

The Challenge of Marginalization of *Baalei Teshuvah*

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Abstract

During the past 40 years, Orthodox communities in the USA have been incorporating individuals who were raised with little or no identification with Judaism as a religious system and subsequently became Orthodox. This paper focuses on the perception of these *baalei teshuvah* and others of their social integration into Orthodox communities. The data derive from a qualitative research study of *baalei teshuvah* from three urban areas in the USA. The study used three methods of data collection—individual interviews with 48 *baalei teshuvah* (24 men, 24 women), 2 focus groups with mental health professionals who were also *baalei teshuvah*, and key informant interviews with 10 Jewish communal and outreach professionals.

The study found that among the interviewees who talked about their engagement with the existing Orthodox community, more than half said that they preferred to associate with other *baalei teshuvah* and expressed pride in their group's attributes. Those who preferred to be among those who were raised Orthodox found the latter to be good role models and were critical of *baalei teshuvah*. *Baalei teshuvah* who said that they saw no difference appeared to be the most integrated. Focus group members conveyed marginalization, expressed in feelings of shame, pride, and superiority. The findings are discussed in relation to adult socialization theory.

The Challenge of Marginalization of *Baalei Teshuvah*

Since the late 1960s, a *baal teshuvah* movement has become visible in the United States of America and in the Diaspora (Aviad, 1983). *Baalei teshuvah* are men and women who were raised and lived as secular or liberal Jews and later became Orthodox. Their course of learning about Judaism, Jewish law, and required observances is well described in the literature (e.g., Aviad, 1983; Danzger, 1989). Their process of discovery, learning, and internalization transforms them internally and externally. Internally, they experience changes in their identity, their knowledge, and their feelings of spiritual connection. Externally, they alter their appearance, their public behavior, and their community. These changes prime them to fit into Orthodox communities. Yet researchers have given little attention to the aftermath of their religious-spiritual transformation, when they become part of and are absorbed by Orthodox communities.

This paper draws from a qualitative research study of *baalei teshuvah* from three urban areas in the USA. The focus here is on study's findings on the social integration of *baalei teshuvah* into their respective Orthodox communities. *Social integration* is defined as inclusion into the fabric of community life, and is the outcome of leaving one's former social group, learning the norms of the new group, and becoming a part of the new community by conforming to its standards and achieving acceptance (Danzger, 1989). This paper examines the feelings of *baalei teshuvah* around inclusion as well as the perspectives of Orthodox community service leaders, and identifies the sources of the difficulties identified.

Background

Previous Research on Baalei Teshuvah

Social science research on *baalei teshuvah* arose in the wake of the counter-cultural movement of the 1960s and 1970s when a cohort of Jewish young adults reclaimed their Jewish roots and became observant (Aviad, 1983; Danzger, 1989). Rejecting the materialism and militarism they found in American society, they found authenticity in traditional Judaism (Danzger). The primary focus of early research on this population was on the individual and social processes involved in the decision to become observant, focusing on institutions of Jewish learning (Aviad; Danzger; Shaffir, 1983) and identity changes (Aviad; Glanz & Harrison, 1978).

Since the early 1990s social science research on *baalei teshuvah* has concentrated largely on women (*baalot teshuvah*). Investigators have inquired why American women who were exposed to feminist ideas would want to become part of a religious movement that is characterized by gender segregation, gender-specific roles, and patriarchal attitudes (Davidman, 1991; Kaufman, 1991). Women in Davidman's and Kaufman's studies were attracted to Orthodoxy because of its emphasis on family and especially valued the Orthodox women's communities. Sands and Roer-Strier (2000, 2004; Roer-Strier & Sands, 2001) also studied *baalot teshuvah*. Their research examines the impact of a daughter's becoming observant on relationships with the family of origin, particularly the mother-daughter relationship.

