemporary Jewish women are adopting for the first time, like the putting on of *tefillin*. Group work concentrates on the importance of *shalom bayit* and how to relate to non-Jewish family members both inside and outside the home.

Serving women who have become Jews of their own volition, whether as an outgrowth of an interfaith relationship or due to personal belief, matters a great deal. Becoming Jewish is a process, not an instantaneous event, and new Jews develop their religious identity and practice over time. Women who have under-

gone "quickie" conversions before a wedding may possess little real Jewish understanding. Those who have attended formal conversion classes may have learned much about Jewish history, theology, and culture, but received scant practical advice about establishing a Jewish home and raising Jewish children. Also,



marital relationships are inevitably affected—and sometimes shaken—both by the wife's burgeoning Jewishness and the couple's efforts to shape a Jewish life together. A Jewish husband may be discomfited by his partner's newfound knowledge of, and enthusiasm for, Judaism. Yet at other times he may be frustrated by the gaps in her knowledge or practice. Clearly, the act of

conversion is not the end of the story. Rather, it is the beginning of a series of adjustments related to changes in personal identity and family dynamics.

Female Jews-by-choice married to male Jews-by-birth are generally not candidates for outreach programs that serve partners in interfaith marriages because such women have already made a commitment to Judaism. They are thus ready to "dig deeper" into Jewish life

“Becoming Jewish is a process, not an instantaneous event, and new Jews develop their religious identity and practice over time.”

and lore than those newly introduced to it. Neither are their needs addressed by services designed for more traditional Jewish couples and families. This is why JOI has added *Empowering Ruth* to its continuum of direct services of outreach to members of the community. Listen to the participants themselves, and you'll see why this is a strong addition.

Hadley Allen

I am about as WASPy as they come. I was raised in an upper-class, conservative Episcopal home. Church and Sunday school were a given. My mother signed me up for the junior choir at the age of six. I taught Sunday school, was an acolyte, joined the junior youth group followed by the senior youth group, and sang in a succession of choirs until I was thirty years old. In Boston somewhere is a plaque with the names of the first 10 people to die in the Revolutionary War and one of the names on the plaque is my ancestor Samuel Hadley. It would be difficult to find anyone who could claim to be more of a WASP.

Now I'm Jewish.

There is a misconception out there that

people choose to convert to Judaism because they are getting married. This *might* once have been the case, but I don't believe it's the whole story. I did not convert because I was marrying a Jewish man, and most of the converts I know converted for reasons other than an impending wedding. And in the end, the rabbis are too clever to let a person convert if marriage is the only reason. So, in fact, *no one* converts simply because they are getting married.

Ultimately, an individual converts for deeply felt spiritual reasons. As a group, we are people who have chosen to ask the deepest spiritual and theological questions of ourselves. We came up empty in our religion of birth, went looking, and found our spiritual home in

Judaism. And that's it in a nutshell.

My story starts when I was not yet a teenager. I started asking questions during my preparation for Confirmation, at about eleven or twelve. I had an issue with the idea that Jesus was the son of God (which is kind of central to Christianity). I approached my minister, who was preparing me for my Confirmation, and asked him what to do. He told me to work it out with God. So, the deal was, I wouldn't say anything I didn't believe. By the time I was fifteen or so I had stopped saying most of the Episcopal liturgy. The music kept me in the church for fifteen years after that, but then even that didn't even work.

I can't explain it, but I always felt a pull towards Judaism but was (incorrectly) told that person could only convert to Judaism to marry a Jew. Then about five years ago I was talking

with a Jewish friend and mentioned the marriage thing. She looked at me and said, "What are you talking about? Of course you can convert to Judaism if you want to."

I went to my desk (I was at work at the time), picked up the phone, called a friend and asked her what I should do. She told me, and within two weeks I was in the conversion process.

And my story is in no way unique.

The *Empowering Ruth* class is a much-needed next step. I had studied with a rabbi for over a year, but a year isn't nearly long enough. The class fills two primary needs of the convert. First, there is a lot of practical knowledge not covered in the conversion process. So much of being Jewish is centered on the home, and in the majority of cases it is the women who cre-

ates a Jewish home. Personally, I think this class should almost be mandatory for any convert, man or woman, who will be responsible for creating and maintaining the home. To wit, I had studied for over a year and never learned how to make latkes.

