Pastoral Counseling and the Journey of Adult Bat Mitzvah: Moving through the "Middle Passage" with Greater Meaning, Purpose, and Spiritual Insight

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Chapter One

I currently serve as a part-time rabbi and teacher at Beth Meyer Synagogue in Raleigh, North Carolina. My husband, Rabbi Eric Solomon, is the synagogue's principal spiritual leader and I have served in various capacities (primarily teaching adult education, leading prayer, and informal spiritual leadership) for the past four years. Our congregation has experienced unprecedented growth over the last four years and we have created a new vision and initiated many new programs to accommodate our growth. The execution of my Doctor of Ministry project rose up out of a need that has been voiced throughout the years that we have served as Beth Meyer's spiritual leaders. In order to offer you some context for understanding our community, I offer you some history in how this congregation came to be, what it is today, as well as some history on the evolution of the Adult Bat Mitzvah movement.

In 1862 Bavarian-born Michael Grausman and his wife, Regina Einstetta, moved from Warrenton, North Carolina to Raleigh. This was the beginning of Jewish culture and religion in our city. Mr. Grausman made uniforms for the army during the Civil War. In addition, the Grausmans were involved in war services and charities, while raising a family in the Jewish tradition. Not until after the Civil War did other Jews come to Raleigh. The early congregation included both the Reform and Orthodox Jews of the town. Therefore, much of the early business was directed toward reconciling their religious viewpoints, in an effort to remain a single congregation.

In 1913, the congregation was established as the House of Jacob. Members of the House of Jacob were a congregation of thirty or forty devoted and loyal Jews. Around 1923, the first building was established. It was a two-story house located on South East Street in downtown Raleigh. *Shul* services were held upstairs, and the rabbi and his family lived downstairs. Because of this, the congregation would often pray, surrounded by the aroma of *tzimmes* and other goodies from the *rebbetzin's* kitchen.

In the 1940's the members made the decision to build a new synagogue building, and in May 1949, the groundbreaking ceremony was held. The synagogue was re-named, Beth Meyer on that occasion, in the memory of active member, Meyer Dworsky. At this time, Beth Meyer also affiliated with the Conservative movement of Judaism. The congregation grew slowly and

in early 1980 the land was purchased to accommodate the growth. On Sunday, March 20, 1983, the Torah scrolls were carried under a *huppah* (canopy) in proud procession from the old sanctuary to the new. The *sifrei Torah* were placed in the Ark and the *mezuzzah* was affixed to the doorpost. The congregants of Beth Meyer once again had a new spiritual home to meet the needs of their approximately 200 families and their future dreams (Wagman and Litwack, 1976). The congregation is now using its third name in and inhabits its fourth location.

When Eric and I arrived at this congregation, we were a congregation of approximately 300 families. Today, three years later, we have grown by almost 150 families. Though still relatively small in size, we consider ourselves one of the fastest growing Conservative congregations in the country. This is a congregation with constituents from all age groups. We are gay and straight, young and old, single and married, Black, White, and Brown, with children and without. There are very active senior and youth committees and our fastest growing constituency are young families. Because we are literally busting at the seams of our physical building, this year we will embark on building another building and expand our current space.

This is also a congregation with a proud legacy of volunteerism; in fact, it is a major part of how members define themselves. Volunteers, young and old, are involved in many aspects of synagogue life including chanting Torah/*Haftarah*, leading religious services, caring for those in need, and teaching classes. Before Eric and I arrived, the congregation voted in favor of being lay-led (without a rabbi) for over a year, in order do some soul-searching after a series of unsuccessful rabbis and conduct a thorough search for a new spiritual leader. During this time of introspection, the congregation's prayer and ritual services were led by a strong group of lay women and a wonderful Jewish educator (also a woman).

Women, as in so many religious institutions, have a particularly distinguished legacy of leadership at Beth Meyer. Unfortunately, this leadership has often been behind the scenes, serving as committee heads but not executive level positions and serving historically "female" roles i.e. caring congregation/kindness committee (in charge of caring for mourners, those are ill, etc.), preparing food for synagogue events, and leading activities for our youth. Ironically, the growing majority of people who attend prayer services are women. The ones who chant Torah and want to learn to lead prayers are women. The ones who show up during evening adult

education classes are women. The ones who lead prayer services in the homes of mourners are women. Women at Beth Meyer have been asking me since I arrived to teach a women's "Bat Mitzvah class." Until now, it was not practical for me to make that investment of time and energy and create a course that would meet these women's needs. That time, however, has arrived.

Dr. Lisa Grant has studied the rite of Adult Bat Mitzvah and published an article outlining and analyzing this topic in *Women Remaking American Judaism* (2007). In her article, "Finding Her Right Place in the Synagogue: The Rite of Adult Bat Mitzvah," Grant notes that over fifteen years of research by scholars of various disciplines teaches us that

> Women seek out this opportunity in order to publicly affirm their Jewish and more particularly, their religious identity. These women are looking for greater comfort and connection in their synagogue communities. They want to become literate and confirm their legitimate place in the public arena of Jewish ritual practice. Though they are learning normative synagogue 'skills' in order to actively participate in and even lead parts of the service, their very participation can have a profound impact on reshaping the norms for worship in their particular synagogue community and ultimately American Judaism overall (Grant, 2007, 1).

With roots in the *Havurah* movement of the 1960s, Reform, Conservative, and Reconstructionist synagogues quickly began to create various courses of study and rituals for Adult Bat Mitzvah as a way to "strengthen attachment to the congregation and Jewish practice in general, and to increase attendance and participation in worship, and more broadly, enc." (Grant, 2007, 2). Getting a basic Jewish education is among the primary reasons women enter such a program. The 1990 National Jewish Population Survey showed that women were more than twice as likely as men not to have received any Jewish education (Fishman and Goldstein, 1993). As a "People of the Book," literacy and learning are an indelible part of what it means to live and identify as a Jew. The learning, however, is not an end in and of itself. Rather, Jewish learning is always about translating learning into deeds and to a life well –lived. As we read in the *siddur* each morning, after a listing of some of the primary commandments in Jewish life, "*Talmud Torah* [learning Torah] is equal to them all, because it leads to them all." I take this to mean, among other things, that the process of gaining greater access to our tradition affords women the opportunity to frame their experiences and lives through the lens of Torah and Jewish tradition.

I am elated to answer this "call" and offer this Bat Mitzvah class to a large group of twenty-two women, who beginning in the fall of 2008, signed a learning contract (*brit limmud*) and committing themselves to studying with me for two years. For the purposes of this Demonstration project, I will call this program "Bat Torah," though most of the women treat it as an adult "Bat Mitzvah" experience. While all of the women have long passed the age of *bat mitzvah* (12 or 13, depending on your tradition), whereupon girls become obligated by the commandments of Judaism according to Jewish law, these women are looking to deepen their learning and grow religiously and spiritually, These women seek to explore, celebrate, and *affirm* their Jewish identity as adult *women*. Some of these women grew up in Orthodox homes where the education of Jewish girls was not taken seriously. Others have converted to Judaism as adults or in the process of conversion. And still others, spent their early adult years busy raising children and educating their children as Jews, but never took the time to invest in their own spiritual development. This class is designed to accommodate all of the deep and heartfelt desires of these women to grow as Jews who take their Judaism seriously. Beyond learning as a group in the classroom, this innovative course model offers participants individual pastoral counseling as a means to deepen the experience on a psycho-spiritual level, creating a space in which to be reflective about the journey, explore questions of meaning, and continue the learning that happens in the classroom. The Bat Torah "class experience" will serve as the "background" for this study. Much has been studied and written about the "Adult Bat Mitzvah" experience. I will reference some of this research as it pertains to my project. In the "foreground," however, will be the experience of pastoral counseling with these women. As a way of narrowing the scope of this project, I will limit my focus to eight women. My *individual* work with these selected women, in the context of the class experience, will be the focus of this demonstration project. The women included in this study are Dina, Pam, Sharon, Sarah, Toni, Rachel, Cheryl, and Leanna (Note: All of the names have been changed to protect the identity of the participants). The selection of these women is intended to reflect diversity as it relates to women's

- Social circumstances: i.e. age, married/single, children/no children, grown children/young children, native to North Carolina or transplanted from other communities, etc.

- Jewish identity: i.e. previous level of Jewish education and practice, ability to articulate one's belief in God/God image, Jew-by-choice/born Jewish, etc.

- Psychological assessment: i.e. women who vary on the spectrum of development from healthy neurotic types to those who are more primitive in their thinking, those with more or less defenses, a range of focal issues including: illness, illness of a child, mortality, death of loved ones, relationships with spouse and children, suffering, shame, etc.

Pastoral counseling has been a part of the job description of a community rabbi for generations. In my work with the Bat Torah students, I will function as both pastoral counselor and spiritual guide. According to Dr. Ochs, these two fields are related but can be distinguished in several ways: training qualifications for the rabbi, types of problems addressed, the role of God language, and objective of the encounter. She explains: The pastoral counselor is usually ordained in addition to be being well versed in the foundational aspects of psychology and its application in a clinical context. Pastoral counseling typically addresses problems in living [i.e. explore fears, obsessions, compulsions, and unresolved issues from childhood] within the context of faith. The pastoral counselor takes religion seriously and accepts God language as natural rather than problematic and helps the client adjust to difficult life situations-- in marriage, in parenting, at work. As in a psychotherapeutic encounter, there are issues of transference in this situation, and when properly handled, they can have curative functions. Pastoral counseling is problem-oriented and can therefore frequently be productive in the short term (Ochs and Olitzky, 1997). My work with Bat Torah participants can certainly be described as a pastoral relationship. No matter what is discussed, it is assumed that the pastoral session is a sacred encounter in which the student may explore questions of meaning and purpose within the larger frame of one's spiritual and religious orientation. The pastoral counseling will be a place to reflect on whatever is happening in people's lives through a distinctly Jewish lens—working with their personal narrative to find integration (or non-integration) with a Jewish narrative. Much of the work we will do together will fall neatly under this rubric. Additionally, there will be specific attention paid to my students' relationship with God. In this case, our work will be more along the lines of Jewish Spiritual Guidance.

Jewish Spiritual Guidance is the process of accompanying people on a spiritual journey.

Morei derekh create a safe space for seekers to tell their stories—*torat hayim*—whereby mundane experiences and reflections can become spiritual insights and sacred stories. The primary goal of spiritual direction is to open up or expand the opportunities for a deeper, richer understanding of our relationship with God and ones own *penimiyut* (inner life). Unlike traditional psychotherapy, the covenant between the director and the guide is quite focused in nature, though the content of the sharing may encompass any aspect of the directee's life in which there is a need to cultivate deeper understanding. Rabbi Jacob J. Staub, PhD, professor of Jewish philosophy and spirituality at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College and pioneer in the field of Jewish Spiritual Direction, writes "The object of spiritual direction is to cultivate one's ability to discern God's presence in one's life — to notice and appreciate moments of holiness, to maintain an awareness of the interconnectedness of all things, to explore ways to be open to the Blessed Holy One in challenging and difficult moments as well as in joyful ones. The director serves as a companion and witness, someone who helps you (sometimes with questions, sometimes just by listening) to discern the divine where you might have missed it and to integrate that awareness into your daily life, your *tefillah*, your *tikkun olam* work, your study, your ritual practice" (Addison and Breitman, 2008). I will be explicit with students that this work may take on different forms. Some will choose to write their own "Working Jewish Theology" or "Letter to their children/grandchildren." Others will bring the questions they are exploring or struggling with in class to our individual sessions.

For the purposes of the class and the potential stigma associated with the term "counseling," I will be using the term "Individual Spiritual Guidance" (ISG) with my students. It is understood that this is a counseling relationship in which women will bring personal issues as well as distinctly spiritual or religious issues to bear. Because the nature of this counseling relationship is both sacred and short-term, the description of "Spiritual Guidance" felt most appropriate for my objectives**.**

As a clinician, I aim to create a "holding environment" for this work to happen (Winnicott). Individual spiritual guidance sessions will be a place in which the relationship between rabbi and student is nurtured allowing for the internal work to take place. Through reflective listening, it is my hope that students will feel heard and appreciated, and therefore feel free to enter the feeling state where the deeper learning happens. In accordance with attachment theory (i.e. concern for

how one connects and binds oneself to others at a conscious and unconscious level), I hope to create a therapeutic alliance in which students can find a secure base in which they feel safe, accepted, and good. This foundational relationship is inextricably connected to the student's spiritual growth and ability to be reflective about themselves and the world.

I will be looking at the nature of the counseling relationship including: my own pastoral presence, resistance (for rabbi and student), transference, and counter-transference. I also want to look at how these women confront and find meaning in: Illness (their own and that of loved ones), the experience of growing older and a sense of their own mortality, the experience of mourning loved ones (especially parents, siblings, and spouses), loss, suffering, changing relationships (i.e. with grown children, retired spouses, aging parents), the experience of moving into greater Jewish knowledge and leadership roles (i.e. How do traditional conceptions about women's roles get internalized—both intra-psychic and communal? What is it like for women to emerge in these new roles without devaluing the tradition? Is there a conflict between those "parts" of themselves?), as well as the experience of shame/brokenness (i.e. What are the "parts" of people that are more guarded in this kind of learning experience? What are they protecting? What kind of healing might take place?)

For me, the crux of pastoral counseling is, indeed, the ability of the client to move from a place of shame and helplessness to a position of worthiness, purpose, meaning, insight and possibility. Suffering and grief *can* offer us an opportunity to grow and be blessed. As the counselor, part of my role is to honor the sadness and suffering—to stand in witness to its unfolding. To hold a mirror up and say, "This is what I see. This is what I hear." And hopefully in doing so, get out of the way and patiently await the miraculous birthing process of the Self. Like the butterfly coming out of the chrysalis, the process cannot be forced, rushed, or rescued. Rather, the counselor can help create a space that honors the honest feelings and struggles of the other and offer the encouragement and support to keep on going on one's journey towards wholeness and meaning making.

I see my role as a pastoral counselor as one who helps people find light in the darkness and identify the invisible lines of connection that enable one to live with greater freedom, flexibility, function and purpose. But this is an infinitely complex and unique process, for each person brings a unique tapestry of his/her life. I will need to think critically about when to pastor and when to counsel and when offering comfort becomes an obstruction to another's growth and

ability to wrestle with difficulty and doubt. Ultimately, I want to "swim alongside" my clients in a way that encourages, guides, supports, and honors, without getting in the way (Dittes, 1999).

Every person is a living text. I expect that people never exactly fit the theory and no story is exactly like another. The most powerful principle I go by is the value of careful and sensitive listening. I work under the assumption that the better I listen, the better able I will be at attuning myself to the psychological issues at hand as well as the Jewish "voice" which might enrich the other's learning about themselves in the world.

I expect that in addition to impacting the lives of these twenty-two women (and their families), this course will begin to shift the culture of our entire synagogue. My hope is that these women, many of whom have served as volunteers for years, will begin to take larger roles in the ritual and administrative life of our community. As our community builds its first *mikveh*, I hope that that some of these women will take upon themselves the obligation of using it or educating/helping other women to use it. As women continue to outnumber the men who are skilled in chanting Torah and leading prayers in our congregation, I hope that these women will soon take over new roles, like the leadership of our weekly *minyanim* (prayer groups). As these women feel increasingly confident in their knowledge and connection to Judaism and to our community, I hope that they will consider running for executive level leadership positions. Finally, I believe that when one part of a system grows, it inevitably forces movement in all the other parts. As Dr. Lisa Grant reflects on the scholarship on women's ritual innovation in Judaism, she notes that "Women who enroll in adult bat mitzvah programs are not seeking to innovate and reinterpret Jewish ritual; rather, they are seeking to fit into existing ritual patterns. These existing ritual patterns, however, *were* changed through feminist activism" (Grant, 2007, 21). My hope and prayer is that the example of these women's commitment to Jewish learning and living will inspire many others in the community to do the same, and together we will all move from strength to strength.

Chapter Two

There are a number of areas of inquiry that intentionally span the categories of religious and clinical principles. The goal is to examine how these categories function independently and interdependently with the participants. Through my work with students over the course of our studies and counseling, I plan to explore the following questions:

Religious

1) What does it mean for participants to delve into serious Jewish learning as adults? What has motivated them to make this commitment? How is learning an integral part of Jewish living? How does learning fit into their conception of *mitzvot* (commandments)?

2) How do participants describe their relationships with/understanding of God? What are the questions they have? What obstacles get in the way of deepening that relationship/understanding?

3) How has being a woman shaped their Jewish journeys?

4) How are issues around loss and suffering a critical part of spiritual growth, particularly in midlife?

5) What are some approaches to faith development in a Jewish adult context?

Clinical

1) Why is middle age (roughly between the ages of 35-65) a particularly ripe time for women to embark on a serious exploration of questions of meaning and purpose?

2) What kinds of issues emerge for participants? Are they primarily psychological? Spiritual? How do these different kinds of issues intersect in this distinctly religious context?

3) How is pastoral counseling a "learning experience?" How does this learning model impact the educational and spiritual development of the participants? What is the role of "group process" on development of these women in conjunction with the individual sessions?

4) How is the *relationship* between a rabbi and her student a transformative part of the learning journey?

5) What kinds of boundaries issues are at play in this setting when multiple relationships are often a reality between rabbi and congregant? (i.e. Rabbi as teacher, counselor, community member, Rabbi as wife of the synagogue's "primary" rabbi and spiritual leader (i.e. issues of confidentiality, relating to both rabbis in different ways, issues around projection, transference, counter transference etc.)

In preparation for exploring these questions as they relate to my project, I will provide below, some principles which guide and inform the way I approach these religious and clinical issues.

A. Religious Principles

Torah* and *Mitzvot

When God reveals God's Self to Abraham, God says, "You shall be a blessing" (Gen. 12:2). But by what merit does Abraham receive this blessing? We later learn that God singles him out because he is charged with instructing his children and all those who come after him to "keep the way of Adonai by doing what is just and right, *la'sot tzekakah u'mishpat* (Genesis 18:19). It is through this pursuit of *mitzvot* (guarding God's path, *derekh Hashem*) as weill as through the pursuit of justice in relationships and in all aspects of life that we may truly become a blessing to others and for ourselves. With acts of justice and righteousness (*tzedek u'mishpat*) and love and compassion (*hesed u'v'rahamim*) we make God's name great (*Kiddush Hashem*). In sin and injustice, we profane and diminish God's name (*hilul Hashem*). As a People, we have the responsibility to bring justice and peace to every corner of the world and to find the sparks

holiness in our own lives. There is no experience or aspect of living that does not contain within it the possibility for holiness, possibility, and healing. "You shall be holy; for I the LORD your God am holy." (Lev. 19:2) God has given us the mandate, the opportunity, and the gift of pursing lives of holiness. Discerning how we can live lives of holiness by participating in the never-ending process of repentance (*teshuva*), we bring glory to God's name and God's world. *Mitzvot*– in their infinite variety-- offer us opportunities to experience God's presence and connect with our greatest purpose in the world.

As Rabbi Brad Artson states, "The language of Judaism is its *mitzvot*, the commandments by which a Jew makes the world a more sacred, sensitive, just and compassionate place… *Mitzvot* [are] the concrete actions Judaism uses to fashion lives of ethical rigor and spiritual insight." (Artson, 1995, 12, 14). The "commandments", or alternatively as I have taught, "opportunities for connection," take place within the context of a relationship with God (*ben adam l'Makom*) and between people (*ben adam l'haveiro*). Much of our learning in class and the overflow of that learning into students' lives will focus on one's understanding of the *mitzvot*. How do we live Jewish lives? What is incumbent upon us as Jews? What struggles do we encounter in growing in observance of Jewish law? We will inevitably explore the traditions' ideas about women's roles in Jewish life and observance of *mitzvot* as well.

For Jews, study and learning is at the center of Jewish life. In our morning prayers, that of all the commandments, "*Talmud Torah k'neged kulam*," "the study of Torah is equal to them all for it leads to them all." Louis Finkelstein, past chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary, was famous for having said, "When I pray, I speak to God. When I study, God speaks to me." This central value is also expressed in the Talmud which dictates that if a parent wishes to study Torah, and he as has a child who must also learn—the parent takes precedence. The parent must not ignore his own study, for just as it is a commandment to educate the child, so, too, is the parent commanded to teach himself (*Kiddushin* 29b). And according to Rava (3rd century Talmudist from Babylonia), "A person should always study texts, even though he may forget, even though the may not understand" (Talmud, *Avoda Zara* 19a).

All of our sages, ancient and modern, emphasize the centrality of study in Jewish life—and in particular, in the lives of Jewish adults. Adult students learning basic Jewish literacy may naturally feel embarrassed or ashamed by their lack of Jewish knowledge. Nevertheless, in *Pirke Avot*, the "Ethics of our Fathers," we learn that a person who is embarrassed or ashamed does not

learn. I will help to create a safe environment in which students feel increasingly free to express their questions and opinions so that learning can take place. I also hold dear the principle recorded in the in Talmud that disagreement is a healthy part of spiritual engagement. Finding difference with one another or the text/tradition, however, must be done with a measure of humility and respect. The rabbis term this "*maḥloket l'shem shamayim*." I aim to create an atmosphere in which students can truly be *Yisra-El*, those who struggle with God (and themselves) in a respectful and thoughtful way—for the sake of the higher good of us all.

At the heart of Jewish life and learning is the insistence that our sacred texts are still vivid, still alive, and that God and our sages intended for us to wrestle with Torah and Talmud the way Jacob wrestled with the angel. This is a tradition in which we are still in dialogue with our greatest teachers, as flesh and blood men and women. It is okay to have doubts and even, to dare to argue with God. Judaism is a road, a metaphor, and path towards meaning in the face of the *mysteries* of life for all those that choose it. There are many more questions than we have answers.