Other recent research on *baalei teshuvah* is diverse. Focusing on men and women, Caplan (2001) analyzed written material on the repentance movement in Israel and its relationship with Haredi society. Relative to the current study, Caplan highlighted differences in perspective of those who have become Haredi and view themselves as such and the perspective of Haredim, who continue to view the newcomers as penitents. Topel (2002) discussed Brazilian *baalot teshuvah*'s acceptance of the practices related to family purity but resistance to covering their heads, a trend that she attributed to the women's incorporation of modernistic

“individualistic logic” (p. 343) into their thinking. Tallen (2002), described the identity struggles of relatively new *baalot teshuvah* associated with a Lubavitcher community in California, which did not fully accept them and sometimes treated them with suspicion. She described the women as living “in a borderland, caught between secular and religious worlds, unable to fully enter the religious world and still feeling the pull of the secular world” (p. 244).

Research on *baalei* and *baalot teshuvah* has concentrated primarily on the early induction period, giving a modicum of attention to social integration. Early researchers leave one with the impression that the prospects of social integration were good once the newly Orthodox gain basic skills and marry (e.g., Danzger, 1989). Danzger observed, however, that some *baalei teshuvah* take on their status “as an identity rather than a transitional status” (p. 337) and join synagogues that are comprised largely of others like them. This paper fills in a gap in the literature on this population by describing recent primary research that includes men and women who have been living in Orthodox communities in the USA over an extended period of time. The research questions guiding this inquiry are, “How do *baalei teshuvah* perceive their integration into the Orthodox communities they join?” “How are they perceived by those who are raised Orthodox?” and “How do they adapt to the ways in which they are received?” Adult socialization theory offers a framework with which to consider the findings of the research.

Adult Socialization Theory

Socialization refers to “the processes by which individuals selectively acquire the skills, knowledge, attitudes, values, and motives current in the groups of which they are or will be members” (Sewell, 1963, p. 163). Parents and other significant adults socialize children so that they are able to navigate effectively in their respective societies (LeVine, 1988). Socialization continues in adulthood as people take on new roles and responsibilities in family, work, and community settings. This occurs through an interactive process in which the person who is being socialized observes social norms, assimilates values, and learns how to perform new roles while engaged in common activities (Long & Hadden, 1983; Mortimer & Simmons, 1978). A further component, relevant to this study, is the acquisition of knowledge. *Baalei teshuvah* need to acquire sufficient knowledge of the Hebrew language, Jewish law, prayer, and religious practices that they are able to integrate into Orthodox communities (Danzger, 1989). Furthermore, they need to make a “situational adjustment,” as they will be moving in and out of different situations each of which may require a different kind of performance (Becker, 1964).

Changing from non-Orthodox and relatively secular to Orthodox involves a *status transition*. Initially *baalei teshuvah* (sometimes called “BTs”) are novices, deficient in knowledge of basic texts and informal social practices. In order to move from novice to full membership, they need to learn and internalize the norms of their new religious community and demonstrate their proficiency and commitment. This entails a change in their identity that is perceived as sincere. The “raised Orthodox” members (sometimes called “*frum* from birth” or “FFB”) of the Orthodox communities that *baalei teshuvah* join are in a position to monitor and reinforce newcomers’ behavior so that it is in keeping with desired norms (Long & Hadden, 1983). As gatekeepers and norm enforcers, the raised Orthodox may be concerned that *baalei teshuvah* will revert to or contaminate the community with customs of secular society.

Methods

This was a qualitative study that used three methods of data collection—individual interviews, focus groups, and interviews with key informants, with no interviewee participating in more than one activity. The personal interviews allowed us to obtain in-depth information about individuals’ experiences. Focus groups had the advantage of eliciting information from a

targeted sector of informants whose group dynamics stimulated each other's production of ideas (Morgan, 1997). Interviews with key informants generated knowledge from persons who were close to *baalei teshuvah* but, because they were in advisory roles, had some distance from this population. Multiple methods enabled the researcher to obtain information from different perspectives, which can be compared (Denzin, 1989). Used together, the researcher was able to obtain a more comprehensive picture of the phenomenon under study (Sands & Roer-Strier, 2006).