The second, and perhaps most important, function of this class, is to provide a safe place for sharing experiences. Everyone who converts to Judaism will say they receive much more than they leave behind. However, we face challenges unique to us. The obvious hurdle is how to handle religious holidays, but there are others. My mother's father was an Episcopal minister, her faith is profound, and she finds all she needs in the Episcopal Church. The same holds true for my sister. Had my father been alive, I

would not have been able to convert at all. It would have caused too much conflict and unrest. It's not an easy thing, breaking your mother's heart.

I understand it, really. Many people never ask themselves questions that challenge the very core of their being. For some, it simply doesn't occur to them; for others, they ask and find the answers in the faith of their birth. To this day, my mother and sister don't understand why I converted. I'm not sure either, frankly. It's too deep to understand intellectually.

Everyone in the *Empowering Ruth* class knows exactly what I'm talking about, and THAT'S why this class is so important.

Besides, some one's got to teach us to make *challah*.

Nadine Bell

I remember reading Exodus when I was twelve years old. I was mesmerized by the Passover story and imagined myself to be fleeing from Egypt, running through the parted waters with my timbrel into the unknown. I grew up in Darlington, a small industrial town in the north east of England (think coal mining, the Bröntes, and 'Calendar Girls'), and did not have any direct contact with a Jewish community until I went to college in Leeds. There my best friend was an orthodox Jewish man from the Golders Green area of London. After graduate school, I accepted a fellowship at Harvard and trundled off alone to Boston. I lived in Brookline, a predominantly Jewish neighborhood, and it was here that I began making tentative steps toward informal Jewish study. Generally, these were very lonely and unsettled days for me. The cultural adjustment was exhausting, I missed my family, and Harvard was overwhelming. At the end of my stay in Boston, when I was feeling most bewildered, a life-altering experience happened. I took a short vacation to New York and fell in love with the city instantly. After returning to England for a while I found a job at Columbia University, so I crossed back over the Atlantic again. And it was just as Goethe said: 'the moment one definitely commits oneself, then Providence moves to. All sorts of things occur to help that would never otherwise have occurred.'

Shortly after arriving in New York, everything started to click. I enrolled in a Derekh Torah program at the 92nd Street Y and began attending different shuls, including Lincoln

Square and West End Synagogue. During my first Torah service, just when I was feeling most self-conscious and anxious (when do I stand? where do I face? I don't know any Hebrew!), a senior gentleman sitting next to me wrapped his *tallit* around my shoulders. The warm, perfect openness of the stranger's embrace symbolized the loving welcome that I received to Judaism in New York. I became part of a wonderful, hotch-potch Jewish community at International House. We organized Shabbat dinners and holiday gatherings and attended services at B'nai Jeshurun synagogue together. I wish I could remember a moment that I decided to convert, but the transformation happened very naturally, inevitably, like the arrival of spring. Rabbi Zimmerman of BJ, an infectiously vivacious soul, supported my conversion. I went to the *mikvah* in June 2004 and became Hadassah Naomi.

So it was perfect synchronicity later that same summer when I received a flyer in my mailbox advertising *Empowering Ruth*, 'a new learning experience for women who have converted to Judaism emphasizing hands-on doing rather than classroom-style listening'. I'd already spent a couple of years in book-learning classes and was eager to have more of a tangible, real-life-issues approach to learning. With session topics like 'Creating a Warm and Loving Jewish Home', 'A Jewish Model of Love and Relationships', and 'Holding Your Passover Seder', how could I resist?