As Jews, the study of Torah and adherence to *mitzvot* is a deeply communal experience. Hillel teaches us in Pirke Avot: "*Al tifrosh min ha'tzibur*." "Do not separate yourself from the community." It is a Jewish value to contribute to and live within community. Each of us travels the journey of life as individuals within community. To illustrate that point, while a Jew can pray nearly anywhere at anytime, our tradition deems the pronouncement of God's holy name (*d'varim sh'bikedusha*) appropriate only in the context of a *minyan* (a community of ten or more persons). To be alive is to need others. We cannot fulfill our spiritual lives alone. There is a connectedness to God and an expression of holiness that can only come in connection with others, even as we understand ourselves as individuals. This notion is at the heart of this Bat Mitzvah program in both its explicit and implicit learning goals.

God

Nowhere in the Bible is there a commandment to believe in God. Though the Torah offers many examples of people who put their trust in God and created lives in accordance with God's commands, belief cannot be legislated in Jewish tradition. That said, there are myriad approaches to understanding God in Judaism and recognizing God's presence in our lives. I see

my role as rabbi as one who nurtures the relationship between my student and God by witnessing the questions and struggles that emerge, offering affirmation of one's experience of God, sharing new perspectives when called upon, honoring the process of discernment, and creating a soulful encounter in which God's presence can be felt.

It is impossible to talk about God directly. Any words or concepts express a sort of grasping at what we can only know through direct experience, transcending words, held in our bodies and souls by virtue of the gift of life. Several ideas help me describe what I understand to be the nature of our ability to encounter God. First, we encounter God through change, growth, and blessing. Just as Jacob wrestled with an angel and emerged with a new name and blessing, I believe we encounter God when we find the courage to struggle, grow and change. That is why we are "*Yisra-El*"—those who wrestle with God. God dwells within that *process*—that *possibility* of something new.

I also believe that God is dynamic. We know this from God's very name, which is an amalgamation of three forms of the word "to be." In the words of Eve Breitman, "The mystery of *being* is at the center of the holiest name for God… Part of the mystery is that when we are fully present, it is as if we are bringing God into the space between people… As we offer and enable our being to touch another, we enable that Aspect of God who dwells among us, the *Shekhinah*, to become manifest." (Breitman, 78) Experiencing God's presence demands that we awaken ourselves and become present to our own lives and the world around us. We feel God's presence, or "holding," in the embrace of the other and in the sense that even when feel ourselves to be most alone, God is with us.

Rabbi Nancy Flam's understanding of *din* and *ra<u>h</u>amim* has also been influential for me in my understanding of the nature of God's power in the world. In her mind, *din* (God's imposition of boundaries and limits on the world) is amoral. In other words, when one becomes sick or a plane crashes, it is not a moral choice that God makes causing those things to happen. Rather, it is a result of the fact that God created a world in which things have limits (in addition to free will, of course). There is disease, people die, accidents happen. Conversely, God also interacts with the world in the ways of *ra<u>h</u>amim*, or compassion and mercy. It is *these* ways that God asks that we walk—to love, to care for, to deal kindly with our selves and one another. God's *ra<u>h</u>amim*, and our own, offer us the possibility of softening the *din* that is built into Creation. On a strictly human level, learning to live with a balance of *din* and *ra<u>h</u>amim* (or *<u>h</u>esed*

and *gevurah*) is one of our greatest spiritual tasks. Any teacher, parent, friend or spouse knows that without limits and boundaries, all things go awry. On the other hand, if there are only rules and limits, relationships cannot grow and thrive. Coming to know and relate to God is to contend with both the limits and abundance of God's presence in our world.

For me personally, the "*Untaneh Tokef*" prayer that we solemnly utter during the Days of Awe, contains the formula for the quintessential Jewish pathway to experiencing God. In this prayer we claim that it is through *teshuva* (repentance), *tefillah* (heartfelt prayer), and *tzedakah* (acts of justice and loving kindness) that we merit the possibility to live another hour, another day, another year. And even beyond the high holiday season, this prayer stays close to my heart, for I believe that is precisely through these actions: repentance (personal and communal growth), prayer (knowing that nearly anything can be done prayerfully), and justice/acts of loving kindness that we most easily access and encounter what we call "God."

We also come to experience and know God through our texts. Our sacred narratives and volumes upon volumes of law and lore enable God and our ancestors to talk with us. But even more, I believe, we do so through life—through real, *lived* experiences and the meaning we create from them. As human beings, we are wired to search for and create meaning. We do this in infinite variety by telling our stories. Our stories reveal the ways in which God connects all people and all things through invisible lines of connection. We come to know God through our very own lives.

Women in Judaism

One of the most revolutionary aspects of the Torah, is that we learn "God created man in His image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them" (Genesis 1:27). Though different in biology, both men and women are essentially the same when comes to their inherent worth, dignity, and godliness. Unfortunately, our tradition was molded in conversation with other parts of the Hebrew Bible, hundreds of years of sacred texts, our evolving culture which has been, at times, misogynist in its interpretation of God's will, the experience of living in diverse cultures, and the real lives of people created in God's image, but not God themselves, that ultimately placed women in narrowly defined roles and unequal legal positions. The first wave of feminism within Judaism sought equality. Namely, women should be treated and function as men. The second wave of feminism, which we experience today, is

predicated on different values. The emphasis now is whether it is possible "to *specialize* as women while we *equalize* as women" (Goldstein, 2). This question is ultimately about granting equal access to Jewish learning, law, and ritual and at the same time celebrating difference. The Conservative movement, which began ordaining women in the 1980s, set forth a powerful statement about the potential for hearing women's voices, valuing their perspectives, and honoring their leadership. We are still, however, trying to assimilate these important changes.

Rabbi Elyse Goldstein identifies five primary areas in which we might view the role of women in Judaism: Women and Torah, Women and *Halakha* (Jewish law), Women and Ritual, Women and Theology, and Women and Leadership. As Rabbi Goldstein writes, "there are no easy or clear answers" when it comes to the role of women in the Torah (Goldstein, 15). Women in the Torah were limited by their roles as wives, mothers, and chattel. This inevitably impacted how they lived and what they were able to accomplish. At the same time, they resisted, they led, and they helped shape Jewish history, not to mention the smaller domains in which they lived. They were both subjects and objects, both person and property. As a rabbi and teacher, I see my role as two-fold. First, I aim to give women access to the texts—to give them the skills and confidence to read them and enter into a conversation with them without mediation. Second, I have both an "inventive" and "revisionist" perspective when it comes to reading text. As an inventive interpreter, I seek to ask questions about and add women's voices, stories, and experiences when I find them lacking in the text. Like a midrashist (those who created our oral tradition of law and lore), I choose to see both the black letters and to imagine the white spaces in between the letters. As a "revisionist," I choose to believe that even with its many problems, the Torah is still the foundational text of my people and contains within it possibilities for women's growth, transformation, and spirituality. This perspective requires that I approach the text with a willingness to ask difficult questions (from a women's perspective) and to look at the assumptions, historical and cultural, that I may in fact reject. As Rabbi Goldstein puts it, "Revisionists recognize patriarchy in the Torah but invite us to read the Torah with non-patriarchal eyes" (Goldstein, 9). Still, I believe the wisdom is there and my role is to learn to unpack it in new ways and help others to do the same.

The intersection of Women and *Halakha* (Jewish Law) is another important area of study to consider as I work with this group. I come to the table as a rabbi ordained within the Reform movement, and yet I chose to study for ordination at an Orthodox Yeshiva in Jerusalem (Pardes),

the Conservative movement's rabbinical seminary in New York (JTS), as well as Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion. I identify myself as an egalitarian Jew who believes women ought to have access to all aspects of Jewish learning, ritual law, and life. At the same time, I recognize that making decisions about women's participation and "boundedness" to Jewish law is not always a straight line. This approach to Jewish law is fraught with inconsistency and invisible lines of connection even as it holds its own internal logic and integrity from my standpoint. The notion of "commandedness" is at the core of the Jewish legal system. According to traditional Jewish law, women are not bound by positive time-bound commandments. Through there are a number of exceptions (i.e. lighting *Shabbat* candles, eating *matzah* on Passover, and hearing the Scroll of Esther read on the holiday of Purim), this is often how the rabbis conceived of women's relationship to the law, generally speaking. Part of the explicit and implicit goal of performing *mitzvot* (commandments), is to attain and create *kedusha* (holiness) in one's life and the world. In Hebrew, *kedusha* (holiness) means "separate" or to be "set apart." Rabbi Goldstein raises these questions:

> What does this mean for women, taught from earliest childhood to be connected? What does this mean for those women who carry life inside, attached to, part of? What does this mean for those women who nurture and sustain from their very own bodies? What does this mean for women who form bonded friendships, taught from earliest memory to bring the family together, to be the cohesive force? Carole Gilligan, in her oft-quoted book *In a Different Voice*, studied the moral development of children. She found that girls experience the world as a series of relationships; boys experience the world as a system of rules… The Jewish concept of spirituality, the Jewish attempt at communion with God, the Jewish quest for holiness, is rooted in adherence to rules, which we call *mitzvot*… Can we redefine *kedusha* as something other than separateness? Can we redefine *mitzvot* not as rules, but as dialogue, as action, as reaching toward? (Goldstein, 34-35)

One Hasidic understanding of "*mitzvah*" is, in fact, "connection," coming from the Aramaic word "*tzavta*." This connection, or *mitzvah* serves as a link between humans and God (*Likkutei Torah, Parshat Bechukotai* 45c). In this way, law is an expression of relationship and relatedness. This is perhaps the best interpretation of what Jewish law and commandedness mean for me and the way I teach my students, for it contains within it both the sense of autonomy (which I believe is a part of modern Jewish living) and relationship, which by its nature, places certain demands, expectations, and opportunities for closeness on those involved. Therefore, whether it is a *mitzvah ben adam l'havero* (a commandment concerning the

relationship between people), i.e. honoring one's parents or returning a lost object, or a *mitzvah ben adam l'Makom* (a commandment concerning the relationship between people and God), i.e. lighting *Shabbat* candles or immersing in the *mikveh* (the ritual bath), these are all opportunities for connection. The more *mitzvot* one takes on and engages, the deeper and broader one's *connection* with God and the world around her.

Ritual is an outgrowth of and category within any conception of Jewish law. As a progressive rabbi, influenced by feminism, I feel both reverence for tradition and cognizant of the ways in which ritual must be adapted and expanded to meet the needs of modern Jewish women in my community. Whether we are considering ritual garb (i.e. *tallit* and head coverings), lifecycle rituals (i.e. weddings, covenantal rituals for the birth of a daughter, and *bat mitzvah*), or other performative acts (i.e. prayer), women's voices have and will continue to shape our practice. Rabbi Goldstein talks about both "imitative" and "inventive" rituals. Imitative rituals imply performing ritual according to the traditional model with a feminine twist. Inventive rituals, on the other hand, imply taking account of the unique moments that happen only to women. Un-connected to history and old communal notions of acceptability, inventive rituals invite women to consider what religious frameworks might sanctify the events and objects in women's lives (Goldstein, 61-65). In my opinion, both imitative and inventive rituals have a place in Jewish life and both present their own distinct challenges and opportunities. My vision of Jewish life would be one rich with traditional ritual, traditional ritual adapted by women's presence and voices, and the freedom to create new rituals with Jewish language, narratives, and imagery.

God Language and Theology must also be considered in relationship to women and women's experiences in Judaism. While Judaism speaks of God as being incorporeal, indescribable, infinite, and wholly non-human, we nevertheless are limited by the fact that we are dependent upon language when it comes to expressing our beliefs and feelings about God. After all, we learn about God through story, which by necessity uses imagery, language, and symbols that are gender specific. And though Maimonides and others caution us against the anthropomorphism of God and the projection of our human needs onto God, we are also taught that "the Torah speaks in a human language." In order for us to begin to understand our sacred texts, including Jewish notions of God and the world around us, we must use human language. We are, therefore, also limited by the constraints of human language. The words used to describe

God in sacred text and liturgy, are predominately male, though not exclusively so. It is impossible to ignore the fact that semantics impacts not only what we say about God, but also what we say about ourselves. As Goldstein writes, this then "becomes not a matter of semantics, but a matter of faith, a reflection of our beliefs, and an integral part of our received tradition" (Goldstein, 89).

Finally, the role of women in leadership is critical for the purposes of this study. It is impossible to ignore the fact that I am a woman rabbi. For most of the women in this study, I am the first woman rabbi they have encountered. I stand on the shoulders of many women who have come before me to pioneer the role of rabbi for women. At the same time, it has only been thirty-eight years since the first woman received rabbinic ordination by the Reform movement of Judaism. This is a relatively short period of time in Jewish history. There is no question in my mind, even in my short career as a rabbi, that people experience women rabbis differently than they experience male rabbis, and by extension, people experience women rabbis' teaching and interpretation of Torah differently than they would male rabbis. As with all areas of Judaism, discussed briefly in this section, I believe that my role as a rabbi calls me to engage with older, traditional models of Jewish leadership as well as to bring forth a new spirit of leadership and care for issues that may have been marginalized in the past. Again, I feel simultaneously called to honor the traditions of our past, to exercise my egalitarian values, and to breathe new life into Judaism by virtue of my creative and feminist orientation. This expression of leadership can't help but influence those I teach. In Rabbi Goldstein's words, "The very notion of a woman rabbi challenges us to recognize that for centuries we thought male rabbis were the norm. By hearing the same stories retold now by women, by being at the same events now led by women, by simply sitting in the pews and looking up to see women in front, many Jews say they have come to see their total Jewish experience differently" (Goldstein, 112).

Suffering and Loss

Much of the counseling and subsequent research and writing will be dedicated to the role of loss, brokenness, and suffering in these women's lives. Inherent in dealing with loss from a Jewish perspective, I will look at the importance of expressing sadness through tears and mourning, understanding different Jewish perspectives on sin and repentance, the creation of substitutional/behavioral responses including: Torah study, prayer, and acts of lovingkindness,

and the role faith. Jewish tradition makes it clear that holiness can be found everywhere-- even in the midst of loss. Growth and meaning may not result when we are in the coils of loss, but with time, community support, spiritual seeking, and spiritual guidance, they may take us to places we never imagined we could go. As Jews, we search for meaning and sanctity in *this* life for which loss is an inevitable and invaluable pathway. In his exploration of loss, Rabbi David Wolpe is reminded of the orchestra in Auschwitz. He writes, "The musicians knew death intimately-- the stench of death surrounded them. Still they created beauty amid destruction because they knew that to believe in the possibility of wonder, of music, of radiance, was what kept them human. We cannot live without loss, but we also cannot live without the possibility of making loss meaningful" (Wolpe, 214). Loss is not pleasant; it is, however, inevitable and necessary as we grow. In the *midrash*, Rabbi Yohanan teaches, "The eye has a white part and a dark part, but we can see only through the dark part." Through loss we often have a new opportunity to see.

According to the Talmud, our ancestors put the broken tablets that Moses received at Mt. Sinai in the ark alongside the second set of whole tablets-- and so too in our lives. A Jewish perspective that I hold dear is that all of us carry with us through the wilderness of life both the broken fragments of our lives and those relationships *alongside* experiences of wholeness. Following Jewish mystical cosmology, this brokenness is actually woven into the fabric of creation and the human experience. And just as God asks us to place the pieces of the broken tables in the holy ark along with the second set of whole tablets and carry them with us through the wilderness, God demands that we move forward with the broken pieces in our lives so that we might make meaning of them and learn from the journey. Suffering can cause us pain; it can also be our teacher.

The Psalmist teaches, "God is near to those that are of a broken heart." (Psalm 34:19). We are not alone on the journey. Judaism, while not silencing our doubts or denying us our freedom to wrestle with God and ask questions, reminds us that, somehow, the very same God that creates darkness extends the *Shekhinah*—the nurturing, protective, omnipresent Divine Presence—to comfort and strengthen us when we suffer. God is always with us. We are never alone in our pain and suffering, though we may, at times, feel that way. Rabbi David Moshe of Tchortkov teaches (with reference to Exodus 19:9) that God is, in fact, often contained in the thickness of darkness. "I will be with you… you are not alone." Just as God is near to those who

suffer and call out, my role as the rabbi is one that mirrors that willingness to accompany. The pastoral counseling experience will allow for a fuller exploration of what it is like for participants to experience loss and carry those losses around on the inside and the outside, from a Jewish perspective.

Spiritual Guidance

"Ayeka?" is a rhetorical question in which God asks Adam where he is (Genesis 3:9). Presumably, God *knows* exactly where Adam is. This is a question that points not to Adam's physical location, but rather, his spiritual and emotional location. I see the experience of engaging in a course of study like this to be one in which students are repeatedly asked where they are (metaphorically) in relation to God, the text, the tradition, our People, history, and their understanding of themselves. I will assess where students are in their faith development. Is a student's theology more primitive or evolved? How have their God imaged been impacted by clinical issues and vice versa?

Our counseling time will pay special attention to the concepts of meeting God through prayer, revisiting our images of God, engaging God through the study of sacred texts, the role of ritual in Jewish life, and giving to and being a part of community. This time will also be dedicated to helping participants *understand* and *attach meaning* to their Jewish experiences and lives, more generally. I believe that our lives do not present meaning. Rather, meaning is what *we* give to a situation. I believe we are hard-wired as human beings to seek and create meaning from our lives and our world. That process can be enriched and made more holy through the teachings, texts, rituals, and resources of our tradition. Spiritual Guidance will be an incubator for this awareness and exploration.

Abraham's Jewish journey may serve as a useful paradigm here as I work with women who are entering and moving through midlife. At the ripe age of 75, God chooses Abraham from which to "make a great nation." The *Midrash Tanhuma* translates this as "I shall create you anew." According to this interpretation, Avivah Zornberg claims that the charge for Abraham to go forth (*lekh l'kha*) is "an urging for self-transformation: at base, that is the meaning of a change of name or a change of place" (Zornberg). Abraham's father, Terah only goes as far as Haran (Genesis 11:31); it is up to Abraham to finish the journey. Many rabbis and students of

Torah have offered interpretations of the command to go forth—"*lekh l'kha"*—because of its unique grammatical form (Genesis 12:1). Two possible interpretations lend themselves to the experience of spiritual guidance and midlife. The first is the idea that that "*lekh l'kha"* (literally: go to yourself) might be implying that the spiritual journey of adulthood is one in which each person must ultimately takes by herself. This is not an endeavor that someone else can perform in one's stead. Rather, it is deeply personal and can only take place once one has begun to shed the identity that is projected onto us as children and young adults, and begun to enter into one's adult self. Connected to this idea, there is a sense of loneliness in the search that is important as one examines what is like to be a stranger, moving through the liminal passages of life. Second, there is a *hassidic* understanding of this phrase, taking it to mean: "Go (in)to yourself." The spiritual journey is ultimately about delving into your roots (your past, your roots, your soul, etc.) and gaining appreciation of your potential (who you *really* are and how you hope to live your life). The spiritual guidance that I hope to provide for participants will be one in which I honor both of these interpretations: the experience of taking responsibility for one's own spiritual path along with the inherent power *and* loneliness in that, as well as the importance of diving into one's self from the deepest recesses of one's psycho-spiritual memory in order to arrive at the emergence of a more authentic sense of self as it relates to God, Torah, and Jewish tradition.

B. Clinical Principles

Midlife

> "Thoroughly unprepared we take the step into the afternoon of life; worse still, we take this step with the false assumption that our truths and ideals will serve us as hitherto. But we cannot live the afternoon of life according to the programme of life's morning; for what was great in the morning will be little at evening, and what in the morning was true will at evening have become a lie." Carl Jung, *Stages of Life*

Many women find themselves hungry for wisdom and meaning as they approach or work through the developmental tasks of midlife. Scholars point to a certain awakening that is often rooted in this period of time. The experience of midlife, including its length, is being redefined. It is a period distinctly unlike youth or old age. Rather than a developmental moment which signals the end or decline of one's life, midlife is becoming a time in which many have the time,

skills, and desire to explore the *meaning* of life. One of my goals through this class and counseling experience it to help participants see that the physical aging process is also a spiritual journey. There are no measures of "success" or "perfection" in this pursuit. Rather, it is about becoming more conscious and aware of oneself in the cosmos. This course invites us to look at the Jewish intellectual universe, but it also invites participants to venture into the parallel universe of the inner self. I hope to open up this exploration by modeling inquiry into their internal lives in the context of our counseling relationship.

> James Hollis, Executive Director of the Jung Center, explained in an interview:
>
> We are homo religiosus—so what does that mean, and how is life to be lived in the presence of mystery? Another way I put it is: in the first half of life the prevailing question is, "what does the world want of me?" To answer this question ego and social development are obligatory. However, in the second half of life, the question is, "what does the soul (Greek for "psyche") want of me?" Whoever does not address this question, submit the ego to transcendent claim, will be brought unwilling to it sooner or later. So, in short, Jung speaks to more of us, in deeper ways, and raises questions which challenge us, and open us to greater depths" (Hollis, March 2007).

In Hollis' examination of midlife in his work, *The Middle Passage: From Misery to Meaning in Midlife*, he explains that in the first half of life, we develop what he terms "a provisional personality." This personality becomes the lens through which we view life. It s a lens molded and shaped by our family, culture, era in which we are born, etc., as well as the inevitable "wounding" which comes with living. Hollis describes several periods in his understanding of human psychological development. The "first identity" is childhood. Childhood is characterized most by the "dependency of the ego on the actual world of the parents." On the cusp of childhood, Hollis describes the impulse to create a rite of initiation into the "second identity." This rite, which applies to the experience of Bat Mitzvah, hopes to achieve a separation from the parents, transmission of the sacred history of the tribe to provide spiritual grounding, and preparation for the responsibilities of adulthood. The beginning of the second identity is puberty, marked by a certain degree of spiritual confusion and ego lability. Hollis says that the "first adulthood" ranges from roughly age 12-40 (Hollis, 23-26). What emerges from the first and second identities, Hollis writes, is an "unexamined adult personality."