Individual interviews

We sought stratified sample that was half men and half women, and half observant 2 to 12 years and half 13 or more years. We stratified the sample by gender because we anticipated that men and women would have different perspectives based on the different roles they play in traditional Judaism. The purpose of stratifying the sample by years of being observant was to ensure that the sample included some people who were early in their spiritual developmental process and others who potentially were further along. We required a minimum period of observance in order to ascertain that all participants were sufficiently committed in their decision to become Orthodox, and considered 13 or more years long enough to normalize one's religious life. In addition, we used a criterion method of sampling (Patton, 2002). Potential interviewees were screened to ensure that (a) self-identify as *baalei* or *baalot teshuvah*, (b) have lived in the USA most of their lives, and (c) were born into homes in which at least one parent was Jewish. In addition, efforts were made to identify participants who were diverse with respect to the stream of Orthodox Judaism with which they identified (e.g., Modern Orthodox, yeshivish, Chasidic) and were living in one of three East Coast target cities or their surrounding metropolitan areas. These criteria were established in order to minimize regional variability that would occur if the sample was from the entire country and to maximize variability within the sample.

The interview sample consisted of 48 *baalei teshuvah*. As planned, they were half men and half women, and half observant 2 to 12 years and half 13 or more years. The age range was from 31 to 58 years. As Table 1 shows, the interviewees were well educated, with more than half having a master's degree or more. They were predominantly married and had children. Most were raised Conservative or Reform. They identified with diverse streams of Orthodox Judaism with Modern Orthodox the most common.

The sample was recruited through contacts of the research team and interviewers. The researchers were sensitive to the fact that some *baalei teshuvah* are not open about their status and, accordingly, they asked the individuals who suggested potential interviewees to obtain permission in advance for the project coordinator to contact them. The project coordinator conducted screening interviews with all potential participants in order to determine whether they met the criteria for inclusion in the sample, to ensure that we met our stratification goals, and to obtain a sample that represented diverse sectors of Orthodox Judaism. She recorded sociodemographic information about participants on a screening form.

Interview protocol. Interviewees were asked to draw a spiritual timeline in which they divided their spiritual-religious lives into chapters and gave each chapter a title (cf. McAdams, 1993). They were then asked to describe what their life was like during each time period, focusing on important relationships, their religious life, and community involvement. They were also asked about their earliest memories of God, religion, and spirituality; spiritual struggles; identity changes; and integration into the Orthodox community. The questions probing for social integration were, "How do you connect with people who are *baalei teshuvah* in your life today? How do you connect with people who have always been Orthodox?"

Because these questions were placed toward the end of the interview and some interviews took more time than expected, several interviews did not get to these questions.

The interview protocol and informed consent form were approved by the internal review board of the university. The consent form gave interviewers permission to audiotape the interviews and ensured that the names and other personally identifying information would be kept confidential. As an additional protection of confidentiality, the transcribers that were used resided in different cities from those in which interviewees lived.

Procedures. The interviewers, located in the three target areas, were trained either in person or by telephone by one of the authors. They interviewed participants in their homes or workplaces. Interviews took, on average, between one and two hours. In appreciation of their sharing their experiences, participants were given gift cards to either a bookstore or Jewish gift shop.

Focus Group Interviews

Two focus group meetings were conducted with Jewish professionals who were also *baalei teshuvah*. The first was with 8 participants, 6 men and 2 women, who were professionals in health, mental health, and education. Their ages were from 31 to 61 and they had been observant 11 to 35 years. The second was with 10 mental health professionals, 8 women and 2 men who were 28 to 57 years old and had been Orthodox from 10 to 38 years. Both focus group meetings were conducted at professional conferences by the same husband-wife team of mental health professionals. The interview questions had to do with the decision to become observant, their subsequent spiritual development, and social integration. The focus group interviews were tape recorded with informed consent and transcribed.