Our group is dazzling diverse. Between about 20 women we encompass almost the entire globe, including participants of Asian,

Australian, Latin American, Native American, North American, Caribbean, and European origins. Not only are we a intricate cultural kaleidoscope, we also represent a wide range of Jewish observance and practice. But one sure thing in common is that we all share a love of Judaism and Jewish learning. Through the lovingkindness, warmth, and support of our leader, Rabbi Zalma, the class provides a balance of open discussion, text-based study, baking, celebration, and laughter. It is a place where we can discuss openly the difficult and often very painful challenges that we wrestle with as new Jews, such as relationships with our non-Jewish families and the December Holidays. It is a beautiful community to be part of because many in the class are either just married or planning their weddings and this infuses a unique life-cycle joy that we all share. Just listening to the other women's stories and experiences has opened up my mind to the existence of so many more degrees of freedom in how I can behave, connect, and live as a Jewish woman.

Many of the sessions have radically shifted my perspective on aspects of Jewish life. An awesome workshop led by Yavilah McCoy of Ayecha opened my eyes and heart to cultural diversity in Judaism. In a study of Jewish approaches to suffering led by Rabbi Olitzky, amongst many insights we learned the Hasidic teaching that we can only change the past, not the future. A very freeing thought. However, my favorite class so far has been *challah* baking. There is something mysteriously, inexplicably magnificent about this mitzvah. You have to try it yourself to find out. I look forward to passing on this delicious tradition to my own children in years to come.

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Rachelle Wibben

My first real experience with Judaism did not occur until my senior year of college. I studied abroad in Greece and Italy, where I took a Judeo/Christian-heritage class. The class touched on the similarities and differences between the religions and gave a very good, though brief, overview of Judaism. The course was run through a Catholic college in Northern Minnesota, and thus focused more on the Christian element, and, being but six weeks in length, never offered much chance to delve into the Jewish part.

However, the class did attend a Friday night Shabbat service. I remember feeling very alienated during the service. Not only was it almost completely in Hebrew with the rest in Greek, but since it was an Orthodox synagogue, all the women sat upstairs, separate from the men. The women basically watched and had social hour while the service was going on. There was very little participation on their part. I remember leaving feeling that Judaism was very male-dominated with the females sitting on the sidelines.

It was not until the fall of 2002 that I really got a taste for Judaism. I attended yet another Friday night service with Jake, then my boyfriend, who is Jewish. Based on my past experience, I wasn't sure what to expect. We attended the hour-long service at the United

Synagogue of Hoboken (USH), which was a drastically different experience. Everyone sat together, for one thing, and the women participated equally. Everyone was so nice and welcoming and made me feel like I fit in. I left having experienced something completely different than I had in Athens. I was excited, and Jake and I talked extensively about what I liked and how very different it was from the Catholic services I attended while growing up in a suburb of St. Paul, Minnesota. It was also at this point that Jake and I were talking seriously about spending the rest of our lives together, and I wanted to learn more about Judaism. Luckily, the Introduction to Judaism class at USH was about to begin, and he and I decided to sign up.

I went into the 24-week class with an open mind and the intention to learn as much as I could. As the class went on and I was learning more and more, I really began to love it. I started to read Jewish books outside of class and attended additional classes at the synagogue. About two-thirds of the way through the class, I decided Judaism was for me and I wanted to convert. I continued my studies and completed my conversion in January 2004. As Jake and I have since married, I am very excited to be a Jew-by-choice. I feel as though the spiritual piece of my life has finally been put into place.

I first heard about the *Empowering Ruth* class through my friend Monica Rodriguez, whom I met through USH. It sounded like a great way to meet other women who were Jews-by-choice and both share our experiences and support one another in our journey. I checked out the website and was very excited about the class. This class has helped me to take a closer look at a lot of the material that was covered during my conversion process as well as do some more hands-on activities like baking challah and latkes. I found it fascinating to hear the women of the class share their different experiences of celebrating Shabbat, raising Jewish children, and creating a Jewish home. One of my favorites things is that we all came from different backgrounds, had different conversion experiences, and belong to different temples yet we all have a common bond—that we are Jewish women-by-choice.

So what's next in my "Jewish Journey"? One thing for sure is to continue my studies of Judaism and improve my Hebrew reading and speaking skills. Foreign languages have always been a little intimidating to me but one day I would love to be called up to read from the Torah. Another step is to start a family and begin the process of sharing what I have learned through my studies and experiences and passing it down to my children. I want my children to love and appreciate Judaism and to be spiritually fulfilled as they travel through life.



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