At a certain point, however, the individual finds this provisional personality inadequate, untenable, or a poor fit. Hollis describes it as a kind of "tectonic pressure" that builds from below and "begins to grate and grind against the greater Self which seeks its own realization" (Hollis,

17). This awareness can invite a crisis, but not an undesired one. This crisis may signal the need for the old personality to "die" but also give way to an opening for a new personality to be born. It is not surprising, therefore, that this passage (whether it is experienced in small and almost unnoticeable ways or grand unavoidable ones) would bring with it a fair amount of anxiety. But Hollis claims that mature aging cannot occur without this, for we must move from the provisional life to true adulthood, from the false self to authenticity. Suffering is an inevitability of life. The developmental task of the middle passage is to find meaning within the symptoms of suffering. This process occurs when we are ready for it to happen, not necessarily at a specific time. According to Hollis, coming into second adulthood is launched when one's projections have dissolved and the provisional identities have been discarded. In doing so the false self dies and a new Self is born (Hollis, 22).

The process of individuation Hollis calls the "middle passage," is ultimately about finding wholeness—to the extent to which that is something we can accomplish. One of the grandest illusions we must shed is that there is a real and permanent state called Happiness. Hollis explains that most of us spend our lives in the swamp accompanied by loneliness, loss, grief, doubt, depression, despair, anxiety, guilt and betrayal. But the psyche, he claims, has a purpose that is beyond our conscious control. This purpose is to survive these difficult feelings and states and find meaning in them. Grief and doubt, for example, can guide us and open up creativity and wisdom unattainable by any other path. The middle passage invites us to wade in the swampy water and see what possibilities await. Hollis writes:

> Each of these swampland regions represents as a current of the psyche whose meaning can be found if we are courageous enough to ride it. When the ship of the Middle Passage is heaving in the swamp we must ask: "What does this mean to me? What is my psyche telling me? What am I to do about it? In the swamplands of the soul there is meaning and the call to enlarge consciousness. To take this on is the greatest responsibility in life. We alone can grasp the ship's wheel. And when we do, the terror is compensated by meaning, by dignity, by purpose (Hollis, 108).

Part of the spirituality of midlife comes in having inevitably known suffering of ones own and that of others. The experience of making mistakes and moving through some darker moments in life brings with it knowledge and wisdom that cannot be achieved any other way. Many people find that the spiritual values of forgiveness, humility and compassion are more easily accessed having witnessed the complexity of life. These internal strengths, more than the physical ones become the sources for renewal and repair.

There are many common issues and concerns which women face in the midlife. Some of these issues include: changes in the body, the declining health and/or death of a parent, shifting relationships with ones adult children, re-negotiating roles with a spouse, and a sense of ones mortality. At the same time as these experiences in loss take center stage there is also a process of birthing that takes shape. Many women find that they are ready to let go of certain kinds of baggage. They expect less of the world since they have seen it up close; perfection is no longer an attainable aspiration. There is also some relief that comes in slowing down, creating a more fertile ground for the internal work so critical to midlife. It is humbling to watch the body age. Yet with the awareness of the fragility of the body may come the opportunity to more powerfully identify with ones *spiritual*, yet embodied, existence. And, when the body fails us, often one finds greater appreciation and awe for the ways in which the body has worked in the past and continues to carry us forward—even through challenging circumstances. The period of midlife can also give way to a deep desire to learn something new and engage with life more meaningfully. There is a sense of there being less time ahead than the time that has passed. And as parents of grown children, there is can be an awakening to the idea that taking care of oneself doesn't necessary amount to denying care to others.

I think that a deeply spiritual approach to midlife is to honor the possibility of change and growth. Spiritual and psychological knowledge, by nature, takes a long time to digest. It must be learned. Lived. Re-lived. Integrated. Midlife is precisely the time to do that work. Midlife can be about forging a new conversation.

The Convergence of Clinical Issues and Spirituality (Winer, Fowler, Rizzuto)

Just as God is understood within Judaism to be dynamic and elusive (inherent in the name YHWH), so too is the human psyche. James Hollis writes, "The unwavering truth of the psyche is: change or wither into resentment; grow or die within" (Hollis, 51). Both psychology and religion encourage us to pursue questions of meaning and purpose, and to continually transform and heal ourselves and in doing so I believe, help to change the world for the better. Nevertheless, in the past, religion has been largely dismissed by the psychoanalytic world. Sigmund Freud is known for his "absolutely negative attitude toward religion, in every form and dilution." Freud saw religion as mere illusion— a set of childish fantasies projected onto God and other symbols, and he actively dissuaded his students from bringing the concepts of

psychoanalysis to bear on topics of religion (Winer and Anderson, 1). In recent years, however, scholarship on psychoanalysis has opened its doors to religion and spirituality and many now view it as a critical pathway into a deepened understanding of oneself and others. New scholarship highlights that there is indeed a rich connection between psychology and religion, and because religious belief is held deep within the psyche, there is a bridge to be built between these two disciplines. In the following paragraphs, I hope to describe some of the ways in which psychology (and psychoanalysis) has interfaced with notions of religious and spiritual life.

Mortimer Ostow, psychoanalyst and neuroscientist, defines "spiritual" as referring to the experience or contact with the transcendent through awe, an encounter in which one is in touch with a transcendent object that responds to a wish or that may appear unbidden, a mystical experience in which one has a feeling of direct intuition, or union with the divine" (Ostow in Winer and Anderson, 70). He understands "religion" as defining the relationship of an individual to a group that supports and protects one another, just as we expect to find in a family. This group supports the religious structures and works to ensure its survival (Ostow in Winer and Anderson, 70-71). Monotheistic religions, he explains, always comprise three elements: Mythic Account of History, Cult, and Moral Codes. "Mythic account of history" refers to the myths by which a religious community comes to understand its origins and history. Ostow discusses one early source of religious commitment as the child-parent relationship with is embedded within the Hebrew Bible. These myths also guide how we look at our neighbors. The connection to these texts, lands, and languages produces a level of attachment that is quite palpable and visible from a psychoanalytic vantage point. Jung also argued that it was not a matter of living without myth, but rather which myth-- for we are always guided by images, consciously or unconsciously. "Cult" refers to "a system of obligations and prohibitions that are intended to establish and enforce the relationship between the worshipper and the deity… Cultic behavior is intended to establish, maintain, and reinforce instinctual attachment" (Ostow in Winer and Anderson, 72-3). In this way, just as a loving relationship requires periodic sexual satisfaction and union, so too religious experience must be reinforced at regular intervals in order to keep the attachment alive. He cites rituals of sacrifice, prayer, and confession as examples of this sort of re-enforcement (Ostow in Winer and Anderson, 73-74). Dr. Ostow even makes the scientific connection between mood elevation and the experience of pleasure in successful social relationships as well as religious services and spiritual experience. Finally, Ostow explains that

most monotheistic religions have "moral codes" which regulate human behavior. Ostow concludes by saying that just as child-parent relations result from instinctual interactions, so too spiritual aspirations and religious structures have their roots in childhood. According to his theory, attachment prevails in each case and facilitates both (Ostow in Winer and Anderson, 80).

Ana-Maria Rizzuto devoted much of her professional life as a psychoanalyst to research in the developmental and psychodynamic processes that govern the relationship between an individual and his or her dealings with divinity. Her groundbreaking work, *The Birth of the Living God: A Psychoanalytic Study*, helped to establish a connection between one's psychic life (organized internally around relationships and their internal representations) and one's conception of God (as an internal object, whether conscious or unconscious). Rizzuto helps us locate God from the perspective of object relations theory.

Object relations theory, pioneered by analysts Bowlby, Winnicott, Klein, Fairbain, and Guntrip and Mahler claim that human development takes place in the context of relationships, or objects, of our drives and affection. There is a primary and absolute need for attachment in humans. Early objects of attachment include one's primary caregivers (usually the parents). The child's inner world is shaped by representations of others. In keeping with this notion, object relations deals with representations and expectations of these objects on the outside and inside. According to this school of thought, the word "object" comes to mean "person" because the person is the *object* of desire and fear beyond simply the people they actually are on the outside. "Object" also differentiates the object from subject. The focus of this theory is the relationship of self to other and the process whereby people come to experience themselves as separate/independent from others, while still needing attachment. These relationships are both *internal and external* ("real" and internally represented) including the internal images of the self. A person's internal representations of an object from the past can dominate his/her present inner world distorting present relationships. What is "outside" often get "inside" and shapes the way a person feels, grows, and thinks.

Rizutto used this body of knowledge (along with other theories) to help us think about how one develops an image of God and a relationship with the divine. Freud is known for pioneering the idea of that one's ideas about his/her father become projected onto his/her internal representation of God. What Freud missed, Rizzuto claims, is that he ignored the mother's contribution in this equation. Rizutto found that her patients incorporated their mothers into the

internal representations of God as well as their *selves* (Rizzuto, in Winer and Anderson, 29). She writes, "In our Western culture, where a monotheistic God is ever present, people form a representation of God directly connected to their primary objects and their own sense of self… Whether the person consciously believes that God exists or not, the deep unconscious and conscious connections between parents, self, God and the culture permit the person to use the God representation in this or her mental life, whether he or she is aware of doing it or not" (Rizzuto, in Winer and Anderson, 29). In other words, our image of God is inevitably limited by the relationships we have had.

In thinking about the convergence of "psychological" and "spiritual" issues as it relates to the participants in this study we need only look at one's conception of God to see the way in which the psychological and spiritual meet. In many ways, one's God concept is a summary of one's own life narrative. Rizutto claims that God image is developmental and she graphs her understanding of the unfolding of human life as it relates to one's object relations and God concept over the psychosocial stages outlined by Erik Erikson (Rizutto, 205-207). I see my role in the equation as one who helps my students reflect on the connection between their lives and relationships as it is reflected in their God image. Often times a crisis in faith is a crisis in a person's image of God, whereby their image is too small to help them live the life that they are living. Dr. Carol Ochs agrees with Rizutto in her understanding of the creation of God image, but she also believes that through a process of reflection and discovery there can yet me a sort of co-creation of a new image(s)—including ones that are self-correcting. In addition to creating a space for reflection, my job is to expose my students to new images of God and texts and to re-enforce that their own experiences are meaningful. What is at stake is not only one's image of God, but also one's view of self and other. What we think about God has considerable bearing on what we think about ourselves. If one stays open, there is room for a self-correcting image of God (and/or oneself). Conversely, if one is overly defended and stuck in one image of God (and/or) oneself, there is no room for growth and healing.

Building on the contributions of thinkers like Piaget, Erikson, and Kohlberg, James Fowler uses developmental psychology to examine how people makes sense of their lives, find meaning, and grow in faith. His understanding of the nexus between psychology and faith is helpful as I analyze what I learn from my counseling with the participants in the course. Fowler believes that faith is *fundamental*, *universal*, and *infinitely varied*. He defines it as "a person's or

group's way of moving into the force field of life. It is our way of finding coherence in and giving meaning to the multiple forces and relations that make up our lives. Faith is a person's way of seeing him- or herself in relation to others against a background of shared meaning and purpose" (Fowler, 4). It functions to help us live in the mystery of life and to serve as a supportive structure when things go awry and we encounter the inevitable losses and challenges that live deals to humankind.

Growing in faith requires self-examination and a readiness for encounter with the faith perspectives of others. Like Rizutto, Fowler claims that faith is largely determined by "how we are welcomed into the world and what kinds of environments we grow in. Faith is interactive and social; it requires community, language, ritual and nurture. Faith is also shaped by initiatives from beyond us and other people, initiatives of spirit or grace" (Fowler, xiii). He cites H. Richard Niebuhr (1957) in talking about the role of our earliest relationship, those who cared for us in our infancy, in relation to the development of our sense of faith. He writes that Niebuhr believes, "Faith grows through our experience of trust and fidelity and of mistrust and betrayal—with those closest to us. He sees faith in the shared visions and values that hold human groups together. And he sees faith, at all these levels, in the search for an overarching, integrating and grounding trust in a center of value and power sufficiently worthy to give our lives unity and meaning" (Fowler, 5). Fowler thinks about faith in terms of relationships and uses "faith" as a verb to describe a way of *being* and *moving* in the world as well as giving language and meaning to that experience. Using Erik Erikson's epigenetic stages as a backdrop, Fowler developed tool and philosophy to assess human growth and development in faith.

Before I describe Fowler's methodology, it is important to look at how Erikson understood adulthood within his model of psychosocial ego development. His model incorporated both biological and social indicators. My study includes women who range in age from 40-65 so according to Erickon's thinking, this age group comprises both "Adulthood" and "Old Age." The psychosocial crisis for adulthood, according to Erikson is "generativity vs. stagnation." By generativity, he means "loving and working adults need to feel concern for, and interest in, the next generation if they are to maintain their continuous identities" (Berzoff, 117). This does not necessarily mean that one needs to be producing or raising biological children. Rather, it speaks to a generalized concern about finding one's place in the life cycle of generations. "Stagnation" implies a certain level of self-absorption or self-indulgence that means

that fails to contribute to others in a significant way and therefore sacrifices his or her place in the cycle of generations. The virtue for this stage is care, meaning " the widening concern for what has been generated by love, necessity, or accident" (Erikson in Berzoff, 118). In what Erikson terms, "Old Age," the psychosocial crisis is "Integrity vs. Despair." Regardless of one's cultural or religious background, this stage necessitates a confrontation with one's mortality as death is an inevitable part of life. Erikson talks about "integrity" as being the opposite of a self-centered kind of love. Rather, it is "an acceptance that this is one's only life. This is the time (and last time) for emotional integration" (Berzoff, 119). Despair connotes a fear of death and sense that time is too short to achieve a level of ego integrity. The virtue that corresponds with this age is "wisdom" which is defined as "detached concern with life itself in the face of death itself" (Berzoff, 120). Wisdom, therefore, speaks to one's ability to find meaning in life and to successfully care for self and others.

Fowler's structural-developmental theory of faith helps us understand how we come to know ourselves and act accordingly. This theory takes seriously previous decisions that shape our character, the stories and images by which we live, the impact of social communities that shape the way we view the world, as well as the predictable crises and challenges of developmental eras described by Erikson (Fowler, 105). The most critical contribution Erikson makes to this theory is the attention to the "functional aspect of faith, the expected existential issues with which it must help people cope at whatever structural stage across the life cycle" (Fowler, 109). There is an interplay between structural and psychosocial stages at the heart of Fowler's theory. Fowler points out that his understanding of "faith stages" do not perfectly correlate with chronological age nor do the stages wholly and consistently describe real, live people with perfect accuracy. Instead, these stages are intended to help describe predictable changes in human thought and adaptation in broad strokes (Fowler, 89). For the purposes of this study, he describes the "optimal parallels" in psychosocial and faith stages as the following (Fowler, 113):

Psychosocial Stage	Fowler's Faith Stage
Middle Adult Era: Generativity vs. Stagnation	Conjunctive Faith
Late Adult Era: Integrity vs. Despair	Universalizing Faith

There is not, however, always correlation in these stages nor is it the goal to help a person rush to the next stage or to evaluate their "achievement" based on a moving to the next stage. Rather it

is one framework that helps us look at where a person is on their journey and how we can understand her better as a result. Next, I will briefly describe his six stages of faith.

I. Pre-Stage 1: Infancy and Undifferentiated Faith

This stage describes the emergence of faith as it relates to the earliest interactions between mother and baby (and even earlier within the womb). The baby cries, and (ideally) the mother responds. The baby is hungry, and the baby is fed. The baby is wet/soiled, and the parent cleans the baby. The baby is totally dependent and undifferentiated with his or her primary caregiver. The holding, rocking, and caretaking of this stage, creates the capacity for loving attachments that will span a lifetime. The quality and consistency of this care provides the foundation for faith. Gradually, as the infant comes to know him or herself as a distinct and separate entity, ideally, infants develop object permanence—that is the ability to retain mental images of missing objects (people and things) along with a sense that we are separate from the others that we love. Despite this trauma, ideally the mother (or lost object) returns and that sense of well-being and centrality is restored. Over time, this contributes to the formation of trust, courage, hope and love even as one necessarily confronts the perceived threats of abandonment, inconsistency, and deprivation. Fowler describes the emergent strength of faith at this stage as

> the fund of basic trust and the relational experience of mutuality with one(s) providing primary love and care. The danger or deficiency at this stage is a failure of mutuality in either of two directions. Either there may emerge an excessive narcissism in which the experience of being "central" continues to dominate and distort mutuality, or experiences of neglect or inconsistencies may lock the infant in patterns of isolation and failed mutuality. (Fowler, 121).

With this stage comes the convergence of thought and language and the opening up of the use of symbols in speech and ritual play.

II. Stage 1: Intuitive-Projective Faith

In this stage, language and play come together to help organize one's experience into "meaning units" (Fowler, 123). It is a period of constantly naming things and discovering their shared meanings with parents. The intuitive-projective child is curious and asks endless questions of "what" and "why" in order to begin to make sense of the world. Fowler explains that this stage is marked by "cognitive egocentrism" whereby the child does not comprehend that there may be various perspectives on any given issue or experience. The child's thinking is fluid and magical. Fowler remarks, "They combine fragments of stories and images given by their cultures into

their own clusters of significant associations dealing with God and the sacred" (Fowler, 128). The emergent strength of this stage is the ability to use imagination and experience the world through images and story. The danger of this stage arise from the possible "possession" of the imagination through violent and destructive imagery and/or the exploitation of one's imagination by reinforcing taboos and doctrinal expectations. The movement out of this stage is marked by more concrete operational thinking whereby the child is increasingly concerned with understanding the difference between what is real and what is not (Fowler, 134).

III. Stage 2: Mythic-Literal Faith

In this stage, capable of inductive and deductive reasoning, the child is interested in testing the world around her and deciphering what is real and what is not. This child can construct a more orderly and dependable world, less influenced by magical and imaginative thinking. There is a greater capacity to identify other perspectives in addition to one's own as well as the ability to narrate one's experience. Fowler finds that these narratives contain meaning, yet the meaning cannot usually be drawn out and applied to a general order of meaning in life (Fowler, 137). Overall, those in Stage 2 construct a world based on "reciprocal fairness and an immanent justice based on reciprocity. The actors in their cosmic stories are anthropomorphic" (Fowler, 149). They can be impacted deeply by symbols and narratives, but may not be able to draw out meaning and apply it to life more generally. Nevertheless, narrative, drama, story, symbol, and myth give greater meaning and coherence to experience. The limitation of this stage is an excessive reliance on reciprocity for creating an ultimate environment. As the person moves out of this stage, he or she must confront contradictions in stories and, therefore, a different level of reflection on their meanings. Literalism breaks down, and some level of disillusionment with former teachers/teaching may set in. There is also the emergence of mutual interpersonal perspective which highlights a need for a more personal relationship with God (Fowler, 150).

IV. Stage 3: Synthetic-Conventional Faith

This stage typically arrives in the midst of adolescence. It reflects a time when a person's world has expanded beyond the family and now references many other spheres of influence as well: teachers, school, work, friends, society, religion, etc. Faith can serve as a coherent orientation amidst this diverse range of involvements. As with puberty, there is a strong emphasis on conformity in this stage. The child is attuned to the expectations and judgments of others but not does yet have a sure enough sense of self to stake out and independent position. Through this

stage, a person begins to form a "personal myth" of his identity and faith. At the same time, there is a danger that the expectations and judgments of others can be so internalized that later autonomy of judgment and action can be jeopardized. A willingness to confront the inherent contradictions within one's tradition often prompts a transition into the next stage. Additionally, leaving home can spur a process of higher level self-examination and a more critical development of one's own values (Fowler, 172-173).

V. Stage 4: Individuative-Reflective Faith

This stage is signaled by an interruption of reliance on external sources of authority. Fowler calls this the emergence of the "executive ego" (Fowler, 179). Critical thinking is now applied to images and symbols that were previously considered sacred in and of themselves. Stage 4 typically takes shape in young adulthood, though it may not truly emerge until the mid-30s or 40s. In this stage, "self" (identity) and "outlook" (world view) are distinct entities. Symbols are translated into a system of conceptual meanings, and the capacity for critical thinking, especially as it relates to reflection on oneself, is enhanced. Fowler claims that this stage necessitates confronting certain unavoidable tensions, i.e. individuality vs. group identity, subjectivity and objectivity, the primacy of self-fulfillment vs. being a service to others, and the struggle between relativity and absolutism. A sense of dissatisfaction with the more "childish" traditions, stories, and symbols one has served may signal a readiness for the next stage. A recognition of life's complexity and a multileveled approach to truth bring one into the fifth stage of faith. (Fowler 182-183).

VI. Stage 5: Conjunctive Faith

Conjunctive faith assumes the organic relatedness of all things and pays attention to the patterns of interrelatedness in things. Part of what gets integrated in this stage is a sense of one's self and the world. In this stage, there is a reunion between symbolic power and conceptual meanings. Fowler describes this "a second naivete" in which there must also be a reclaiming and reworking of one's past (Fowler, 197). This period is about going deeper into the beliefs, symbols and stories which have helped to create one's identity and narrative, and it assumes that one has the capacity to be more reflective. It is uncommon to reach this stage before midlife because is assumes that one has encountered loss, met defeat, and is willing to look at the contradictory and more troubling aspects of one's faith tradition and the world around her. It is a stage focused on a serious pursuit justice and moving from a tribal to more universal perspective on the world.

Fowler calls the strength of this stage "the rise of the ironic imagination—a capacity to see and be in one's group's most powerful meanings, while simultaneously recognizing that they are relative, partial and inevitably distorting apprehensions of transcendent reality. It's danger lies in the direction of a paralyzing passivity or inaction, giving rise to complacency or cynical withdrawal, due to its paradoxical understanding of truth" (Fowler, 198). It is, therefore, to place oneself squarely within the narrative of one's tradition while at the same time expressing a willingness to be self-critical and recognizing the limits of our language, stories, and symbols in describing the Ultimate reality.