Key Informant Interviews

In order to obtain the perspectives of individuals who had direct expert knowledge about and professional experience working with *baalei teshuvah*, the researchers interviewed 10 key informants. The purposive sample of 8 men and 2 women consisted of rabbis, wives of rabbis, therapists, educators, and *kiruv* (outreach) workers from the same general geographic areas as the interviewees. The key informants were asked what attracts people to Orthodox Judaism, the issues *baalei teshuvah* struggle with, possible differences in the struggles of men and women, patterns of movement to a higher spiritual level, and the integration of *baalei teshuvah* into the wider Orthodox community. All of these interviews except one were conducted by telephone. Summary narratives were written on the content of these interviews.

Data Analysis

Transcriptions of the individual interviews and focus groups, as well as the summary narratives of the key informant interviews, were read several times and discussed by the research team. The team also developed codes for a more detailed analysis. Interviews were coded using the software package NVivo. The analysis of social integration based on the interviews used the coded selections on that category. For the analysis of the focus groups and key informant interviews, the author re-read the transcriptions and narratives, identifying passages denoting social integration.

Findings

This section discusses the findings from the individual interviews, focus groups, and key informants in separate sections. Findings from individual interviews are summarized in Table 2.

Responses from individual interviews

Prefer other baalei teshuvah. Among the 42 interviewees who talked about their

engagement with the existing Orthodox community, 24 (57%) said that they preferred to associate with or were more comfortable with other *baalei teshuvah*, with a small number of the others preferring those who were raised Orthodox and others expressing no preference (see Table 2). Six did not address this question.

The primary reason given for preferring to be with other *baalei teshuvah*, given by 16 (verify) participants, was that they feel a special connection with others who have gone through a similar journey. The following are exemplary of these interviewees' statements:

They're people who understand...I have some... women friends...whose life course in some ways has been very similar to mine, and that, so we identify with each other a great deal, because of that. (Cheryl, observant 11 years)

Baal teshuvahs are like, that's my world. Those are my friends. Like we share common experience. Like, you know, you can relate to someone who's been through what you've been through. The story might be different but it's basically the same. (Shmuel, observant 15 years)

(Many of my friends) were on the journey together, so that was tremendous, and we were all fumbling and mumbling together, which many of us still feel we do today. There's, when you're a *baal teshuvah*, you never really feel that you got it. (Robert, observant 22 years)

Others talked about the special bond that comes from having "had those kind of awkward conversations with their parents" (#44, male, 12) and said they said that they need others like them because they provide each other with reassurance and support.

Interestingly, eight of those who said that they preferred or were more comfortable with other *baalei teshuvah* were critical of those who were raised Orthodox. Some viewed them as less interesting than *baalei teshuvah*. As Yonatan (observant 10 years) said, "You know, grew up in (city in New Jersey), went to this yeshiva, played basketball, go to, you know, go to (particular university), you know, did *Sha'alvim* (yeshiva in Israel)." Others were critical of them for gossiping, being complacent, acting superior, and being materialistic.

On the other hand, Karen (observant 8 years) criticized others like her, stating that "*baal teshuvahs* tend to go overboard." A more seasoned *baal teshuvah*, who thought he could "pass" as someone who grew up Orthodox, maintained his preference for others like him because they are special. As he said, "I can almost spot a BT... there's something about the person on their face, there's a spark that they might have"(Reuven, observant 28).

Prefer raised Orthodox. Five respondents indicated that they preferred to associate with those who were raised Orthodox. Two respondents remarked that those who have always been Orthodox are comfortable with themselves. Another said, "If I ask them a question, I usually can get a more, a broader view on the answer." All were critical of *baalei teshuvah*. Joyce (observant 13 years) said that some "have not integrated Orthodoxy with who they were, and... become kind of very black and white in their thinking." Similarly, Toby (observant 19 years) found them too rigid. Deborah (observant 15 years) thought they were too "fervent" and "gung ho." Michael (observant 15 years) distanced himself from the spirituality of other *baalei teshuvah*. Even though these interviewees admired those who were raised Orthodox and were critical of other *baalei teshuvah*, they felt some disconnection from them. As two *baalei teshuvah* said:

We all *daven* in either the same *shul* or nearby *shuls*.... But, I don't necessarily have any social contact with them. I mean, there's a, sort of a barrier between... myself and sort of the, grew up *frum*, went to *yeshiva*, you know, they all know each other from having... learned at *yeshivas* and...I have no, I have very few points in social common. (Michael)

...with time I've gotten so immersed in being with so many people that um, that are *frum* from birth, that I am comfortable being with them, I'm comfortable speaking with them...I know, again, there's *gvul* [gulf] between us, but... it's not an intimidating experience for me. (Deborah)

Those who expressed no preference reported developing friendships based on the person's individual qualities and not their religious status. These participants drew distinctions among some *baalei teshuvah* and some of those who were raised Orthodox. Edward (observant 15 years) described two categories of *baalei teshuvah*--"There's the people who are sort of, somewhat normal... who just sort of live their Judaism and don't wear it on their sleeve. And then there are people who wear it on their sleeve and...seem to go overboard," suggesting that he preferred the former. With respect to those who were raised Orthodox, Edward said that he objected to those who were dogmatic or told him what he should do. Danielle (observant 7 years) said that she connected with the longtime Orthodox if they were accepting of her. Some, she said "have always poked fun at me, of being this excited young, uh, religious, I mean as far as young in the religion, and that it'll wear off, and you know, you'll see, this'll die down and you'll be just the rest of us." On the other hand, three regarded those who were raised Orthodox as role models. As Amy (observant 22 years) said, "The people that were *frum* from birth, I think, they were always people who I learned from, and respected and wanted to be like, and ... whose lives I wanted my life to be like." Notably, Jerry (observant 25 years) boasted that even though he and his wife are "not totally comfortable in the *frum* world," they are "on very good terms with some of the top *frum* families in town. Very close."

Focus Group Responses

Social integration came up in various ways the two focus groups of *baalei teshuvah* professionals. During the first one, group members compared their initial feelings of idealization of the Orthodox community with more recent feelings which they described as "de-idealization." Initially, they were excited about discovering Orthodox Judaism and thought that the Orthodox people they came to know were perfect. Over time, they began to identify failings. As Caren explained:

I sadly found myself having to de-idealize the Jewish community. Because whereas initially I first saw all the *chesed* [lovingkindness] and the warmth (inaudible), which is still there, but once joining the community, seeing a lot of the *lashon hara* [gossip], the cruelty, the myopic, provincial thinking, the misogyny..., seeing really a judgmentalism that I think is very ...unhealthy and dysfunctional.

She explained further that she had been looking for "a rabbi, a *rebbe*, a *rebbezin*, people from the community, just that the love and warmth would just sweep me along in greater and greater observance" and feels sad that she has not been able to find that. On the other hand, Yehuda said that even though he has had disappointments with the some of the rabbis of his community,

“I’m still in awe of the goodness in the community.” Hershel described a close relationship with a rabbi that has brought him closer to the community.

In a later discussion about changes in their development over time, Aaron conveyed that he is no longer perceived as a *baal teshuvah*. He explained:

In the yeshiva where I work, at ... meetings they’ll talk about *baalei teshuvah*. I don’t know if they know I am. They all know I am. I think they know that I am, but I don’t think they envision me that way either.

On the other hand, Batya asserted, “Once a *baal teshuvah*, always a *baal teshuvah*,” and gave this example of an incident that occurred recently:

I sat down at a table and then a group of men sat down and I jumped up. I said, “Oh, I don’t think I should be at this table.” And then Rabbi Rubin said to me, “Mrs. Schwartz, come back to the table.” Because his wife came. But my initial reaction was, “Oh my gosh, I’ve done the wrong thing.” I didn’t realize.... (for) as an adult you’re learning all these new things. You’re always saying, “Did I do this right? Oh, did I leave something out? Maybe I should have.... Oh, I don’t think this is right.” That happens all the time.