VII. Stage 6: Universalizing Faith

Stage five is still a very divided stage as a person is caught between universalizing apprehensions and the need to remain aligned with one's story and group. Stage six marks a move from this divided, or paradoxical, place to a position of total universalism and inclusivity. Fowler remarks that this stage is rare because it describes a position of such radical commitment to justice and love at the expense of oneself and one's identification with particular tradition. This commitment is grounded in an affirmation of an ultimate redemption of the world (i.e. the coming of the Kingdom of God). Stage six describes a person who is more allied with a love and identification with the world than the self, who has had experience in achieving union with God/Being, and is no longer striving to develop or boost the ego, but rather to join the being-ness of the world. (Fowler, 199-204).

I have explored these stages with the hope that they will inform how I analyze the development—both psychological and spiritual—of the participants in my study. I believe that Fowler's greatest contribution as it relates to my work, is his ability to describe the way in which psychological and faith development go hand in hand. He gives language to the development of faith and helps contextualize it within some of the traditional psychological methodologies for understanding growth over the lifecycle.

In considering the contributions of some of the thinkers discussed here and many more not mentioned, I would argue is that while psychology is necessary in the pursuit of healing and wholeness, it is not sufficient. There are spiritual matters than cannot be captured by psychology alone. Nevertheless, one necessarily informs the other, and for that reason, these disciplines must converge in the context of my work as a rabbi and the lives of those I counsel and teach. Pastoral counseling, in my context, aims to address problems in living (including fears, loss,

unresolved issues from childhood, etc.) within the context of Judaism. I expect that some participants will bring issues that *seem* classically psychological, psycho-social, and/or developmental (i.e. relationships with family members, the experience of aging, losing a parent, etc.) while others will bring issues that *seem* purely spiritual (i.e. belief in God, God image, ritual observance, etc.). I see these issues, however, as inextricably connected. Part of the privilege and responsibility of pastoral counseling is the opportunity to listen to my students with both "hats" on. My hope is to create a safe space for a conversation in which they find themselves psychologically and spiritually illuminated. In Dr. Ochs' words the goal is not to heal, but rather "to help the seeker discover—discover, not create—the patterns in their lives" (Ochs and Olitzky, 18).

Counseling as a Learning Experience/Group Process

I believe that the experience of counseling, including the relationship that develops with one's counselor, is, above all, an opportunity for learning and growth. The learning, in this context happens on three planes—at least. First, the rabbi herself is engaged in a process of growth and learning as she teaches and counsels. Second, the participant is learning about herself through the counseling experience (through both cognitive/content and relational/emotional learning). Finally, the participant is learning and growing within the context of the group.

In Judaism, learning and teaching go hand in hand. This means that I am dedicated to learning as I teach. My coursework, reading, and ongoing supervision and therapy are critical to my ability to do this work. Additionally, my commitment to my own spiritual practice (through prayer, ritual, yoga, meditation, Torah study, and *tzedakah*/*gemillut hasadim*) is invaluable to the process of offering counsel and guidance to the participants in the program. As I share what I have learned, I will necessarily be changed by what I teach and what the students give me back in return. In this way, I am both teacher and student. In fact, the greatest teaching I may offer is rooted precisely in the fact that I myself and not done yet. I am a work in process committed to the same process of growth and learning that I am encouraging in those I teach and counsel. I too am still growing in awareness, discovering my truths, asking questions, and developing a more intimate relationship with God. And so, just as I engage in the process of teaching, my students force me to continue to learn. Rabbi Hanina put it aptly in saying, "I have learned much

from my teachers, even more from my colleagues, but I have learned the most from my students" (Talmud: Taanit, 7a).

Estelle Frankel, teacher, psychotherapist, and spiritual guide, understands the process and experience of therapy as one of transformational possibilities. The possibility for transformation lies in the willingness and desire, on the part of both the counselor and the counselee, to grow. In her words,

> A good deal of what goes on in spiritual healing is that our notion of who we think we are begins to expand. In a sense we are given new eyes, the ability to see ourselves from God's perspective, as it were; from the vantage point of the infinite. Though we may be able to hold that expanded vision of ourselves only for brief moments at a time, even so, it can have a profound effect on our identity. Instead of being overly identified with our problems and pathologies, we can also begin to appreciate our perfection and purpose. Instead of feeling isolated and alone in our pain, we can begin to experience ourselves as part of a larger whole in which our individual stories and lives reflect the larger story of which all people are a part (Frankel, 2).

I would echo Frankels's teaching here in that part of what the sacred space and time of therapy provides is an opportunity to develop an observing ego, whereby you can take what is *inside* and bring it *outside* for the purpose of reflection and growth. Just as the Torah is both revealed (*nigleh*) and concealed (*nistar*), so too our psyches. Freud's understanding of the conscious and unconscious is at the heart of this psychological and spiritual learning experience—by bringing what we do not know to the conscious mind, learning from this growing sense of awareness, and moving through life differently as a result.

Part of this learning process in a Jewish context is locating oneself within the context of Jewish myth and metaphor. In this way, we look at Torah and our extensive textual tradition not as mere history and fact, but rather as a series of narratives, symbols, and characters with which we can better see and understand ourselves. In finding ourselves within this greater collective story, we also open ourselves up to a deeper sense that we are not alone in this world, and in many cases, this is the cornerstone of psychological healing and well-being. We come to see that while these are indeed our personal struggles, they are also mirrored in the cosmos and in our sacred inheritance. I would argue that anything we experience in life can be viewed from the perspective of Torah (in its most expansive sense) and this ability opens our lives up to greater meaning and depth. Elie Wiesel once said: "People become the stories they hear and the stories they tell" (Frankel, 3). What happens when we tell our stories and contextualize them in new

stories? What happens when we hear them differently now that we have spoken them out loud to a receptive and compassionate listener? What happens when, in speaking our stories, we find that they have changed?

The exodus from Egypt serves as a core myth for the experience of therapy and growing as Jew and a human being. This journey of birth, redemption, healing, and homecoming is mirrored in our lives just as it is refracted through our daily prayers and more than fifty references in the Torah text. At the heart of this narrative is the birth of a nation and a birthing of the self—one which we are commanded to enact each year at the Passover *seder*. The *Haggadah* states, "in every generation, each individual should feel as though he or she had gone out of Egypt." We all are constantly struggling to move from places of narrowness and constriction (*mitzrayim*) to freedom and expansiveness. Estelle Frankel goes further and says that

> The very formation of the ego and its defenses can be seen as a descent into *mitzrayim* of sorts for our spirit, which is essentially limitless. To some degree, the narrowing of consciousness that accompanies ego development is inevitable and necessary, for in order to function in the world we have to develop a healthy sense of our own autonomy and will. But that very sense of our separateness becomes a *mitzrayim*, which we must transcend in order to embrace the fullness of our true being… In exile we become disconnected from our own true nature and inner being; our outer lives slide out of sync with our inner essence… Deliverance from exile, or redemption, on the other hand, implies a return to one's true self, to one's own inner heart of hearts. (Frankel, 104-105).

All of us emerge from childhood and early adulthood with a certain degree of wounding and alienation whether it was because of primary caretakers who were unequipped to nurture us adequately or because of other circumstances in which we encountered the necessary losses that life inevitably shares with all of us. My hope is that this class and counseling experience will be one small, yet meaningful, experience in helping participants move out of their own personal *mitzrayim* and into a greater sense of freedom, belonging, self-awareness, and connection to themselves and the world around them. As counselor, I will be thinking about peoples' journeys and questions in terms of inner-liberation ("coming out of Egypt") and moments of finding our own truth ("standing before Sinai").

While group process will not be a focal point in this project. I intend to reflect on the group experience as it relates the growth and development of the women I counsel individually. Since this is first and foremost an "educational/class" setting, with the primary objective of

imparting information, it does not fall into the category of a "therapeutic group," "support group," or "psycho-educational group." Nevertheless it *is* a group and this group experience is also part of what I hope will help students grow as psychological, emotional, social, and spiritual beings. So, as I reflect on the women selected for this study, I will also being looking at certain factors that relate to the group: How do these women participate in the formative stages of the group? What happens when there are problems in the group? How do participants fit into the force of "group cohesiveness?" Part of our individual time may also be dedicated to exploring what it is like to be in this group. This is yet another aspect of the learning experience I hope to create for participants.

The Therapeutic Alliance between Counselor and Counselee/Rabbi and Student (Zalman, Dittes)

In *Pirke Avot* 1:6, we read "Find for yourself a teacher (a *rav* or rabbi), acquire for yourself a friend." I want to begin this section by thinking about the qualification for a rabbi who is qualified and trustworthy to counsel. I credit Rabbi Bradley Shavit Artson in helping me arrive at this conceptual version of "rabbi." In my opinion, a rabbi is a person with whom I can share my life and she can illumine it in the light of "torah," broadly construed. I have no expectation that she will be able to answer all my questions; rather, I hope that she is able to help me live my life better along the path of torah by paying attention to my words and allowing me to do the same in a new way. A rabbi is one who knows me well enough *and* is sufficiently grounded in torah to help make that integration happen without simply projecting herself onto me. Being a rabbi means being further down the road in terms of having worked longer at consciously integrating one's life and the *mesorah* (Jewish tradition) and therefore willing and unafraid to bear witness to another's journey and the potential for growth that is contained within it. James Dittes, in his seminal work on Pastoral Counseling, describes the distinctiveness of this endeavor as "providing the spiritual climate that maximizes the opportunity for the parishioner to grow in personhood and in the capacity to cope. The pastoral counselor empowers the *parishioner* to identify the problem and discover resources" (Dittes, 10). In the rabbi's willingness to be an "attentive witness" rather than a "player" in the other's life, the congregant has an opportunity to learn about him or herself in the context of Jewish tradition and reflect on what that means to *her*. My commitment to my congregant is to be wholly committed to her

welfare, growth, and healing. When it comes to "advice," I take my cue from one of the Hasidic masters of 19th century Poland. We all have our own path to God and to the spiritual path. A student of the Seer of Lublin (Yaakov Yitzchak, d. 1815), on of the early Hasidic masters, once said, "Show me one general way to the service of God." His teacher replied, "It is impossible to tell men what way they should take. For one way to serve God is through the teachings, another through prayer, another through fasting, and still another through eating. Everyone should carefully observe what way his heart draws him to, and then choose this way with all his strength" (Buber, 313). In light of this teaching, I see my role as counselor is to utilize the transference and countertransference to allow my student to reflect on her own truth, her feelings, her thoughts, her way of living in the world as a human being and as a Jew, and to encourage a process whereby she makes her own decisions in the context of that process of discernment. I cannot know what the right path will be for anyone, but I am faithful that given the proper support, time, and effort, most people can find their way.

Using these ideas about a rabbi as background, I want to discuss the ways in which transference and counter transference play a role in the therapeutic alliance. *Transference* describes the feelings we transfer onto a person based on an earlier relationship, unconsciously putting the unresolved issues of a prior relationship onto a new one. According to Freud, transference can be both positive (in which the congregants feelings for the rabbi are primarily affection and trust) and negative (feelings of hostility and suspicion). Freud considered positive transference unobjectionable in that it enables the work of therapy to get done by helping both parties move through the arduous journey. Negative transference, on the other hand, must be interpreted or the work will become impossible (Kahn, 184-185). Both kinds of transference, however, are allies to the process of self-discovery within a therapeutic alliance, for they assist in making known to the congregant and the counselor what is otherwise unconscious. *Counter-transference* describes the process whereby the rabbi/therapist transfers unconscious feelings onto the client based on what the client evokes for the rabbi/therapist as well as the rabbi/ therapist's own psychodynamic history. Like transference, these thoughts, feelings, and perceptions that the rabbi has for her congregant are also indispensable for the work at hand. Even empathy, critical to work of counseling, begins with counter transference (Kahn, 198). As human beings, we cannot help bringing our buried history of wishes, fears, and traumas/losses to

each of our interpersonal encounters. This happens unconsciously and inevitably impacts our perceptions of and reactions to our relationships and our lives.

Dr. Gary Ahlskog writes about transference and counter transference as it relates specifically to pastoral counseling. He speaks of transference as the "client's way of showing you what cannot be said directly." This shorthand "involves a complex relationship between fantasy and reality, conscious and unconscious dynamics pertinent to psychoanalysis but not pastoral counseling" (Ahlskog, 34) He suggests that there are two aspects of transference that are relevant to this kind of work. First, each congregant inevitably comes with unfinished business in resolving oedipal or superego conflicts and seeking solutions to establishing a gratifying adult life transferred from many other contexts. This unfinished business can be responded to in the context of this kind of counseling work. Second, Ahlskog claims that congregants will often show you "the effort they are making *not* to show the most troubling unfinished business." In this case, the congregant is motivated not to face certain feelings (usually ones that are unpleasant, uncomfortable, disappointing, etc.), often because is its assumed that as an authority, the congregant risk judgment. Or, out of the congregant's need to idealize you, they resist sharing unfinished business with the hope that you will look up on him/her favorably. Obviously, there are many other possible driving forces at play here. The important point is for the rabbi to be attentive to what the congregant is showing or making an effort not to show. Dr. Ahlskog reasons that "no matter what presenting problem may be on a client's mind, the most valuable, relevant, reliable information is conveyed to you via the client's way of 'being' in the room; and greater gain is expected if you speak to this way of being than any other topic. Clients will show what they may not be able to tell. What they show is your most important clue to understanding where they need most help" (Ahlskog, 34). Counter transference, in his opinion, "properly refers to what you unwittingly show the client from your own interior, unrelated to the client's concerns… It consists of acting on your feelings—showing them to the client via word or deed—rather than containing them silently. Such an enactment, based on your own feelings, interferes with the client's journey" (Ahlskog, 36-37). Ahlskog cautions clergy to be aware of their own anxiety as it relates to the people whom they counsel, because if that anxiety remains unexplored it threatens the clergy's ability to "hold" upsetting material and feelings that the congregant sets out and to face it head on and/or to unconsciously become blind the upsetting feelings/material which must be dealt with if the issues are to find

any kind of resolution (Ahlskog, 37). When the rabbi is aware of her own psychic discomfort, she is less likely to over-talk, dismiss, or avoid the congregants feelings and/or issues which are important to the work at hand.

Another part of this work that will be important to consider are boundaries in dual relationships. For example, some of my students are my children's pre-school teachers. Others sit on the board of the synagogue (therefore my husband's employers) or are fellow pre-school parents. For each individual in this study, I may represent different roles at different moment: rabbi, rabbi's wife, friend, and peer, etc. Unlike my work as a pastoral counselor/therapist in which I counseled clients whom I never saw outside of my office, my students see me on carpool line, at the gym, at the grocery store, mowing the lawn, and in the context of my classroom and office. This reality has the potential to complicate the relationship, but also to deepen it if, I am sensitive to the boundary issues that may arise. Without question, issues around transference and counter transference are relevant here because the rabbi's boundaries and the clarity of role is of tantamount importance. In particular, awareness on the part of the rabbi of the dual-ness in all settings can facilitate a safety for the congregant. Confidentiality is another important piece of helping to set up boundaries around what can become un-boundaried relationships. In will be explicit from the outset of the class and remind the students regularly that the class is a closed group. What is said in the group must stay in the group. Even more importantly, I will clearly articulate and respect the confidentiality of the students in the counseling setting. This is particularly critical as it relates to my relationship with my husband (the rabbi's primary rabbi and synagogue leader). The only case in which I would consult with Eric would be with the express permission of my student. Along these lines, to the best of my ability, I limit all formal counseling to the rabbi's office. While it feels convenient and natural for some students to want to "talk" over lunch or on the carpool line, or at the gym, I gently and clearly try to communicate that our work will best be done in the context of the synagogue office. I suspect that there will be many ways in which I will be called upon to set up boundaries to help my students (and myself) work and live within healthy, effective, and ethical relationships so that the work of pastoral counseling can most effectively be accomplished.

D.W. Winnicott (1896-1971) is considered one of the fathers of "Object Relations Theory." Among his many contributions to psychoanalysis, he believed that all human beings have needs that must be met by a person. This necessitates a relationship. The primary human

needs include being seen, valued as an individual, accepted as whole with both one's "good" and "bad" qualities, held tight/let go, cared for, protected, and loved. He focused on the need for, interplay, and tension between attachment and separateness. One of the theories that emerged from this premise is that of the "Primary Maternal preoccupation" which is described as the essential need to be one with who can allow herself to become completely lost in her baby. As separateness grows, the mother must create a "holding environment" to allow baby to grow protected but not overly limited. Over time, young children create transitional objects that offer the ways to hold on to internal representations of others (including the mother) when not able to do so on their own. Paradoxically, aloneness and independence can only be developed in the presence of the other, without whom, it is too painful. Ideally, the result of this development is the

'True Self"-- the repository of individuality, uniqueness, difference, or core of the personality which ought to be nurtured so that separate individuality can emerge. The sense of vibrancy and aliveness in a human being makes is revealed to the extent to which the parent (mother) nurtures the child and creates a safe and steady foundation from which to grow. (Berzoff, 136-140). This model is of psychological development is critical to the work of developing a healthy alliance between rabbi and congregant, for this is above all, a relationship in which needs are these most basic needs are expressed and responded to. I see my role in this relationship to be a "good mother" and to work to create a safe "holding environment" for my congregant's needs and questions.

Heinz Kohut (1913-1981) talked about these ideas in terms of "Selfobject Transference." This theory is based on the idea that in a counseling relationship, the client unconsciously hopes that she will find the parent for whom she has been hoping and waiting. According to Kohut's idea of the "selfobject," every baby/child longs to find that she is welcome and loveable (this is the foundation for a child's self-esteem). Every child also longs to feel held by a calm, confident and competent parent in order to help her face an overwhelming world and overwhelming feelings. Finally, every child wants to know that she is like others and acceptable in the world. She comes to know this in the ways that she identifies herself with her parents. Answers to these fundamental questions set the stage for the psychological milestones of adolescence and adulthood. Kohut talked about transference in the context of hoping for something better that what one received in these most fundamental areas. Selfobject transference works when the

therapist is empathically tuned to the client. This transference assists with the healing in allowing the therapist opportunities to recognize and empathize with the client's ancient longing for acceptance, nurturance, support, and validation (Kahn, 194-196). This too, is an important part of what happens psychodynamically with a congregant and rabbi in a counseling context. Part of the job of the rabbi in creating this alliance lies in sending the message (over time and through explicit and implicit care) that the congregant is loveable, secure, and acceptable not only in the eyes of the rabbi, but in the eyes of God and Jewish tradition.

While there is often a presenting issue or problem at hand, pastoral counseling is about soul-searching. The goal creating a safe space to explore, expand, and heal one's psycho-spiritual landscape happens most exquisitely and powerful in the context of a relationship. The relationship or alliance that forms between the rabbi and her student, with all its complexities and nuances, *is* the vehicle that enables the process to flower and ultimately, move forward. Awareness of transference and counter transference, as well as personal anxiety, on the part of the rabbi is critical to the healthy and productive nature of the relationship. In the special case of counseling, performed by clergy, boundaries become even more important in setting up a secure space in which people can share explore their lives and souls. The beauty and power of pastoral counseling lies in the counselor's willingness to be an attentive witness to another's life— to graciously enter another person's life with benevolent curiosity and offer one's pure attention, empathy, concern, and respect without regard to yourself as a player in their life. It is about offering a sense of total regard, not unlike what God, in God's *hesed* (grace) offers us. As Dittes remarks, "What the pastoral counselor provides is not a clever diagnosis, nor an astute remedy, nor a surfeit of love, but a constancy of attention, enabled by a disciplined abstinence from the vagaries of desire" (Dittes, 15). And it is precisely this "constancy of attention" to the meaning that lays beyond the details one's life that has the potential to actually create change, bring healing, and engender faith and hope.

Chapter Three

In May, 2008, I offered an information session about the class for interested participants (all are members in good standing). I was overwhelmed and overjoyed by the amount of interest. I had anticipated running the course with 8-15 women. Over thirty women expressed serious interest, and twenty-three committed to the class. This course of study has five central components.

I. Core Class: This class will meet to study with me for 1 hour and 25 minutes once a week for 21 sessions each year (two year program). I am using the curriculum masterfully designed by Dr. Lisa Grant in partnership with the Melton Research Center for Jewish Education of the Jewish Theological Seminary for the Women's League for Conservative Judaism as the primary guide for this component of the program. (Please see goals, outcomes, and a calendar of study in the pages that follow).

II. Hebrew: *Kitah Aleph* (Level I), *Kitah Bet*(Level II), and *Kitah Gimel* (Level III) classes will be taught by women lay leaders in our who have both the Judaic knowledge and pedagogic skill necessary to achieve the following goals. This class will take place after my "Core class" in 30 minute sessions. The classes will also rely on *chevruta* work (working in learning pairs) both inside and outside of class.

i. *Kitah Alef:*

- Year One: Students will learn/re-learn the *Alef-Bet* and practice basic Hebrew reading skills.

- Year Two: Students will master a list of central Hebrew prayers and gain proficiency in reading Hebrew.

ii. Kitah Bet:

- Year One: Students will focus on Hebrew fluency using the *siddur* (prayer book) as the primary text.

- Year Two: Students will learn to chant Torah.

iii. Kitah Gimel:

- Year One: Students will learn to chant Torah.

- Year Two: Students will learn to chant *Haftarah* and/or develop skills in Hebrew grammar and translation.

III. "Individual Spiritual Guidance": Every participant will commit to meeting with me individually, three times each year, for 45 minutes. I expect that students will use this time for pastoral counseling in different ways. I have expressed my openness to students to use this time in a way that best meets their spiritual, emotional, and educational needs, i.e. expanding upon what we have been learning in class, integrating what we are learning in class and what is happening in their homes/personal praxis, exploring their relationship with/understanding of God, exploring their family relationships as it relates to their spiritual growth, discussing current life issues of spiritual import, exploring their spiritual/Jewish narrative, working through challenges/obstacles to deeper connection to Judaism and God, writing their own personal theology, etc. Students will determine the agenda, though I may offer questions for reflection if they aren't sure "where" to begin.

IV. Co-curricular activities: There will be a variety of social and social justice oriented activities over the course of the two years that aim to involve participants and their families as well as expand the experience of the class beyond our classroom. These activities will include a number of small group social action projects, a family Shabbat dinner, a family experience in the *sukkah*, a Women's *Seder*, etc.

V. "Regular" Attendance at Prayer Services (Shabbat & Holidays): Though I will not be

taking attendance, there is an expectation that participants will attend prayer services (more) regularly.

I asked that all participants sign the following contract before beginning the class, sanctifying their commitment to the course expectations.

The goals of the approach for this class are based on the curriculum prepared by Dr. Lisa D. Grant for the Adult Bat Mitzvah program she developed (2000).

The goals are:

a. To build a foundation in Judaism that will lead to excitement about lifelong adult Jewish learning.

b. To gain familiarity and comfort with Jewish liturgy, including Shabbat, festival and daily services.

c. To create a community of learners that will serve as a role model for adult learning and engagement throughout the synagogue community.

d. To become more curious and reflective about one's own theology and how one's life might fit into traditional Jewish narratives and philosophy.

e. To find integration between one's emotional and psychological development and one's religious growth.

f. To experience the counseling time/space and relationship with the rabbi as a safe "holding environment" for exploring questions of meaning and purpose in a religious context.

The Core class will explore the following topics over two years (Grant, 2000):

Lessons for Year One- Living in Jewish Time

Introductory Sessions:

- Getting to Know You

- Creating a Holy Learning Space
- Living in Jewish Time

Daily Cycles:

- The Building Blocks of Jewish Prayer
- The Structure of Jewish Prayer
- An In-Depth Exploration of the Daily *Amidah*
- Introduction to *Mitzvot* as a System for Jewish Living
- *Tzedakah*

[Selection and execution of a group *mitzvah* project]

- Keeping Kosher
- *Birkat HaMazon*
- Parents' Responsibilities to Children

Weekly Cycles:

- Shabbat
- Building Skills for Shabbat Table Rituals

[Family Shabbat Dinner at the synagogue]

Monthly Cycles:

- The Wonders of Creation
- *Rosh Hodesh* – Monthly Renewal
- *Mikveh* and Finding holiness in Intimate Relations

Yearly Cycles/Holidays:

- The High Holidays as Life Cycle Events
- The Three Pilgrimage Festivals-Symbols & Celebrations
- Rounding Out the Holiday Cycle

- *Siyyum* (Based on a cooperative learning project in which small groups of two or three study a holiday of their choosing independently which will be presented at this event.)

Lessons for Year Two-The Three Pillars of Judaism: God, Torah and Israel

God:

- What Do I Believe?
- Finding God in the Everyday
- Encountering God Through Text
- Encountering God in Prayer
- *Sukkot:* Welcoming Guests, Past and Present

Torah:

- Introduction to Conservative Judaism
- Building Blocks of Jewish Law: Rabbinic Views on Women
- *Tallit* and *T'fillin:* Egalitarianism and Jewish Tradition
- *Tzitzit* Tying Workshop
- The Torah Service
- Making *Midrash*: Explicating Biblical Narrative

[Co-curricular workshop: Leading your *Pesah Seder* with Rabbi Eric Solomon]

Israel: Land and People

- Israel Connections Through Holidays and *T'fillah*
- Israel Through Literary Representations
- American Jews and Israel: Leaps of Faith & Other Journeys
- American Jewish Change-Makers
- Women in the Synagogue

- Religious Pluralism: Finding a Common Language Among Difference
- God Talk
- Where We Started/Where We're going
- *Siyyum*: Demonstration of Mastery (Based on a cooperative learning project in which small groups of two or three study a one or two of the matriarchs and offer a *d'var torah* based on their learning.)

CULMINATING CEREMONY OF ADULT BAT MITZVAH, June 12, 2010

I will be using a variety of tools that will serve as the basis for my analysis and evaluation of the course's impact. First, I will rely on my reflections of actual interactions both in the class setting and individual spiritual guidance sessions. To this end, all classes and individual sessions will be recorded for the purposes of review and reflection. I will write up "verbatims" along with the necessary analysis of various parts of the class and individual sessions with the help of advisors and supervision. Verbatims will include portions of transcribed material from our counseling sessions as well as my analysis of the clinical and religious issues that are raised for both the student and myself as the rabbi. I have contracted the supervisory services of the Rev. Kelli Walker Jones, who has spent years advising clergy and supervising their pastoral work. We have agreed to meet for approximately two hours a month for supervision in which she will advise me both on my students and my own ministry. This reflective experience will also contribute to my ability to evaluate my work.

Second, over the course of the two years of study, I will ask participants to do some writing, including reflection pieces, i.e. essays, presentations, questions in individual spiritual guidance. I will use these writing samples as evidence for my observation and analysis. (See my opening questionnaire as an example.)

Finally, I will be looking for growth in the following areas, in order to evaluate the effects of my ministry. These outcomes include:

1) Women will become more vocal in their group participation and find greater ease in talking about God, Jewish concepts, and their own spiritual journeys. They will begin to find themselves ever more a part of the chain of tradition, taking ownership of their relationship to God, Torah, and the Jewish people,

and seeing their lives through the lens of Torah (Jewish narratives, symbols, language, ritual, etc.)

2) Women will gain the necessary skills to participate and lead Jewish prayer and ritual. This will, of course, happen at varying levels of proficiency for different women based on their past educational experiences and current dedication to their studies.

3) Women will take on the learning with seriousness as well as engaging actively in the reflective part of the program through writing and individual spiritual guidance. I am looking to see women develop an "observing ego" when it comes to their religious lives.

4) Women will develop a sense of community with one another as evidenced by new friendships, study partnerships, collaborative volunteer work in the synagogue, and a growing desire to lead and impact change in the synagogue at large.

5) Women will find the courage and space to ask difficult questions, struggle with the texts and their faith, and ultimately find some answers that harmonize their understanding of Torah and the *torah* of their lives.

Ultimately, I will refer back to the "Goals" and "Outcomes" outlined above in my assessment of my ministry and the impact of my work on those I teach and counsel.

Questionnaire:

Opening Assessment Questionnaire
October 6, 2008

1) What motivated you to take this class?

2) What do you hope to learn about Judaism? About yourself?

3) If you were to draw a timeline of your life, how would you describe the place where you stand right now?

4) What spiritual questions and opportunities do you see for yourself, as a Jew (on your way to becoming a Jew), at this moment in your life?

5) How has being a woman shaped your Jewish journey?

6) What are your hopes for your relationship with me, as the rabbi?

7) How would you describe your relationship with/understanding of God? What are the questions you have? What obstacles get in the way of deepening that relationship/understanding?

8) How would you like your life to feel/look differently based on this process of learning and exploration?

9) How do you think this process of learning and exploration will affect those people closest to you in your life?

Chapter Four

In this chapter, I will offer a brief introduction to each of the eight women who are the focus of this project. Additionally, I will describe the outcomes assessed according to the methods I specified in chapter three, namely: writing samples ("Reflection pieces"), assessment questionnaires, class presentations, and transcriptions from counseling sessions. I will describe what I observed from my students' learning process as well as my own experience of executing this project. I will highlight themes that emerged from the counseling sessions as well as notice threads of connection between them. While I will not provide a detailed analysis of each woman's experience in this course, all the assessment materials I collected can be found in the appendix of this paper for the purposes of further study and analysis. Anything I comment on or quote in this chapter is taken from those materials.

I. Introduction of Women

a. Dina

Dina, 48, was raised in Greensboro, North Carolina with five siblings. Her mother died when she was 47 (cancer) and she has also lost two siblings to cancer. Dina is an exuberant, open, charismatic, and devoted person. She married her husband soon after she completed her college degree at North Carolina State University. He is thirteen years older than she is and they are raising five children together (ages 21, 19, twins age 11, and 7). Dina is the primary earner in her family and works in the pharmaceutical business. She travels almost every week around the country and is very confident and independent. Her husband is supportive, but respecting each other's independent lives is critically important to them both. Though Dina was raised in a Conservative synagogue and family who deeply identified with being Jewish, her Jewish identity was put on hold during her adult years and the first 19 years of raising her children. When her oldest son was arrested at college for using drugs three years ago and suspended for the year, Judaism and the synagogue became her refuge. Though her oldest son is doing well and is enrolled again at the university, her second oldest son got into major legal trouble nearly two years ago after driving drunk and causing over $60,000 damage in local neighborhoods. He too is recovering and managed to graduate high school this spring.

The difficulty and stress caused by the trouble with her second son only cemented her commitment to deepening her own spiritual life and creating a different sort of life/system of values for her younger three children. Over the past two years, Dina has become a regular at Shabbat services and hasn't missed more than three weeks in two years. She has also taken on the leadership for our Sisterhood's Judaica Shop and has most recently signed on as secretary on the synagogue's executive board. Her younger children practically live at the synagogue and her twins spent every Shabbat afternoon with my family. Dina is also acutely aware of her mortality having lost her mother at such a young age (one year younger than she currently is). All of these factors have spurred her interest in and commitment to growing as Jew.

b. Pam

Pam, 65, was raised in New Jersey. While I do not know much of her early upbringing, I know that she was very close to her mother, over the years, and that she was raised with a sister (sick with cancer) and a brother. Pam had two sons with her husband whom she married at an early age. When the children were teenagers, her husband had an affair and divorced her. A number of years later, she re-married. When one of her sons had a child and moved to Raleigh to raise his family, Pam decided to follow with her new husband. Her husband had struggled with clinical depression from time to time, but was stable before and during the move. After the move, he fell into a deep depression and despite hospitalization and ongoing care, he committed suicide by hanging himself after twenty-two years of marriage. Her rabbis and synagogue in New Jersey and later, in Raleigh, were a great source of support for her through both the divorce and the suicide. A couple of years later, Pam met a man in Raleigh. They fell in love and started a life together. Within two years, he two committed suicide. Pam has felt like a "marked woman," walking around with a "scarlet letter." She feels a tremendous amount of guilt, especially with regard to her last husband's suicide (which occurred six years ago). Despite her grief and guilt, Pam fell into a job teaching in the pre-school at Beth Meyer Synagogue soon after she moved to Raleigh and has worked here ever since. She is one of the most gifted pre-school teachers I have ever seen and she won this year's "Classroom of the Year" in Raleigh for the "early childhood division." She was also my son's pre-school

teacher this year and was my daughter's teacher two years ago. She cares for all the congregation's children every Shabbat morning. Pam has also recently begun dating a special man and is struggling with how to let go of the past and let herself love again. Pam has tremendous resilience and an obvious fragility as well.

c. Sharon

Sharon, 53, was raised, along with two sisters, in Ohio by parents who were German immigrants. Her parents escaped the war and converted to Christianity in an effort to avoid the death camps and make a safe life for themselves and their children in America. Sharon was raised as a Methodist and didn't know of her parents' Jewish roots until she was a teenager. Sharon's discovery of her parents' history and the war played a large role in Sharon's identity Jewish, and otherwise. She attended College and married soon after. Together with her husband, who is a physician and the State Health Controller for North Carolina, they raised three children, ages 20, 22, and 24. Sharon has a degree in clinical social work and has worked for many years as a therapist in social service agencies. She has recently taken on the chair position, leading our congregation's social action committee. Sharon now has an "empty nest" and is deeply involved in thinking about and crafting this next part of her life's journey. She is in a very open space, curious about what the future holds and eager to make Judaism an integral part of that picture.

d. Sarah

Sarah, 53, has been a member of Beth Meyer Synagogue for over twenty years. But, she grew up in Michigan with parents who were raised Orthodox, but became secular/cultural Jews as adults. She was exposed to more ritually observant life through her extended family in New York and Israel where she would visit regularly as she grew up. Sarah met her husband in Washington D.C. after college and they married and moved to Raleigh soon after. Her husband's mother, *z''l* (now deceased) is a survivor of the Holocaust. She was rescued on the Kinderstransport and raised in a Catholic convent by nuns. Sarah became very close to her mother-in-law over the years and her passing made a tremendous impact on Sarah. Sarah and her husband have two adult children. Their younger son was diagnosed at the age of seven with Wilm's tumor (cancer). He received

chemotherapy and radiation and has been in remission for over a decade. Additionally, Sarah's husband has severe muscular sclerosis, though he continues to be a very happy and active person, despite his physical limitations. Sarah was trained as an environmental toxicologist and worked for the EPA for many years. She now does consulting and lobbying in the field of public health. She is active in politics and is proud to be a Republican in a fairly liberal, progressive community. Though there has been much suffering in Sarah's life between her husband's ongoing illness and her son's childhood cancer (and there may well be many, many other wounds of which I am not aware), Sarah is extremely defended and it was been hard work finding an opening in our individual time together. Her defensiveness in class is even more palpable.

e. Toni

I first met Toni, 64, in a support group that I led through Jewish Family Services two years ago. The group I facilitated was for people moving through difficult times, primarily those going through intense illness and those who were caregivers for sick loved ones. At the time, Toni was going through intensive chemotherapy for her third bout with breast cancer. After letting her follow-up care of mammograms lapse for many years, she was diagnosed in 2006 with advanced breast cancer. Remarkably, she has "beat" the cancer again and is feeling well. Toni was raised on a farm in rural Virginia by her father, who was deaf and escaped Europe just before the war, and her mother, who was from New York City. While both of her parents were Jewish, she received most of her Jewish education, both formal and informal, from her beloved aunt who lived nearby. She also attended the local (and only) Orthodox synagogue in the closest town. As an only child, Toni was often lonely and felt quite alienated from her peers and the larger non-Jewish community. She went on to college and eventually began a career in public policy and work in the non-profit world. She also married a Jewish man, though they never had any children. Toni's husband's job brought them to Raleigh almost twenty years ago. Toni is passionate about social justice and was recently an official delegate for the state of North Carolina in the Democratic primary and later in the Electoral College. Toni is kind-hearted, sensitive, and earnest. She is acutely aware of her mortality and is

committed to making meaning of the time she has remaining on earth, despite her intense fragility.

f. Rachel

Rachel, 59, grew up in a Jewish family in Long Island, New York where she went on to raise her own family with her husband of forty years. She has two adult children and has re-located to Raleigh in the last couple of years in order to be closer to her adult daughter and her grandchildren. Rachel grew up with what she described as a loving, father who was somewhat helpless and passive in their family as well as a cold, harsh, and distant mother who wielded all the power in their home and favored her brother. Rachel said she was taught at an early age to be quiet and compliant. There was a tremendous amount of anxiety in the home and she is still working to quiet that internalized anxiety within herself. She married a very supportive and gentle man, much like her father. Five years ago, she was diagnosed with breast cancer. She was treated with a lumpectomy and radiation. While the oncologist recommended chemotherapy to be more certain that she would not have recurrence of the cancer later on, Rachel felt that the experience of going through chemotherapy would be more than she wanted to endure. This was disappointing to her adult daughter, but she accepted her mother's decision. Mid-way through this year, Rachel had a scare with an inconclusive mammogram. After more x-rays and a biopsy, she was given a clean bill of health. Rachel enjoys working as an assistant in a law office. After raising two children and being marginally affiliated with the Jewish community through her adult life, this class marks her first serious and ongoing study of Judaism. It has also been a way for her to develop community and make new friends. Rachel is very open and eager to deepen her spiritual life and make meaning of the years she has remaining.

g. Cheryl

Cheryl, 36, is a mother of two (son, age 9 and daughter, age 6). She is married to her high-school sweetheart and they have lived in Raleigh for over ten years. Cheryl grew up in Savannah, Georgia and was the youngest of four children. Her home was conservative and the family was active in the Methodist church, though her parents were both raised as

Southern Baptists. In high school, she was sent to a special state school for students who excelled in science and math in North Carolina. There she met her husband and her Jewish journey formally began. It was very important to Cheryl not to convert for her husband's parents' sake. After agreeing to make a Jewish home and to raise their future children as Jews, Cheryl's husband was not insistent upon her conversion. They were married by a rabbi in Austin, Texas despite the fact that she was still a believing, if not practicing, Christian. Cheryl pursued her B.A. and received a Master's degree in science. As they went on to have children, Cheryl's involvement in the synagogue and Jewish community at large took off. Still, she felt no immediate need to convert. Additionally, she felt strongly that if she converted, her mother, with whom she was very close, would experience her conversion as a personal and painful rejection. In time, however, Cheryl began leading various committees at the synagogue and was growing increasingly interested in a deeper Jewish life. It wasn't until the death of her mother, however, that she decided she was ready to formally convert, which she did under the leadership of my husband in 2006. She has continued to serve on the executive board of the pre-school, the religious school, the "death and dying committee" (person who receives the first calls when someone in the community dies and coordinates ritual washing and other rituals, as well as coordinating *shiva* and mourning rituals), and she recently became the synagogue's "ritual committee." By the end of this year, she became an expert Torah chanter and she has signed up to chant a large section of Torah one Shabbat a month for a year. Cheryl has a harsh superego and can be bothersome to others in the class with her need for validation that often comes off as being haughty, but she means well and ultimately yearns to be respected and accepted in the eyes of others. She is struggling with what it means to be Jewish, a mother, a wife, a leader, and an adult daughter who has lost her mother.

h. Leanna

Leanna, age 50, grew up as a Jew in the south. Her home was filled with Jewish culture, but she had no serious religious education and no regular practice of Jewish ritual and observance. She left her home to go to college with a fragile Jewish identity and a lot of ambivalence about Judaism. She went on to meet her husband in college (who is not

Jewish) and received a master's degree in social work. Together, they have three daughters, ages 18, 20, and 22. Leanna has done different jobs over the years, but took many years away from her professional life to raise her daughters. With her last daughter now leaving the house for college, she is embarking upon a new business in "Geriatric Care Management." She lost her father in recent years and is very involved in caring for her mother. Leanna truly sees herself as being in the middle passage of her life. She is seeking spirituality and meaning and a new connection to Jewish life on adult terms. In many ways, her return to Beth Meyer synagogue and her involvement in this course signals both a return to and a beginning of her identification and involvement with Jewish life and community. Leanna has many, many questions about Judaism and more generally, about her identity that is undergoing tectonic shifts personally, professionally, and religiously. She is defended in certain respects and extremely self-conscious about her lack of Jewish knowledge but she is struggling to open herself up and that push-pull tension is acutely felt in class and in our individual sessions.

II. General Observations on the Learning Process

In looking back at the various assessment tools I collected over the course of the first year of this program (See Appendix), I found that many of the goals were met and/or addressed to varying extents by all of the participants. As you will see in the section labeled "III. Themes," below, the members of the class were eager to learn and pursue a path of adult Jewish learning. At our last class, which took place just before Passover (2009), I invited each of the women to bring in an item that represented or symbolized their sense of "freedom" for this year. Together, we created what I termed, "a Freedom Plate." Interestingly, over half of the women put their course binder, *siddur* (prayer book), or *Tanakh* (Bible) on the plate. The sense was that this class, along with the counseling component, offered women the *freedom* to feed their own souls by filling their cups with learning, prayer, reflection, community, and new skills. For women who are so often caregivers, this was a chance for them to set aside time for their own nourishment and focus their energies on their own journeys in a way that felt meaningful, rather than indulgent. The members of the class gained familiarity with the basic Jewish liturgy for Shabbat and festivals. In fact, beginning each class with a couple minutes of silence and

blessing and ending each class with *Kaddish D'rabbanan* was perhaps the most consistently moving part of the class. Many commented on how those first few moments of silence were the first deep breaths they had taken all day. I modeled, and we practiced, how to create a *kavanah* (intention) for learning and prayer. Women in the class have written articles in the monthly newsletter about their social action initiatives, and several women have already become regular and accomplished Torah readers on Shabbat mornings. The word has also gotten out about our group and the excitement has spread. I already have a group of people interested in the next two-year cohort. In this way, these women have most certainly served as role models for adult learning and engagement in the life of the synagogue. Those women with young children at home have spoken a lot about what it means for them to model for their families being life-long learners and to embodying the idea that Jewish learning doesn't end when one becomes a Bar/Bat Mitzvah at the age of thirteen. Women have developed a sense of community with one another by setting up at their own initiative *hevrutot* (learning partners) that met to study over the summer, a summer *Rosh Hodesh* pottery painting event, and many unexpected friendships. One woman even said to me that her biggest fear in joining the group was being a classmate of one of the other women who was her children's pre-school teacher. In the end, she said, it was the greatest experience of the class, explaining that she always thought she knew that teacher, and it turns out, she really never knew her at all. It took a full year for the group to gel and I am so glad that we have another year to grow more connected to one another. In this coming year, I will devote more attention to addressing group dynamics.

The other goals I had for the group (elucidated in Chapter Three) included becoming more curious and reflective about one's theology, finding integration between one's emotional/psychological/religious growth, and using the counseling experience as a safe space for exploring questions of meaning—both explicitly and implicitly spiritual. In this area, I sensed the greatest growth. Women were bold in asking the big questions: "Why is there evil?" "Why do bad things happen to good people?" "What have my illness/losses meant in the narrative of my life?" "What will be the spiritual legacy I leave my children?" "How do I address the emptiness I feel here and now?" "What does it mean to me to be Jewish?" "What does Judaism have to teach me about my closest relationships?" "How do I grow spiritually independent of my family?" "What do I really believe/not believe about God?" These are just some of the many questions of deep spiritual and existential import that emerged from our class

time and counseling sessions together. These women, often overwhelmed or wary at the beginning, found themselves engaging their theology in news ways by virtue of the individual attention provided in our private sessions in which I simply provided a safe and open space for this kind of reflection. Sessions addressed emotional, psychological, religious, and often times physical growth and change. I made an attempt to help bring feelings into conversations around God imagery, and psychological insights into the physical changes in these women's lives as a way of helping that integration along. Finally, I found that the counseling sessions allowed the women to really develop a personal relationship with me, and in doing so, the learning and engagement with the work also deepened.