Dovid, whose best childhood friend was thrown in jail for attempted murder, said that he did not think that persons who grew up Orthodox could understand where he is coming from. He said that he has a different perspective even in discussions of the Talmud. Caren expressed pride in *baalei teshuvah*. She said, “The *baal teshuvahs* I know are really reaching incredible plateaus and maintaining a passion and exuberance that sometimes I think almost really lights up the community.” Regarding her friendships, she said:

And I do find that our friendships probably tend to be more with *baalei teshuvah*, because like you were saying, there are certain perspectives and nuances that are somewhat different. It’s like, you don’t fit in with the non-religious, and with the *frum*-from-birthers, I’m open to a total friendship. But I guess there’s a yeshivish way of thinking with certain things. I find more (that) the *frum*-from-birth people don’t feel an affinity towards us more than, I think, I don’t feel an affinity towards them.

The discussion in the second focus group, which consisted exclusively of mental health providers, focused primarily on the process of psychosocial-spiritual development and on spiritual struggles. Three women in this group discussed their struggles to fit into their Orthodox community while maintaining their individuality. One of these women, Esther, spoke of her initial determination “not to be identified as a *baal teshuvah*,” as she was ashamed. She attributed her attempts to hide her *baal teshuvah* identity to an “intense need to belong.” Later in the interview, she along with two other women, expressed pride in their identity. Avi expressed mixed feelings:

...although on one hand, I feel like, yeah, I’m a *baal teshuvah*, and I’m sort of proud of it. There’s also part of me that thinks, uh oh, I hope people don’t know that I am. And 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 glommed onto *yiddishkeit*, and, I would really hate for any of this study to focus on anything, well, the reason these people became this was because, well, they came from these homes, or these situations....

More proud than ashamed, Cara said that she wondered how visible she is as a *baalat teshuvah*. She said, “I’m very proud I’m *baal teshuvah*, yet in certain circles I’m kind of, well, ‘Does it

show?’ Of course it shows, I mean I don’t talk *yeshivish* that well.” Yet Miriam conjectured that in comparison with “many people who are *frum* from birth,.. there is a quality that we have that they wish that they also had. And it’s expressed in such a real authentic way, because it doesn’t come from a place of rote.”

Key Informant Responses

The key informants were professionals who have contact with *baalei teshuvah* in relation to rabbinic, educational, counseling, and programmatic responsibilities. Notably, all spoke about the need on the part of *baalei teshuvah* for an open, accepting, and caring community. As one rebbetzin said, being “embraced by someone on the inside” is the key to *baalei teshuvah*’s growth. Others talked about their intense need to belong and to be loved. Several informants contrasted the warm, friendly atmosphere of their synagogues or organizations with the reception *baalei teshuvah* are given by some longtime Orthodox, who feel threatened by *baalei teshuvah*. They believe that the growth-orientation and enthusiasm of *baalei teshuvah* triggers the reaction, “They are growing and I am not.”

A few of the key informants observed a lack of social integration. One said, *baalei teshuvah* feel like “outsiders because they feel like they don’t fit in and don’t know enough, and they struggle with existential angst.” Two other informants commented that *baalei teshuvah* can be identified by the way they pronounce Hebrew; one added that they are distinguished by their sneakers. One informant said that *baalei teshuvah* idealize those who grew up Orthodox and wish to date them. In his opinion, “They would be better of finding another *baal teshuvah*.”

Discussion

The findings that have been presented offer perspectives on social integration by individual interviewees, focus group participants, and key informants. There was sufficient convergence in their reports to construct a composite picture of the social integration of *baalei teshuvah*. The discussion that follows builds such a portrait and develops the themes of marginalization, adaptations to marginalization, and the socialization. It also looks at the implications of the findings for Jewish communal practice.

Marginalization

Regardless of their gender or age, the *baalei teshuvah* conveyed feelings of marginalization and alienation. Considering that 57% of the interview respondents expressed a preference for socializing with other *baalei teshuvah*, it appears that they do not feel integrated into the larger Orthodox communities. At the same time, they do, no longer identify with the secular communities from which they derived. They feel more connected to other *baalei teshuvah*, whose background and experiences are similar to their own, and view those who were raised Orthodox as having traveled in different social circles since they were young. As Tallen (2002) described, *baalei teshuvah* occupy “a borderland” in-between the secular and religious worlds. Another way of putting it is that they are outsiders among insiders.