While I have chosen to feature just eight women from the class, each of the twenty-two women brought deeply interesting issues. Some of the issues that figured prominently into my counseling with the other women (not included in this study) were:

- One woman's dissatisfaction with her job after nearly twenty years and visioning how she will go forward and perhaps re-imagine her next steps.
- Dealing with the marriages of one woman's two sons to non-Jewish spouses.
- For two women in the process of converting after over ten years of living as Jews and raising Jewish children, this counseling experience was a space to make peace with their decisions and flesh out their remaining questions.
- Thinking about how to honor one's aging parents and to mourn the loss of a father-in-law who died in the midst of the class. Another woman lost her mother and still another a mother-in-law who was a matriarch in their family and in the life of our congregation.
- Dealing with a young son's Tourette's Syndrome.
- Dealing with the recently diagnosed cancer and imminent death of an estranged parent.
- Dealing with the disappointment of not getting a job promotion and the issues from childhood that are still fresh in terms of self-esteem and self-worth.
- Dealing with a physically and emotionally abusive husband after over thirty years of marriage.

I am quite certain that I would not have known about many of these central issues in their lives if I only saw the participants in the class context. I was amazed and moved by the kinds of issues that emerged and my students' willingness to share so openly with me. I made it clear that it was up to them to set the agenda and women were eager to fill up the space with their reflections,

questions, narratives and musings. Some women came in with specific things they wanted to discuss; others simply arrived, sat on the couch, and opened themselves up to the surprise of what was on their hearts and minds at that particular moment.

I was very interested in how the students would manage boundaries regarding confidentiality, seeing me in a rabbinic context along with so many other contexts (i.e. on the pre-school carpool line, at the gym, in the grocery store, at prayer services), and being the wife of the synagogue's "official" rabbi. To my great surprise, there was little concern about confidentiality. At times, a couple of women asked me in a counseling session if I knew about a particular situation assuming my husband had previously shared it with me. In most cases, I did not know what they were about to share with me, and even if I did, I used it as an opportunity to reinforce the safety of their relationships with Eric and with me as individual rabbis and asked them to explain the situation to me from the beginning. I was explicit about the fact that we don't talk with each other about matters shared in counseling and if we deemed it important to consult each other, we would only do so with their expressed permission. I found it critical that we met for all counseling sessions in the "rabbinic office" at the synagogue. While some women suggested that we "do it" while going for a run or on a play date, I explained the importance of us setting aside "sacred" time to do the work of spiritual direction in an appropriate context. I believe that my insistence on such boundaries made a difference in the counseling and the relationship that developed between my students and I. Because so few of the women had come to Eric for any real counseling needs, these sessions were most often their first time in the rabbis' office. As a result, few had the preconceived notion that this was "Eric's" office alone. Therefore, the concerns I had about what that space would feel like for us to share (from our congregants' perspective) turned out to be unfounded. I was also explicit, especially concerning the women with whom I have multiple relationships, that the covenant we make when they walk through the door was to use the time to address their own personal and spiritual concerns. It was to be *their* time and I assured them that we could make other time to discuss my children, or other such matters. I also wanted to give them permission to take this time for themselves and to feel that it was okay for us to spend all of the time taking care of them in our counseling time together. Again, I was surprised at how easily this worked. Once I clarified the purpose of our time together, the appropriate information flowed forth and there was little boundary crossing with other material/relationship issues. It was clear that there was a significant amount of

idealization of my role as rabbi occurring for most of my students in the counseling context. While it is to be expected, I was aware of both how that idealization could be helpful (in establishing boundaries and creating a safe space to be vulnerable) as well as an obstacle (expecting that I would have all the answers, expecting that I would live up to all their projections and assumptions about being a rabbi, a super-wife/mother, or a super-Jew). I worked hard to manage those projections and expectations in the counseling space.

III. Themes that Emerged from the Counseling Work

Over the course of three fifty-minute sessions for twenty-two women (nearly seventy hours of counseling), certain themes emerged as both interesting and significant. In this section, I will comment on some of these themes as they relate to the eight women introduced in this chapter.

a. A Disorienting Dilemma

For most of the women in this study there was sort of disorienting dilemma that prompted their interest in taking on this path of study and exploration. Some of the women were able to identify that "dilemma," and for others, it was more subtle. For Dina, this dilemma had two parts. First, at the beginning of the class Dina was the age that her mother was when she died. Second, Dina's two older sons were both suspended from their respective schools in the few years preceding this class. One was punished for drug abuse and the other for vandalism. Dina was understandably shaken by these experiences and these events brought her back to the synagogue in her search for meaning, strength, and peace. In Session 1A, she said, "I just feel a tremendous amount of urgency about doing this class now. First, I am now the age that my mother was when she died. I feel that this is the mid-point in my life. I hope this is only the mid-point. I feel an urgency to be a model for my kids to teach them how to go through life. My older two have had so much trouble. I don't want the same thing to happen to my younger ones."

For Toni, too, beginning this Jewish learning journey was connected to a disorienting dilemma. She wrote, "I have stumbled into an unplanned early retirement. There was no

conscious decision to do so, but due to a combination of decreasing consultant work and an extended period of cancer treatments, I found myself without gainful employment. It's been confusing. I don't know how to label myself --retired or unemployed. I don't know what I would like to see as a next step -- trying to find a job (so tough in the current economy) or starting a nonprofit -- or doing nothing. So I am in a place that I can't seem to define for myself. For all of my adult life, I have been primarily defined (and sustained) by my work. Without meaningful work, who am I?"

For Rachel, the disorienting dilemma was a second move late in life to live near her children and grandchildren. She feels she finally has the time and energy in her life to take this step and feels that it "opens up new doors and keeps her brain active." Rachel sees herself as "at a comfortable point in life, past her peak with a lot of her life and experience behind her, but still hopeful of having much more ahead, but with less pressure, demands or expectations." She is trying to connect with what it means to be a Jew in deeper more meaningful ways than ever before. She feels that spirituality is important to her and means more and more as she knows more. She is also a breast cancer survivor and the trauma of her diagnosis and treatment is still very much alive as she navigates these new waters of Jewish life and learning.

b. Jewish Literacy and the Experience of Learning in Adulthood

This learning experience was advertised to all women in the congregation—both those who had previously celebrated their *bat mitzvah* and those who never pursued a path of more advanced Jewish study. What I found is that even those who celebrated their *bat mitzvah* as teenage girls were hungry to continue and deepen their learning. For many, this was their first serious Jewish learning experience in their lives.

Growing up, Dina was very involved in Jewish life. She attended Hebrew school, Sunday School, and Shabbat services weekly. She did not, however, formally become a "Bat Mitzvah." She feels that she did not take that step because she was competitively swimming at the time and she was not comfortable with the Hebrew but was able to hide her difficulty through memorization. Additionally, her parents were not particularly interested in whether or not she took this step. She began "yearning" for this experience, however, when her oldest two sons began their bar mitzvah preparation. It bothered her that she did not know what they were doing.

She also wants to set an example for her children, and ultimately to learn about Judaism and more about herself. She is most interested in learning about ritual, customs, holidays, prayer, *mitzvot*, and how to incorporate Judaism into her daily life as an individual and a family. Dina writes in her opening reflection piece, "Being Jewish to me also means educating myself. I am trying to expand my knowledge and know that Judaism offers the opportunity to learn on a daily basis. My quest for a more Jewish life includes trying to understand why we do certain things and considering the role that it may play in my life."

Pam had almost no formal Jewish education and now finds herself and as a Jewish educator (teacher in the synagogue's pre-school). She feels that the more she knows, the more she feels herself growing. She says, "There is such wisdom and fairness in this religion… I truly feel that God is leading me in this direction." She wants to learn about Judaism, and also about herself because she is a teacher and role model for young children. She writes, "I love being Jewish and I want it to shine through my actions and words. It's one thing 'loving' being Jewish but its important that I have the knowledge to go with it."

Sharon writes, "My desire to learn about Judaism is deepened by the connection I feel to those who were denied the right to study and pursue it [in the Holocaust]. The concept of *tikkun olam* [repairing the world] is the part of Judaism to which I connect most readily. I find inspiration in the Torah as it teaches us to work for justice and peace. That we continue to seek justice and shalom, despite millennia of denial and persecution, inspires me to learn more and do more. While I identify a beginning to my Jewish journey, I recognize there will be no end until my life ends. Learning and becoming is life-long."

For Toni, learning is also a key part of her goals for this time in her life. Though she was raised in an Orthodox synagogue, she still feels she is "woefully ignorant about Jewish theology, beliefs, and practices," and wants to fill in the gaps. She wanted to think deeply about what she truly thinks about God, religion, and her Jewish heritage. Toni also wanted to discover whether the spiritual rewards of Jewish observance would be sufficient for her to change a number of aspects of her long established life style "which was mostly devoid of Jewish thinking and practice." All of the women in the class recognize that they have a lot to learn and there is a palpable excitement about that experience and the new found literacy they are gaining.

c. Emergence of Jewish Identity

For many of these women, the experience of this class marks the emergence of a dormant Jewish identity, or made manifest for the first time. Dina writes in her Reflection piece about what being Jewish means to her,

> I have come to the realization that being Jewish means everything to me… it is a huge part of my life not only from an observance perspective but also from a "being "perspective." I find that not only do I identify as Judaism being "my religion," but I have committed myself to also "living" Judaism, which is an expansion of my identity. I find myself thinking about being Jewish and leading a Jewish life on a daily basis. It is more than doing the right and moral thing; it has become a quest to follow certain commandments and customs so that not only do I identify with my "Jewishness" but I also remind myself and others that I am Jewish on a daily basis… Being Jewish connects me to my family both living and no longer living. Being Jewish is a commitment to God, my family and myself. It defines my life!

Sharon also found "something" was happening for her in terms of identity. In session 1B, she said, "I would say identifying as a Jew is definitely strengthening and I guess that comes with doing it more; living it. Going to *shul* on Shabbat, practicing my Hebrew almost every night, wanting to do Jewish rituals. You know it's funny. My husband's parents who are Jewish stopped practicing Judaism for all intents and purposes, as soon as their children left the house. And we are almost the exact opposite. Our children have all now left the house, and I have never felt more strongly about making Judaism a serious pert of my life. We are at the opposite end!"

Though Rachel's Jewish identity is hardly cemented or clearly defined, it is obvious she is engaging questions of identity through this process. Rachel wrote in her first reflection piece, "Being Jewish is really more than a religious belief. To me, it encompasses my heritage, my traditions and really is a culture in of itself. But what do I really mean by this? Although I know very little about the religious tenets of Judaism, know very little Hebrew and don't even understand much of a service, I feel very strongly about my Jewish identity and very proud of my Jewish heritage. The hard part of the question is "why." I really don't know the answer to this question—perhaps the answer is related to the reason why at the age of 58 I am in this adult Bat Mitzvah class hoping to learn Hebrew, to learn more about Jewish history, more about the meaning of the traditions, holidays, etc. Perhaps I am trying to define and understand what being Jewish really does mean to me."

Cheryl converted to Judaism a couple of years ago after having raised her young family as Jews. In her first reflection piece, Cheryl describes in the process in which she came to know herself as a Jew. She articulated this process for the first time in the context of our class and counseling sessions. She wrote,

> When my mother passed away nearly five years ago, I received many cards and phone calls from my Christian friends. Most of them echoed the same sentiment, something to the effect of, "You should rejoice that she is in a better place." I wasn't rejoicing. I was feeling the worst pain I'd ever experienced. When we returned to Raleigh following the funeral, I went to our regular Shabbat service. What would have normally been a small gathering was a nice–sized group, most of whom were Jewish friends of mine that had come, without being asked, to support me while I said *kaddish* for the first time. No one said anything to me about how I should feel, or how I should act. They just sat there with me. That weekend, food began to arrive at our house. People from the Jewish community pre-school that I hardly knew were keeping me from having to worry about dinner. That is when I first felt like a part of the Jewish community. I don't think my personal theology changed much with my subsequent conversion. I have always believed in one God. I've always believed God created every person in God's image. I think the three major religions are all really the same at their core. The differences are basically window dressing. How we pray and where we pray don't matter much. Who we pray with is really the important issue. Being Jewish, to me, means having a group of people to pray with me, stand with me when I need them, and hold me when I cannot stand up on my own.

Perhaps no participant, more than Leanna, has struggled with her Jewish identity in the context of this class. In the first class when students took turns sharing objects with the class that symbolized some meaningful aspect of their Jewish journey, Leanna simply brought a piece of paper with a large question mark that she lifted up to show the others in the class when it came to her turn. She said that she felt like the most prominent symbol of her Jewish identity and journey was a "question mark," and she was entering the class with the hopes of figuring out how to answer some of those questions. In her opening reflection piece, she wrote:

> Growing up Jewish in the south meant, at times, hiding my Jewish identity, so that as an adolescent, I didn't appear different… being Jewish was more of an embarrassment than something of which to be proud. I had a secret involvement with the youth group as no one from high school knew of my membership. USY gave me a sense of religious entitlement and place to be proud of my heritage. In college I drifted away from my religiosity, as school, friends, and academia took precedence. I met my husband who was not Jewish and I strayed further from my religious roots although when we decided to marry, our wedding would be a Jewish one and we vowed that our children would be raised as Jews. When the children started coming along, we held strong to our commitment to raise them in my faith and enrolled them in Jewish preschool with the

> hope that the school would assist me in nurturing their heritage. During those years, I once again identified with my religious customs and enjoyed participating in our Jewish lives. [In time], I, yet again, lost whatever connection to Judaism I had left. So here I am trying to figure out what being Jewish means to me because I don't know except for the fact that I was born a Jew with a long family history from the "old" country. At this time of my life, being Jewish has become only a cultural meaning rather than anything spiritual… I hope to find a deeper meaning in my Judaism to guide me through my second adulthood so that I can peaceably reconcile issues of my own mortality.

Leanna's willingness to engage these questions in both the classroom setting and our individual counseling was, by far, the most bold and strident. If asked to bring in an object representing her Jewish identity at the end of the year, she told me she would have brought the *tallit* which she has now sewn from some beautiful raw silk which her deceased father once brought back from the far east or the Judaic ritual items she has since molded from clay and painted to perfection.

d. God Imagery and Finding a Theology (Understanding the Nature of God's Power)

Though the formal units exploring theology and God belief are part of the curriculum for the second year of this course, God figured prominently in our classroom conversation and even more, in our individual counseling sessions. This is a topic that I hope to explore with greater breadth and depth in the coming year. Some women had strong and unwavering belief in God, while other were met with more questions than answers. I tried to create a space for participants to articulate those beliefs and questions as well as invite a conversation around them in an effort to clarify, re-consider, and update those ideas in light of our studies together.

In thinking about God Dina says, "I tend to think of God in a few perspectives. I pray to Him daily and believe He is all-knowing but I am not sure of how I view His role in events both good and bad. I tend to pray not for 'things' but more for well-being and fairness. If feel very blessed by God with what is truly important and am so thankful for that. I am also a little 'juvenile' and superstitious in my beliefs of God." Dina prays every *Shabbat* for the strength to teach and guide her children and for God to help her older sons on their way.

Sarah was troubled by her lack of belief in God. As the daughter-in-law of Holocaust survivors and the mother of a son who was diagnosed with a rare form of cancer at the age of seven, she seemed to act as if she didn't mind that she didn't believe in God or better stated, was

unsure about her belief in God, but her words betrayed the feeling she communicated. Namely, she was struggling to make sense of the nature of God's power. She said to me in session 2A,

> It's hard for me to think about spirituality. I am not one of those people that it comes easily… There is only one [theology] that stuck with me and if I believed in God, this is what I would believe. It was the view that God created the world and then left, or stood back, and no longer interferes. Where did God go? I don't know. So, if you think that way, I don't know what good it does to pray. But this sort of explains to me how all this bad stuff could go on. I mean if there was a God acting in this world, how could God not get involved to stop horrible things from happening. So, it is not a "God is dead" belief, but pretty close… I understand perfectly why people want to believe in God… but it just doesn't work so easily for me.

Later in the session (2B), Sarah reflected on the possibility of feeling "God's presence" through the trauma of her son's cancer. She went on to describe a terrible moment, soon after her son's return home from the hospital with his initial diagnosis, in which their world had been turned upside down. Sarah was unsure of everything, including how to physically care for and clean her child's port (inserted into his chest for chemotherapy). She described the utter panic and helplessness she felt. Eventually, they had the good fortune of coming upon a nurse/home health aid who walked her through everything she needed to do and came to the home regularly for assistance. Sarah said, "The nurse said we would take it slow, and week after week she came and helped… She would sit there and just talk to me… I always say that if there was a God, then God sent me her." Sarah also reflected on both the pain of so many friends abandoning them after the initial crisis of diagnosis passed, but also the gift of one family's friendship in helping them through the most harrowing of circumstances.

Toni describes her relationship with God as "still tentative." She explains, "There is a residue of guilt from my childhood when I was ashamed because I didn't think I believed in God and I felt that was evil. I perceived nothingness after death and projected myself into a Godless void. Now I get glimmers of an awareness of God -- as connection and relationship and then I lose it. I forget and have to struggle to remember. And, for long periods I can't find my way back. There are many obstacles. The God described in the Torah is often so violent and cruel that it makes me want to reject it all. I have difficulty reconciling such harshness with my positive feelings about Judaism. I get confused. I am a literalist and metaphors seemed forced and false -- rationalizations. I feel that my spiritual journey zigs and zags and I don't experience

forward movement." In session 2B, I asked Toni to talk about her earliest memories of God, or the feelings that she associates with the God she remembers imagining as a child.

> T: I have to tell you that my earliest memory is thinking as a kid that there was no God. And feeling a dark empty void. That was my deepest darkest secret. I worked so hard not to let myself that that, but that is was I felt. But the positive, was sitting around the table on Shabbat, the warmth, the connectedness, and relationships, singing *zemiros*. Two very different feelings. One of me alone, isolated, blackness. Probably more about my own isolation that about God. [Crying] But it is about connection and finding ways to be in relationship. That is what it is about for me.
>
> J: And that may be kind of the growing or evolving nature of God for you… because people get stuck with one image of God and when it no longer works, they sort of disengage with God. It just doesn't work anymore. It is not useful. That's fine, but part of this endeavor, is giving those feelings and images room to grow and change. It is almost like in your description, you had the real experience of being deeply lonely on the one hand and real family on the other hand with warmth in connection. And you felt God in both?
>
> T: I don't know. Where is God in the absence of God?
>
> J: That's an important question.
>
> T: It's a hard question I can't answer yet. [Long silence] I have this image of this kind of big slippery ball and I kept trying to find a place to get my hands on to connect and it always eluded my grasp.
>
> J: What a powerful image.
>
> T: Yeah... and it wasn't only my childhood… I had some tough times in my 30s too. I even had a suicide attempt right before I met my husband. Which is…. God? I guess that is the answer. In my darkest moment…. I am sorry for all this crying. I haven't thought about this stuff in a while.
>
> J: No need to apologize. This is why we are here together…
>
> T: And this is why social justice is so important to me. There is a whole continuum of coping mechanisms out there and we have to keep as many life lines out there as possible so that people who are most in need can find their way back.
>
> J: You *know* what it is to suffer, in your own way, you are sensitized in a way that you can't help but to care for others. And unlike that ball that you couldn't get a foothold in, it sounds like with social justice, you found your footing. It was real. It meant something. A deep kind of connection.
>
> T: That was always my home, I guess

In this conversation, it is clear that re-visiting old images for God holds deep feeling for Toni. This conversation about God was also very much about how she makes sense of her connection to Judaism and the meaning she is making of her life post-cancer.

Cheryl wrote in her opening questionnaire that her relationship with God is constantly shifting and seems to change according to the situation. Sometimes she distinctly feels God's presence or knows what God would have her do/feel, and other times, she is frustrated and feels that God is totally unknown to her. As a teenager (and a Christian), she had fewer questions and felt like her relationship with God was more solid. This is frustrating for her. In session 1A, Cheryl talked about her relationship with God, her questions, and her struggles to develop a working theology.

> C: And I think also that my view of God is kind of skewed. I had this view of God that was kind of fed to me.
>
> J: Can you tell me what that view was.
>
> C: Well my parents grew up Southern Baptists. We belonged to a Methodist Church yeah because my parents have social conscience. Actually that's a bad thing to say. Steven's family used to say just the nastiest things about Southern Baptists. The Southern Baptists that you see in the news that are spouting off… things. They are the vocal ones and they are not the majority. And my family's all still Southern Baptists so Steven's family just used to say such horrible things… These are my people. See they're not all like that. Most of them are very tolerant. But their view of God was very different. It was kind of, you know, very parental view and a very judgmental view. To be feared sort of.
>
> J: Geared toward reward punishment
>
> C: Exactly and then when I got, the Methodist Church, I don't know that they force one view of God. It was a very open. Which I always kind of liked… I hope that we have a soul and that all of our souls are kind of some how make up God. And I don't know, I've always tried to reconcile the scientist in me and the whole religious thing. I've never, I don't really understand the whole anti-creationism debate because to me you can believe in creation and not have a problem with evolution.
>
> J: Yes, I am curious about what it is like for you as a scientist and a person with a spiritual life.
>
> C: I've never had a conflict because something had to set the ball rolling and its not and I don't think that there is any way that pure chance could have come up with what we have. That's incomprehensible to me. So I think that I believe in God as a creator and I

also don't believe that everything started in 7 solar cycles. That doesn't seem right. But then I don't think that Methusala lived to be however old. I don't think that I've ever been able to take the Bible completely literally…Apart from letting go of some of the childhood weirdness, I don't think that my view of God had really changed any.

J; Do you still have the sense that there are expectations that God has for you, or a certain standards that you strive for?

C: You know I think the older I get the more I think that I do it to myself. You know, if something awful happens, my first thought is, I still think, what did I do to deserve this? Like there's got to be some kind reason of that this awful thing is some kind of retribution for something

J: Something *you* did…

C: And I don't know if I'll ever be able to let go of that even though I know logically that's completely wrong. But I used to think that, because my parents told me that God had really high expectations for me. I think that they were my parent's high expectations

J: We have those two relationships…each is so important to how we grow to think about ourselves.

C: I set really high expectations for myself and I think I probably, and I can't imagine as a child and in retrospect I think my expectations were probably higher than my parents too. I think I'm just that way. You know, but I don't think I see of God as setting those for me. At least not anymore. I may have at one point but I don't now.
And my internally imposed system is so much worse than anything…

J: So in some ways is God becoming more for you a source of compassion, of perspective?

C: Yeah, I think it is.

Like Toni, Cheryl's theology is also in motion. And, like Toni, her understanding of God is intimately tied to some projections about herself and an internalization of her relationship with her parents.

Leanna desperately wants to feel God's presence, to have a sense of faith, to feel "spiritual," but she claims she doesn't know how or what that would mean to her. Here is a piece of one of our conversations about God from session 2:

L: …[My Catholic husband] has faith. He can talk about his faith in God. I don't have that. It's kind of like…it makes me very teary… maybe like a woman who can't have a child.

J: I am even thinking that in Hebrew, someone who is barren, is *akara*—and that word, meaning "barren," actually means "uprooted." So there is a kind of uprootedness that you are feeling. There is a sense of both loss and emptiness, and also disconnect.

L: Yes! And I also feel cheated that I don't have something you have, or others in the class have…

J: I am wondering, when you think back on your life, what were the most profound, transcendent moments? What would they be? How would you describe them?

L: For me, giving birth was like climbing a mountain. I was very fearful the whole pregnancy. It was like there was an alien in there. It was a part of me and not a part of me. There was a being in there that was totally dependent on me, and I was always dependent on my parents. And to be strong, on my own, I had to be in charge and engaged in this on my own. And interestingly enough, when I gave birth, I felt this incredible separation. I felt so sad, in some way. I mean don't get me wrong, I was thrilled too, but to leave my baby in a crib. That was such a loss for me. And that is why, for as long as my body could bear it, I kept my babies in that snugli. So, that was a major transformation for me. There is nothing like becoming a mom.

J: What helped you move through the fear of it all?

L: Interesting question….well, the first thing that came to my mind was faith in myself. There was another time, I must have been 12 months pregnant, and I said to someone at work, "I just need to take 'this' off for a minute." I got a little claustrophobic. And then I had to just get strong again and move through it. And I guess that's what it was—faith in myself. But faith out here, I don't know about that.… I want something to wake up inside of me, but I am waiting for some moment of revelation.

J: And, I am going to nudge you to imagine that awakenings don't look only one way. So you are waiting for a grand awakening, and yet you are here. You are reading, thinking, feeling, and considering new possibilities. I want to suggest that that too is an awakening. Not just Mt. Sinai moments.

L: You know when I come to services, I get a lot out of the Friday night service. I am listening to Eric and the guitar, and I am moved by the music. And, people are so warm. They are welcoming. I feel something there! Then when I leave, I feel good. I savor what I feel.

J: What is the goodness that lingers?

L: I don't know. I guess there is a connection. The music relaxes me. It makes me feel I can find my way inside…When I am in front of the piano, I just love it. When I am done I feel exhausted. It is a lot of concentration. Fulfillment.

J: It sounds spiritual.

L: Yes, it does

L: I hear what you are describing and I can also see that if you can relax, you can see what happens. If I constantly feel like it is a task and I am running around to find something, and it isn't happening.

J: Right, so what happens if you give yourself permission to come here on a Friday night and to just see what happens. To notice without judgment.

Leanna has a husband who has re-committed himself to his Catholic spirituality in recent years along with many friends (Jewish and non-Jewish) who feel connected to their beliefs and faith community. Conversely, Leanna feels alienated, unsure, and illiterate. And yet, the yearning is palpable. Despite digging her heels in when it comes to staying loyal to her parent's rationalistic approach to life and Judaism, her capacity for feeling and intimacy is apparent. Her defenses lowered in each and every one of our sessions, while her openness to being honest about her yearnings and questions became more expansive. In this exchange, I saw her judgmentalism soften, while her benevolent curiosity expanded. What I observed with Leanna and all of the women I saw worked was a projection of their own experience onto God their own experience.

e. Developing a Spiritual Practice

There are many ways that one develops a spiritual practice in Judaism. Generally speaking, I would characterize this as a process in which one dedicates oneself more seriously to the performance of *mitzvot* (commandments). Or, stated differently, one is committed to more regularly finding opportunities to be connected to God and reflective about oneself. Many students thought about *mitzvot* in the context of our sessions together. Some of the most common *mitzvot* that people were interested in exploring were: *tzedakah, kashrut, Shabbat* and the wearing of ritual objects (i.e. *kippah* and *tallit*).

The spiritual practice of *tzedakah* in Judaism centers on giving charitably and the pursuit of justice and righteousness for all. Many people in the class felt particularly close to this mitzvah and their understanding of it increased by virtue of dedicating several classes to the topic. Additionally, part of the expectation of the class was to divide into small groups—each of

which would take on a *tzedakah* project of their choosing. Dina said in session 2A, "I know I can't cure the world. And that is overwhelming to know that I can only do a very small part, but I do have to do my part. And the kids' involvement is critical… You know we don't talk to our kids about the money we give to charity and to educate them about what and why we give… That is the beauty of this class because is brings it to the forefront. It's like I wouldn't be thinking about this to the same degree without our class and learning together."
In session 3B, Dina also discussed her family's Shabbat observance and how she hopes to evolve those practices to make the Shabbat experience more meaningful and relevant to the entire family.

Sharon used many of our individual sessions to talk about her emerging spiritual practice. In this exchange during session 1B, Sharon and I discussed the issue of *tallit* (prayer shawl).

> S: … My latest struggle is with *tallit*. My deep hope is to feel comfortable wearing one and I have a beautiful *tallit* that one of my dear girlfriends I mentioned made for me. But, up until now, it hasn't felt right.
>
> J: Can you tell me what doesn't fit?
>
> S: The whole thing. I know I am supposed to say a blessing before I put it on. Which I can actually learn now, thanks to your class. But I am just not sure how to do it.
>
> J: Okay, just so I understand, there is an awkwardness there in getting started with the blessing with which you are not familiar?
>
> S: I feel like I'm faking it. But then if I can move past it, I still feel that I am adjusting to something that doesn't feel comfortable yet. Also, it feels like I am demonstrating a kind of observance and piety that I am not ready to show or not living up to.
>
> J: Hmm… is there a feeling of unworthiness there?
>
> S: Probably (smiling and chuckling), I was trying to avoid going there. I feel a bit undeserving. And maybe there is that sense is that you get the *tallit* when you deserve it and have demonstrated the work to prove you are ready. Yeah. Unworthiness, that fits. So, I don't know, maybe over time that will change.

Later, in session 3, Sharon discusses what it was like for her once she started to wear her *tallit* on a regular basis.

> S: So, I have just been normalizing it. I think one of the things you helped me see is that it is an object that can be helpful, but I was making it much more than what it was. And I have many from which to choose. Because each of my three children left them

> home. So I trade off. This week is Sophie's week. Next Hannah's. And then, oh, Ben it's your turn too. And it just brings that piece with me. What I love about Judaism and what you have taught me is that this can fit *me*. I just love that. I had, what was my *tallis* that was made for me, and it is so big. It is gorgeous, but I haven't worn it. I always thought, that's mine, but it doesn't fit.
>
> J: It doesn't fit.
>
> S: And maybe it will one day. But for now, I have other choices.

Finally in thinking about what Sharon learned over the course of the year, she wrote in her final reflection:

> The most profound learning experience for me this year is that I have become a regular attendant at Shabbat services. My attendance at Saturday morning services was not a single conscious decision, but has evolved during the year. Initially I went to services to have the opportunity to practice my Hebrew during congregational prayers. Then I went to practice feeling at ease wearing my *tallis*. Occasionally I went to keep my husband company or because I was interested in the guest speaker. Soon I began going because I was eager to hear the next section of Torah and *D'var Torah*. What became an occasional Saturday morning activity has become a habit, a spiritual and ritual occasion. I've experienced moments of true prayer and deep spiritual reflection on Saturday morning; certainly not every Saturday, but I now know it's a possibility. I've come to understand the rhythm of the service and have learned to appreciate communal prayer and ritual. The rich texts have prompted me to extend a discussion about a reading or a commentary on the Torah with my husband on the way home from *shul* or later during the weekend. During Shabbat service I've taken opportunities to ponder a line from Torah, a reading in the *siddur*, or simply mediate as I watch the sky change through the windows behind the *bimah*. I have become more comfortable in the study of Torah and Prayer/*Avodah* during this year. "Becoming a bat mitzvah" is a process, and this year it has allowed me to discover the joy and beauty of the Shabbat morning service.

For Toni, deepening her Jewish practice means coming to terms with being a woman in Judaism having grown up in a very traditional household. She writes, "My early experience of Jewish worship was peering over a balcony at the 'real' service in the men's section below. Women were mostly voyeurs and spent their time gossiping or assessing each other's new fall outfits modeled at the High Holy Days each year. They competed to see whose latkes at the Chanukah celebration would disappear first. They cooked treats for the periodic classes the Rabbis held for the men. I felt that as a woman I didn't belong in the most essential aspects of Jewish worship. The first time I stood at the *bimah* I cried. Part of me still feels uncomfortable wearing a *kippah* or a *tallit*. Despite attending a feminist college and coming of age during the

height of the feminist era, somehow I still don't feel 100% entitled to full participation in Jewish worship service. But as a result of the Bat Mitzvah class, that is changing." Toni is regularly seen at *Shabbat* services proudly donning a *tallit* and a multi-colored *kippah.*

Rachel took on a regular spiritual practice of prayer and mediation at the beginning of the year and described that to me in session 2. She said, "I really am integrating this *bat mitzvah* experience with my life. I mean every morning I have this conversation with God. The context started with the CD of prayers which you sang and shared with us. I listen to it every single morning. Even though I don't understand all the words yet, there is something about it that opens me up to prayer. And after I listen, I find the conversation can begin. I try to do it like the three parts of the *Amidah*. But I always find that I start with thanks… every day I say to God, I am trying to be a better person. Things I said or did that I wish I didn't… or an unkind thought I had. I ask God to help me be a better person. Maybe I can… ask God to help me be kinder with myself."

Cheryl would like to find a way to use her religious practice to rise above the stress of daily life and to feel as though she has the knowledge to participate in every aspect of synagogue worship. She still feels somewhat intimidated by the choreography of prayer and worship. Nevertheless, Cheryl, perhaps more than any other student, took on learning Torah cantillation with the most enthusiasm and dedication and is now a regular Torah chanter in our congregation. Cheryl goes on to explain one of the most significant changes as a result of the class being her Shabbat observance. She wrote in her final reflection piece:

> …As our family grew and our time together became more constrained, our observances changed. We began to focus on the importance of the family Shabbat dinner and the Friday night service. Our Saturday Shabbat observance was winnowed down to sleeping in before beginning the rat-race of sports, birthday parties, projects, and house work. While prayer had become more important in our life, the true ideal of Shabbat as a day of rest and reflection had been getting lost. I found true inspiration in hearing my classmates' stories of how they find meaning in Shabbat. I had always considered our family fairly observant, but I began to realize that we were missing the much larger point. I cannot remember whose suggestion it had been, but I decided to follow one of my classmate's examples and completely stop checking e-mail on Shabbat. It is amazing how freeing the small-seeming act can be. I have also signing up to read Torah at least once a month. This has two outcomes: First, I'm learning more Hebrew and becoming more comfortable with the scrolls and on the *bimah*. Second, this forces me to attend Saturday services, at least each time I read. While I don't find service attendance restful, it prevents me from participating in other less-restful activities, such as the mile-long list of

household chores. Having the broad age range in our class has also been inspirational. It has allowed me to look forward to my later years with great anticipation. While I treasure the baseball games and ballet recitals, I long for a time when the daily stresses of parenthood have subsided, and Stephen and I can truly enjoy a restful Shabbat.

f. Confronting Mortality

After several bouts with cancer, Toni is very much confronting her mortality. When I asked her in session 3A how she thinks about the fact that she has survived cancer so many times, she said

> I think about the cancer in terms of coming to resolution with my life. Time feels different. Time feels more precious. It's more meaningful. I guess I am looking for a sense of integration. Looking at death is in some ways a gift. The first time I was diagnosed, it was so terrifying. I was paralyzed with fear. Now, I am so much more accepting of it. I was thinking this morning that in some ways I look at it as a wave coming in and your are seeing the shore and you fear the wave is going to break, and then you realize that it is all water, and all it has ever been is water. I feel it is sort of about paying attention to the rhythms of life and what it is all about. Feeling less attached….and people don't often talk about it, but there are gifts that come with this. Don't have to worry about shampoo. I only use deodorant under one arm and not the other. I don't have to shave. There are those little things at the trivial level. But also on the deeper level, I wouldn't be surprised… there is a sort of inevitability about it. I have been very fortunate.

There is also a part of Toni's confrontation with mortality that entails examining the legacy she hopes to leave after her death, which she anticipates will not be so far into the future. Because of her diagnosis with cancer and subsequent treatment early in her marriage, she was unable to have children. Toni is sorting through what that means and making peace with the fact that she is not likely to live many more years. Here is what she shared in session 1B:

> T: So, you know, part of that is about legacy. My mom talked a lot about giving roots. Knowing I won't have those roots to pass on.
>
> J: Do you think that your legacy might take a different form?
>
> T: I have always thought about my political work in those terms and I have things I want to do, but I find it difficult to get moving. I am not an initiator. I find it difficult to find someone to partner with. So I am still figuring how I do this thing on my own or find someone new to work with me. And, I have had three cancer diagnoses now (breast

> cancer, endometrial, breast cancer again). I guess I feel very fortunate to be here, but not very confident this is going to be a long life. [Crying.] So I guess I feel a pressure to seek out the spiritual and to explore that and try to integrate that. That is particularly important. And (more tears…) to figure out what my legacy is. I guess I hadn't thought of it before in exactly that term. But that is what it is.

For Cheryl, the loss of her mother at a young adult (age 30) marks a watershed moment in her life. She spoke of this loss with great feeling many times in our sessions together and, in particular, how the absence of her mother has spurred her on to think about the meaning of her own life, her dreams and goals, her inadequacies and disappointments, and her Jewish identity. Towards the end of the year of our working together, Cheryl called me to explain that the anniversary of her mother's death was approaching and she wanted to mark the day in a special, and distinctly Jewish way. As a result, she invited me to lead a *minyan* in her home and invited the class to attend and "make the *minyan*." She prepared all of her mother's favorite desserts with her mother's recipes and shared some thoughts with our group about her mother's character and impact on her life. In session 3A, she shared her experience of that prayer gathering:

> After my mom's death, it was too confusing to claim *shiva* for myself, but now, things are different. I had a real observation there [at the minyan we did together last week]… I had been to many *shiva minyanim*, but until it was my own, I never realized, and quite loved that everyone says *Kaddish* with you. Because, when I came back to Raleigh after the funeral in Savannah, it was very hard for me to stand in services and say *Kaddish* by myself. It was very, very difficult for me to be alone. It was so much easier when everyone was there with me. I almost wish we did it like that all the time. I mean, it is not something you want to stand out about or be recognized for.

Cheryl is still mourning the loss of her mother and this loss informs the way she has come to think about herself and the years she has remaining. Cheryl felt that remembering her mom in the context of our counseling sessions and our class experience was healing.

Leanna's spiritual quest is very much tied to this moment of life transition that she finds herself in. Turning fifty this past year, watching her daughters head off to college one by one, beginning a second career, and caring for her elderly mother, demonstrates that her life is full of transitions and changes which force her to confront her identity, her existence, and the passing of time. In an early conversation in session 1A, Leanna traces how her search for some spiritual connection ties into her mid-life passage.

L: …Am I looking for something that doesn't exist? Am I looking for something magical? It's almost like I feel very concrete. I feel like I have missed it all along. I don't feel anything. People talk so poetically about their spirituality. How do I get that? Maybe that is because of the way I grew up. We never talked about this kind of stuff [as a child growing up in her family of origin].

J: Is that okay for you?

L: I didn't know.

J: So what I hear is that there is a curiosity about a part awakening inside of you… wondering what it might be like to feel something spiritually… and not sure exactly how to find your way in, without a prior reference point so it feels kind of foreign. It's a beginning point, but if feels like shaky ground because you are not sure what it will look like and how it will fit with your life. Am I getting it? Is it scary? Is it exciting?

L: Not scary. I feel inquisitive. I feel a yearning, but I'm not sure exactly what it is that I want. You know I am on the cusp of a major milestone. I am about to turn 50…

J: Mazal tov!

L: Thank you very much. It's just so hard to believe. And I see my mother getting older. And, there has been more disconnect between me and my mother, and some of that stuff that makes me realize my age. It's like the second adulthood. How did I get to the second adulthood? I am starting a new business. I just changed synagogues. We left the Y for another gym…. All these changes.

J: Lots of changes.

L: Lots of changes. I look at my children and I see how much older they are. I have a junior a college. It is like all of a sudden… so I am looking for something to guide me, to help me, to hold me, to steer me. You know, I have grown up in the south and I grew up listening to Christians talking about "turning it over to God"-- on the one hand that makes my skin crawl because I believe we have to be responsible to make our own decisions, but on the other hand, they get something.

J: They have something to hang on to.

L: Yes. Are you getting a picture of where I am at?

J: Yes. I think I do. And you are in good company. It seems to me you are approaching an important moment in your life, very rich, ripe, somewhat confusing, but open and expansive time to ask big questions. I think that this period of time is amazing and really an opportunity and you are seizing the moment. These are the questions I have, these are my dreams, these are my longings…

L: I feel like I am on the verge of tears. I often feel that way these days. And, it you know it is also the end of my fertile stage life. It's a lot!

J: I believe that there is not a body and a soul. And this is a very Jewish idea—we are embodied people. We live in our bodies. Our soul is encrypted on every cell in our bodies. Our experience of ourselves as physical beings is also spiritual. So, I think, the physical changes you experience is not separate from your spiritual longings.

L: You got it. In my second adulthood, I want to be spiritual and I just don't know how to. This is my mid-life crisis!

J: It is. What I see from the outside is a beautiful opening. This opportunity.

L: Yeah, but it is also a grieving. A mourning of what I am leaving.

J: Absolutely. There is no question. There is a loss. There is a self that has to be shed to find yourself anew. Those things just go together.

L: I think that is where I am at.

J: Yes, and I think both of those parts have to be acknowledged. Both the loss and the opportunity that awaits. Especially when you have spent so many years raising your children and that being at the forefront of your identity. And to see your children growing up and being more and more independent, which is of course what you want, there is a also a certain sadness in that.

L: It's true. You know my girls are entering their adulthood and I am leaving mine. Not that I am dying, but I am leaving that youthful kind of adulthood.

J: I hear that. This is big stuff. And I can't emphasize enough that the difficulty with change is often leaving that old part behind. There is a kind of loss that goes with that. I think it is important to say that.

L: Actually, I think it is the first time I have *said* that. There is a loss. I didn't really recognize it as that. There truly is a loss. I don't think we talk enough about this.

For Leanna, as for Toni, Cheryl, and so many others in the class, exploring Judaism entails facing their own mortality. Sometimes this surfaces in remembering loved ones who have died or in caring for those who have become ill. But for all of these women, moving through the "middle passage" means confronting the fragility of life and the inevitable movement of time.

g. Illness and Loss

Another inevitability in life is loss. Several of the women in the class are cancer survivors, many have lost parents and other immediate relatives, and everyone has experienced the profound and life-changing experience of loss in some form. Illness and loss necessarily bring up the experience of suffering which is both spiritual and religious. Though the class experience did not formally take on this topic, nearly everyone pursued a deeper understanding of suffering, evil, and the nature of God's power in the face of loss in the context of our individual counseling sessions.

For Pam, dealing with the many losses of her life has been the point of entry and backdrop for her Jewish journey. Pam' first husband had an affair and they divorced while she was a young mother of two children. Pam went on to have two more husbands over the course of twenty years, both of whom committed suicide. She has carried a tremendous amount of guilt and shame from these losses and has truly found her path to healing in Judaism (teaching at our synagogue's pre-school, caring for the children on *Shabbat* mornings, and pursuing her own Jewish studies and practice. In session 1, Pam explained,

> After the traumatic death of her last partner] I had to get back on my feet and teach to keep my job and prove I could take care of myself. It wasn't easy and it has taken seven years to get to the place I am now. I don't know why I am here and why I am doing this Bat Mitzvah thing, but here I am. I feel like God has brought be here in some one and what I am seeking is peace. I decided to make my life as good as it can be-- to be a great teacher and to live my life in synagogue. But I am not in peace. How do you be in peace after something like this? Two suicides. Two eulogies. You know I think that a number of years, if you said, who do you feel most sorry for at the synagogue, people would have said me. I would have been the poster child for the pathetic person… [But,] I feel like people respect me a lot now. It has been seven years. I have worked hard to get where I am. I am at much more peace now…And it looks like my destiny is to teach children and live a real Jewish life. And adding this bat mitzvah onto it all, that is such a huge thing for me. I think it is really God driving me to do this… I don't want to make you nervous about this, but maybe you are here for me for a reason. I feel I can share all this with you… So it is miraculous that I found myself here. All those traumas were connected to me coming to a synagogue. It all comes back to being Jewish and God.