Those who preferred other *baalei teshuvah* had been observant, on average, fewer years than those who preferred those who were raised Orthodox or had no preference. Thus, it is possible that they were bonding with others like them as a form of security and that, over time, they will integrate. On the other hand, associating primarily with other *baalei teshuvah* may impede or slow down their process of social integration. Longitudinal research could clarify the outcomes.

There are suggestions in the data as to the attitude of Orthodox communities toward

them. For one, some *baalei teshuvah* are critical of other BTs for being too “intense” or “rigid” or going “overboard.” Such statements suggest that they have internalized attitudes of those who were raised Orthodox and want to distance themselves socially from individuals of this type. Secondly, some *baalei teshuvah* expressed uneasiness about disclosing past experiences and current life events. For example, one *baal teshuvah* alluded to having had a childhood friend who was put in jail for attempted murder, a situation that he did not think those who were raised Orthodox could envisage. It is likely, however, that members of Orthodox communities do have impressions of the secular environments from which *baalei teshuvah* came and disapprove of them. Thus, it is not surprising that one of the key informants thought it was advisable that they marry other *baalei teshuvah*.

According to the Talmud Tractate *Berochot* (34b), *baalei teshuvah* inhabit the highest rung of the spiritual ladder, surpassing the *Tzaddik* or Righteous person. Yet they are not perceived that way by the Orthodox community. In contrast, they appear to be stigmatized. Some Orthodox individuals may be wary of the past experiences of *baalei teshuvah*. Others may not want to associate with them out of fear of stigma by association (Goffman, 1963/1974). Furthermore, those who were raised Orthodox may be interpreting minor deviations (e.g., wearing sneakers) negatively (Goffman). Criticism of *baalei teshuvah*'s pronunciation of Hebrew seems to reflect a bias in some Orthodox communities toward an Ashkenazi dialect, which they view as correct. Most likely the *baalei teshuvah* use the Sefardi dialect of Modern Hebrew that is taught in Reform and Conservative religious schools.

Adaptations to Marginality

Our data suggest three means of adapting to their marginal position. One, already suggested, is to hide their *baal teshuvah* status or information about their past that others might frown upon. Another is to adapt to the requirements of the Orthodox community and integrate. Those interviewees who said that they preferred to associate with those who have been Orthodox all their lives seem to fall into this category. They seek to learn from those who know more than they and model their lives on them. Among these are some who try to “pass.” In order to do so, they would have to hone their language skills and, in the case of men who belong to some synagogues, pronounce Hebrew the way those who attended yeshivas do. A third approach, to be discussed next, is to associate primarily with other *baalei teshuvah* and form separate communities.

Formation of baalei teshuvah communities. *Baalei teshuvah* frequently become Orthodox in order to gain community (Aviad, 1983). Yet, instead of becoming a part of the community that aspired to join, a majority of the interviews reported feeling more connected to others who are on the same path. Consistent with Danzger's (1989) earlier observation, we learned in the process of recruiting our sample that many *baalei teshuvah* clustered in certain synagogues. These synagogues and their members seem to have formed “subsocieties” (Berger & Luckmann, 1967) of other *baalei teshuvah* who share a similar meaning system and experiences and offer each other acceptance. Their rabbis may be *baalei teshuvah* who have mastered the requisite knowledge but understand the spiritual needs of the group, or religious leaders who are committed to bringing *baalei teshuvah* into the fold and are willing to nurture them. Nevertheless, *baal teshuvah* subsocieties are vulnerable to elitism. As noted in the findings, some express their solidarity and protect themselves by asserting their superiority to outsiders. Although the formation of separate group may be satisfying to members, it does not help them integrate into larger Orthodox communities.

The Socialization Process

Baalei teshuvah who participated in this research expressed uneasiness about navigating the Orthodox world. They enter new situations cautiously as they do not have the insider knowledge one needs to make a “situational adjustment” to circumstances they have not previously encountered (Becker, 1964). This leaves them with a lingering anxiety about their performance and a need for advice and mentorship to help them navigate in this world.

Some *baalei teshuvah* in the interview and focus group samples expressed admiration for the longtime Orthodox and viewed them as role models and sources of information. From the perspective of socialization theory, role models help socialize newcomers so that their status transition will be smoother. These socializing agents monitor the behavior of newcomers so that it is consistent with social norms (Long & Hadden, 1983). Those *baalei teshuvah* who accepted their newcomer status and deferred to those who were raised Orthodox benefited from relationships with those who could help them adapt.

Other *baalei teshuvah*, however, were disinclined to accept the higher status of the already Orthodox. Even though they lacked in-depth knowledge of Judaism, they seemed to expect to be treated as equals and to develop relationships built on personal choice. This expectation appears to derive from modernistic, individualistic thinking (Topel, 2002) and democratic values rather than status differences within the Orthodox community. Furthermore, these *baalei teshuvah* did not seem to be aware that when people exit from a previous role they tend to retain a “hangover identity” based on a previous status (Ebaugh, 1988, p. 5). In this case, their previous secular status, which involved violating fundamental Jewish laws and social norms, impeded their acceptance as equals. Like newcomers in other social situations, they could only be cautiously accepted.

Implications for Jewish Communal Practice

The principal finding of this research was that *baalei teshuvah* feel marginalized and develop a variety of strategies to deal with alienation. Jewish communal professionals who work with this population can address these feelings in several ways. For one, they can consult with rabbis and lay leaders about this phenomenon and urge them to provide the educational and social resources that will help integrate *baalei teshuvah* into the community. Such a consultation should convey the positive attributes of *baalei teshuvah*—their thirst for knowledge, their enthusiasm, and their spirituality. Secondly, Jewish communal workers can organize support groups for *baalei teshuvah*. Our two focus groups at professional conferences turned out to evoke insight, warmth, and acceptance. Finally, we encourage Jewish communal workers to work clinically with those *baalei teshuvah* who are having difficulty navigating the uncertain status of being a *baal teshuvah* amidst a community of persons who have always been Orthodox.

Table 1

Description of Sample of Interviewees (N = 48)

Characteristic		
Age		
Range		31-58
Mean		45.4
S.D.		7.5
Gender		
Male		24
Female		24
Marital Status		
Married		44
Separated		1
Single		3
Highest Level of Education (n = 47)		
High school		2
Some college		3
College graduate		17
Master's degree		12
Law degree		5
Ph.D.		6
M.D.		2
Parental Status		
Has child(ren)		45
Does not		3
Number of Children		
Range		0-6
Mean		3.1
S.D.		1.69
Jewish Parents		
Both parents		47
Father only		1

Religious Movement Identified with Growing Up

Reform	13
Conservative	26
Traditional/non-Orth	1
Reconstructionist	1
None	7

Number of Years Observant

Range	2-38
Mean	14.4
S.D.	9.0

Age when Became Observant

Range	15-55
Mean	31
S.D.	8.9

Stream of Orthodoxy Identified with Now

Modern Orthodox	20
Right of Modern	6
Right wing Orthodox	3
Yeshivish	4
Hasidic	5
Combination	2
Other	6
Don't know	2

Spouse is a *baal* or *baalat teshuvah*

Yes	34
No	6
FFB who lapsed & returned	2
Convert	2
INAP; not married	4

Table 2

Perceptions of Social Integration by Baalei Teshuvah (N = 48)

Category	Frequency	Gender	Age (mean) (range)	Years Observant (mean) (range)
Prefers or is closer with other <i>baalei teshuvah</i>	24	11 female 13 male	45.5 31 to 58	12.9 3 to 38 years
Prefers those who were raised Orthodox	5	3 female 2 male	47.6 36 to 56	17.6 years 13 to 26 years
No preference, socializes with both, depends on the person	13	7 female 6 male	46.3 33 to 55	17.5 years 2 to 26 years
Not applicable, no response	6	1 female 4 male	41.5 36 to 47	12.0 years 3 to 25 years

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