In my second session with Pam, we devoted the entire time to studying texts about suicide in Jewish law and lore, at her request. I think Pam was astonished to see that the way that Jews thought about suicide in the Bible, and the way that those views have changed. These changes represent our changing understanding of mental illness. Pam was particularly moved by Saul's

suicide in the Bible. We talked about the law evolving to make every allowance to forgive the person who takes their own life and to extend mourning rites to the survivors. She felt that everything was opening up for her and God was leading her to study with me. I suggested that God is inviting her back into life. She may not always feel she needs to punish herself. This takes time, of course. She was moved by the rabbis' leniency—both in the direction of the one who committed suicide and the survivors. In our third and last session of the year, Pam wanted to talk about her first romantic relationship in seven years. She is eager to love and experience authentic companionship, but so fearful to lose again. She would repeatedly ask, "How do you learn to open up her heart to love again?" And yet, she connected her ability to begin again after so many losses, to God's grace and loving kindness. At the end of the year, she wrote her final reflection about the meaning and power of "*teshuva*" (repentance and forgiveness).

Sarah was extremely eager to tell me in various contexts that she didn't think she believed in God. She doesn't think of herself as a "spiritual" person, and much of the assessment material I gathered contains little affect or passion on any issue. Nevertheless, Sarah chose to take this course and explained that she was "open." Sarah spent most of the time we had together discussing the recent loss of her mother-in-law (a Holocaust survivor) and the experience of her son's childhood cancer. Her son is now healthy and in college. In both cases, Sarah grappled with how to make sense of God in the midst of evil and/or suffering.

For Rachel, much of our time together was spent talk about her breast cancer diagnosis, treatment and recent scare of a recurrence. After describing to me the shock of her diagnosis five years ago and the details of her decisions about treatment she said (session 1B),

> R: … I am coming up on five years, cancer free. I take all my medication. I go for my check-ups. That is a life-altering experience.
>
> J: You don't come through something like that the same as you were before.
>
> R: No. And it has made me a better person… In some ways not…
>
> J: In what ways?
>
> R: I feel I have lost the sexual part of my personality. Because when your breasts become this thing that everyone is touching and diagnosing and handling. Drawing marker all over you. Somehow or other it changed me. That is a sad part. Some part of me died inside. It made me feel very unattractive. Maybe it coincides with my age. Just

> not so attractive. I don't know. One is bigger. To be scarred. But, that is the only negative. The positives [crying] are that I appreciate things so much more. [More tears] Every day is a gift when you don't know how many more… every day I wake up and I'm thankful. Going back for tests is always stressful because you never know what they are going to find. Before I go I am very nervous, and then I put it behind me. So far, I have had little scares here and there, but nothing major so far. So, it has made me a stronger person, a more thankful person, and you really see what's important to you. And it is not the material things. It's the people. I was very lucky my husband was there for me. I went to a support group when I was going through radiation, and so many of them had nobody. So, I think I am a happier person, which sound crazy. I am just a happier, more grateful person.
>
> J: That makes sense…. You can see how you would never wish such a diagnosis on yourself or any one else, but it has been a blessing for you in some powerful way.
>
> R: It has. It has. Because I feel like nobody gets everything. Everyone has their sadness. It's just life. I have come to the point that I'm okay with dying. I just don't want to be sick. I don't have children who depend on me anymore. I know people will miss me, but it is not like I have young children anymore. I just don't want to be a sickly person who is suffering and everyone around them is suffering alongside them.

Yet even as Rachel has found this sense of fragile peace around her cancer diagnosis and mortality, it is also evident that she is still struggling with the meaning of suffering and the nature of God's power in the world. Here is part of our conversation from session 3A:

> My question is why did God create a world in which there are limitations, so that bad things can happen?... Could it be that if there wasn't bad, we would appreciate the good? Like it would be hard to appreciate vacation without work. But sometimes the bad is so bad. So tragic. When I see a sick child. I struggle with that. How could God make or allow this child suffer?... Sometimes people say that everything happens for a reason. Part me of agrees and part of me is not so sure… think it is interesting that when really bad things happen, people either get closer to God or think how could there be a God… [My experience has been to] get closer. I think it is more comforting to say that God is going to be with me and help me through this. But I could see how other people might go the other direction…"

Of course, there are no easy answers to these kinds of questions. Rather, I attempted to provide a safe space to give words to these women's losses, to ponder what they have learned and gained in the face of loss, and to bear witness to how they are forever changed as a result.

h. Making Peace with Ones Family of Origin

Many students were not given a Jewish education as children. Part of this course of study has opened up the possibility of making peace with that loss as well as many other non-religious issues that caused some kind of wounding as young children. While I did not intend our sessions to take on the character of a traditional psychodynamic therapy model in which one would typically explore one's relationships with primary caregivers with great depth and detail, certain aspects of the participant's childhood experiences and relationships inevitably came to the fore in our individual time together.

In our first class of the year in which students were invited to bring an item which was meaningful to them, Pam brought in a bag containing *tefillin*. Pam knew she was Jewish as a child because "she ate Jewish food". Her father played pinochle on Friday nights and her mother played *mah jong*. She never went to synagogue, so one can imagine her surprise when one day she found a bag of *tefillin* under her sister's crib. Her parents explained that they kept the *tefillin* in a bag under each of the children's cribs. As an adult, Pam asked if she could keep the bag and its contents. Pam reasoned that her parents must have believed in something and so did she. Pam has worked hard to find her way into Judaism even though her parents, whom she loved and missed, didn't offer her a Jewish education (formal or informal).

Sharon is the daughter of German immigrants who escaped the war but raised her as a Protestant. She writes, "My Jewish journey actually has a beginning point: it began at age 16 at the recognition when I began to reveal the secret of my Jewish heritage which my parents had kept hidden from my sisters and me. After my heritage was reluctantly acknowledged, I began to explore and learn about Jewish history, culture, and tradition. As I was raising my own children, my women friends become beloved and important as they modeled holidays and Jewish traditions in the home and welcomed me into the Jewish community." Sharon's spiritual search has everything to do with making peace with her parents and her family history. Because Sharon lost most of her family in the Holocaust and her parent's Jewish identity was hidden for much of her life, Judaism has been a sort of coming home on her own terms—a journey of both individuation and collective identity.

The loss of Rachel's mother, with whom she had a difficult relationship her entire life, signaled a spiritual awakening. In session 1B, Rachel discussed with me what it was like to care for her mother in the last months of her life.

R: I lost my mother and my father in the last year and a half. I did not have a good relationship with my mom. As I said, she was not a nurturing person. She really had her own problems. She would always say to me, "I did the best I could," but I never bought that. But that when she got sick with dementia and liver problems for years, I wound up moving her out to Las Vegas.

J: That was an act of love.

R: It was. My brother was not going to do anything. She was alone. She was my mother and I still had compassion for her. And that too was a blessing. And it really gave me closure with her. She was always a very angry, difficult, mean, bitter person. Always yelling and criticizing me and my father. But when the dementia set in, she lost that. She became very gentle. And I am very compassionate and she brought that out in me. She was so pathetic, and helpless. I never wanted to be like that. A burden…. [She describes her mother's progression of care in Las Vegas]. And then Frances the hospice nurse, that angel, called [More tears] and said if you want to see your mom, come now. And when I got there, she had just passed. She was just lying there and she looked peaceful for the first time in her life. I never saw her like that. And I realized, I had let go of all the anger I had for her. No more hostility. I was done with it. I had forgiven her.

J: First, what a gift that you were able to find that peace in the end with her… to love her and to care for her. Not to say that you forgot your history together, but to have worked through that enough that you could find compassion for her… not everyone finds that in the end—especially in relationships that were fraught.

R: It's so true. What a blessing. Because I think that I would have lived much more tormented as my life went forward had we not had that time together. If you had ask me what my worst nightmare was twenty years ago, it would have been that my father would go first, and I would be left taking care of my mother. So my worst nightmare happened, but it turned out to be a blessing. Just shows, you never know how life is going to turn out. It's all good. I have a lot to be thankful for.

J: This is all what it is to live. To live life, awake.

Though Rachel's relationship with her mother was painful for so many years, in the end, she found a tremendous sense of peace in her mother's death and the way in which she was able to care for her in last days. These reflections had everything to do with how Rachel is coming to see herself as she moves into the "third chapter" of her own life as well as her search meaning and spirituality in the context of this class.

Leanna spoke at great length with me about her search for spirituality in contradistinction to her parent's approach to Jewish life. In session 2, she said "You know that I am thinking that part of my anticipation of this journey is also an indication of a breaking away from the parental

figures, because this is something my mom can't relate to at all. I suppose I am giving birth to myself in a new way." In her family of origin questions and questioning (a critical aspect of Jewish spirituality) were not welcomed in the home she group up in, and Leanna is becoming aware of how her spiritual search and relationship to Judaism and God may, in fact, be quite divergent from that of her parents. As with all of the women in the class, I attempted to make that transition and individuation process safe, conscious, and meaningful in the context of our counseling sessions.

i. Re-negotiating Relationships with Spouses

Seven out of eight women in this study raised issues around the fact that their enthusiasm for Jewish learning and living was not shared in a harmonious way with their spouses. This lack of support and disinterest manifested differently for each of the women. However, it is noteworthy how widespread this feeling and reality was for this group of women.

For Dina, her return to Judaism, alacrity for this class, and her emerging Jewish practice has been challenging for her husband. She spent a lot of our time together talking about how these changes have been difficult to articulate and navigate. She said in Session 1B, "This [making sense of my Jewish journey for my husband] has been hard to tell you the truth. I see this as a very private sort of thing. It feels kind of vulnerable and scary… you and Eric must talk about these things [spirituality and religion], but I don't think most people do. It is just so personal. You know Ron and I have our own lives. We love our kids and we enjoy spending time together, but we do our own thing most of the time. I treasure that he gives me space to live my life. To work. To travel. And he spends a lot of weekends on his boat. And that is fine. When we are together, we just don't talk about this kind of stuff." We went on to explore how she might engage her husband in a conversation about her spiritual journey that is non-threatening and open.

Sarah faces a similar situation. Her husband is not threatened by her journey, but is simply disinterested. She explained to me in session 3B:

> And for me, part of the challenge is that I have a husband that is in a very different place. He could not keep Shabbat. Doesn't want to. He will tell you that the worst experience of his life was staying with my cousins in Israel for Shabbat. I loved it. But to him, it was hell on earth…. Mark was happy to do it when our kids were growing up. He was

> really into everything in the pre-bar mitzvah years, but after that we stopped going. But you are right, now we are just sort of finding our way and I'm not sure about it all. I don't think Mark will ever be on a spiritual journey. He doesn't think about God and just doesn't care. He hated philosophy in college and he is just a really practical person. And that's exactly how her mother was. She wanted her children to be Jewish and to know they were Jews, but she didn't do much of anything and didn't believe in God or anything. She was Miss Practical. Anyway, in a way it may be harder than when people are totally unified in their approach, but I don't feel like we are living separate lives or that I am married to a non-Jewish spouse. It's hard and it's not. Sometimes it feels hard, like I'm caught in the middle.

Toni says, "Right now, there is only my husband who does not feel the same need to explore his Jewish identity… this journey would be so much easier if it could be shared with those closest to me." Rachel says that while her husband is supportive of whatever she decides to pursue, and is proud of her taking this class in particular, he is not much interested in his own spiritual journey or hers. She writes, "He doesn't really get it." Cheryl feels that her increasing knowledge and observance of Jewish life is intimidating to her husband, but hopes that it will spur him to step up his practice. By our last session (4D) she said, "I even see Steven changing. He is getting stuck with more household stuff and kids' stuff that he is used to!" Regardless, of the participants' spouses' responses to their involvement in the class, all of those relationships have demanded a certain level of communication and re-negotiation as a result.

IV. Final Thoughts on the Results of the Project

Overall, I felt that the individual spiritual guidance component of this learning experience was incredibly rich and deepened the learning for each and every participant, including myself. Not every student's experience was entirely transformative, fundamentally impacting her psycho-spiritual beliefs and practice. But in every case, the women acquired a new body of knowledge and an opportunity to be reflective about and integrate that knowledge into their lives. First, the experience of individual spiritual guidance offered the students an opportunity to be more reflective than they would have been in a classroom-only experience. There was time dedicated and attention paid to their personal stories and how those stories interfaced with the material at hand. Second, it gave the women another active role in their learning experience by charging them with setting the agenda for our sessions, asking their most pertinent questions, and

determining the path of inquiry. There was no room for being a passive learner in our individual sessions, even if some of the women were more apt to "hide" in the classroom setting. Third, for women who were self-conscious about their lack of knowledge, meeting on an individual basis offered them a safe space to ask their questions and articulate their feelings without fear of being shamed publicly or slowing the class down. Fourth, the counseling afforded us a space to develop a trusting and sacred relationship between rabbi and student. The intimacy of this bond most certainly impacted the quality of the classroom sessions and the depth of the learning overall. Most of the women cried in at least one of their sessions, as I actively elicited feelings in our sessions. I believe this is at the heart of this kind of adult learning. It is my belief that students had the sense that when they walked into class, I held inside of me their stories, their questions, their insecurities, their losses, and their dreams.

From the various assessment materials I collected and the final reflection pieces, it is clear to me that the women acquired a significant body of knowledge. But equally important to me, I would claim that the women gained a deeper sense of themselves as Jews and as spiritual beings. Some women were far more defended than others, but even those whose defenses were high, had a chance to be reflective and to connect to some of their feelings in a safe and non-threatening atmosphere. As a rabbi and counselor, these hours of counseling represent my most significant growth as I was challenged to be present in each and every encounter and to trust that each of us would our way in the process if we stayed open, aware, and attuned to sanctity in and around us. Everyone's level of engagement of the material, including my own, was intensified because our individual time together. My faith in the counseling relationship and the process of discovery that can happen in a counseling experience has only grown as a result of this experience. It is rare that rabbis have the opportunity to know all of their students on this level and I feel that I will forever be enriched by virtue of this gift.

V. Chapter Five

This final chapter will explore the implications of my results, both anticipated and unanticipated. I will also discuss the contributions of my project to the religious and clinical principles I outlined in chapter two as well as my rabbinate in a wider context. Finally, I will address the implications of this project for future of the congregation and my rabbinate.

I. Implications of Results: Congruence and Incongruence in this Demonstration Project

As discussed in chapter four, on the whole, my goals and outcomes were largely met through this *Bat Torah* experience and pastoral work. Most women became more vocal in their group participation and found greater ease in talking about God, Jewish concepts, and their own spiritual journeys. Some participants continued to remain quiet most of the time in class, but without exception, all of the women participated actively in the individual counseling sessions. Evidence suggests that the vast majority of the women found themselves ever more a part of the chain of tradition, taking ownership of their relationship to God, Torah, and the Jewish people, and seeing their lives through the lens of Torah (Jewish narratives, symbols, language, ritual, etc.), though still with many questions and doubts. All of the women increased and expanded the necessary skills to participate and lead Jewish prayer and ritual. As expected, this happened at varying levels of proficiency for different women based on their past educational experiences, their Hebrew skills, and current dedication to their studies. The only area in which I felt somewhat disappointed was that only about half of the class became weekly attendants at worship services and a number of the students were less than diligent about attending the Hebrew skills portion of the class (which met after my class on Monday evenings). I recognize, however, that this increase in weekly participation in synagogue worship is not insignificant. Additionally, some of the students who were a bit delinquent in their Hebrew studies last year have started the second year of studies with a greater sense of commitment to this part of the process as they prepare for the Bat Mitzvah ceremony in the spring. In a study of the Florence Melton Adult Mini-School, the authors suggested after two years of research that learners are

more apt to assign greater meaning to the Jewish practices they choose to perform, than they are to say that their study led directly to increases in Jewish behaviors (Grant, Schuster, Woocher, and Cohen, 67). Additionally, much of the change was subtle, not obvious by my measurements. Nevertheless, on the whole, the women in this course took on the learning with seriousness and actively engaged in all aspects of the program.

They paid particular attention to the reflective part of the program through writing and individual spiritual guidance. With some encouragement and gentle reminders, all of the women completed the various "reflective" assignments I ask them to prepare. I was especially surprised at how eager and diligent the participants were in attending the counseling sessions. Most were extremely open and willing to be vulnerable despite the fact that they knew I would be recording the sessions and using this work for my research and learning. After obtaining their permission to record their first session, they never mentioned it again. The participants were eager to sign up for sessions for the following year as well.

There was also a real community-building process in motion. Because Judaism is inherently relational in character, I paid special attention to nurturing relationships and cultivating community (between the students and between students and their rabbi). We learned about our selves and our tradition through conversation, including: conversations in counseling, partner-work, small group-work, as well as many large class discussions. It took nearly the entire year, but by May, the women had developed a sense of group identity as evidenced by new friendships, study partnerships, collaborative volunteer work in the synagogue, and a growing desire to lead and impact change in the synagogue at large. At our final *siyyum* (Celebration and Demonstration of Mastery ceremony) in the spring, to my total surprise, the women learned and performed a song/prayer in multiple parts with instrumental accompaniment in my honor. Of course, the real honor was that they had worked together to sing this, demonstrative of their group identity and deepening connection to Jewish prayer. Facilitating group dynamics will be at the fore as I conduct the second year of study with this group.

Finally, I found that the women did indeed find the courage and space to ask difficult questions, struggle with the texts and their faith, and ultimately find some answers that harmonize their understanding of Torah and the *torah* of their lives. This endeavor, of course, is never completed, but some good headway in nearly every case was made. In thinking about the adult bat mitzvah as a transformative experience, Ann Brooks invites us to look for fundamental

change in the participant's sense of self, her worldview, her understanding of the past, and her outlook on the future (Brooks, 2000). Using these categories of analysis, I would claim that the experience for the women in this study was indeed transformative. The impact of the pastoral component to all of the goals in this demonstration project proved to be critical in creating a space to make and reflect upon meaningful change.

II. Contributions of Project: Linking Outcomes to Principles Discussed in Chapter Two

a. Religious Principles

Through the execution of this project I aimed to expand the students' exposure to and understanding of Torah—both the sacred texts that comprise the Torah and the *torah* or teaching/wisdom that comprises Jewish tradition and our personal lives. I aimed to use traditional texts to enable them to reflect more deeply on their contemporary lives and use their lives to guide them in understanding traditional texts. I also attempted to introduce the concept of *mitzvot* in a way that would be relevant and meaningful in a cultural context in which people see themselves as autonomous and self-directed in their spirituality. I believe that I was most successful in this effort by virtue of my attempt to soften the boundaries and assumptions around what defines *Torah* and *mitzvot* while at the same time exposing them to original sources to enhance their connection to the inherited tradition. For example when I explained that our tradition values the text as well as the wisdom that we gather over a lifetime, women felt less illiterate and inconsequential. When I described *mitzvot* as a system whereby we are called to be in relationship or connection with God as often as possible, women were less threatened and overwhelmed by the prospect of being unable to follow and perform everything that our tradition teaches. I used the statement in the Talmud (*Kiddushin* 29b) to impress upon them the importance of their studies as adult students. This required children and spouses to step in and support the women in their efforts. I also regularly articulated to them Rava's exhortation (Talmud, *Avoda Zara* 19a) to learn even in the face of the diminished ability to remember and to understand new material. My desire to meet them where they were and to work hard to help everyone feel respected and valued, despite their lack of knowledge, helped facilitate a productive and safe learning environment. There were times when students felt ashamed and

embarrassed and I attempted to address that in class. When I couldn't address it adequately in the group setting, I made sure to broach the issue in our individual sessions. There were also occasions when people disagreed on issues. I tried to model and articulate the value of *mahloket l'shem shamayim* (disagreement for the sake of Heaven) and create a safe environment in which that could happen. There were some members of the class who consistently felt defensive and alienated. This was frustrating for me, but I learned to accept that these are "styles" and were demonstrative of how these women move through the world beyond the confines of our class. Nevertheless I tried to hold up the value that we didn't all have to agree and that part of what thrills me about Judaism is its multi-vocal approach to text and practice. Every time we stood for the recitation of *kaddish d'rabbanan* at the end of class and constituted a *minyan*, we embodied the Jewish principle of community. In this way, we entered the class as individuals (each with our own private meditation and intention for the class) and exited as a community bound by a particular history, Jewish values, and hopes and dreams for our learning and spiritual growth.

We didn't talk about God in class nearly as much as I expected. The first third of the second year of study will be devoted to that topic. Nevertheless, we devoted a significant amount of time to God in the individual spiritual guidance work. As Kathleen Fischer writes in *Women at the Well*, "A spiritual guide's role is not to promote any one image of God, but rather to support a woman's process of understanding how she images the divine and how her images affect her life" (Fischer, 59). This intimate arrangement provided the space to sort through those varied images and their implications as well as to ask difficult questions and, indeed, to do some "God-wrestling." I myself struggled, at times, with how to honor their questions without feeling invested in their answers. I aimed to ask questions to help them clarify their views, consider alternatives, and arrive at new questions and/or conclusions. At times this felt to me like I had a more specific agenda and it was challenging to communicate my ultimate goals in light of their desire to please me and my honest intention for them to grow as Jews. But, I do believe that women came to know or understand God better by virtue of our study of both sacred texts and the stories of our lives. Whether in the class or the counseling office, I aimed to project an openness about God and theology (and their *feelings* about those beliefs) which is, in my opinion, often neglected in Jewish classes, even among the more regular worshippers and participants. Even for those who were not yet comfortable talking about God, our meditation/silent prayer at the beginning of class each week, offered an opportunity, in the words

of Eve Breitman, to experience God's presence by virtue of being present to our own lives and the world around us.

Our identity as a class for women, led by a woman rabbi, and interested in the issue of women in Judaism was at the forefront of our experience. In terms of our study of Torah, I actively modeled and facilitated a "revisionist" approach in which I willingly recognized patriarchy in the Torah, but invited us to read the text with non-patriarchal eyes. I encountered some resistance from time to time, but in large part, the women were excited and invested in finding ways to see themselves in the text and recognize that it may reflect some language and values to which we no longer adhere. The all-women environment provided a space for women to talk about Jewish law and ritual observance from their perspective. Because the stated philosophical position was reflective of the Conservative movement, I encouraged women to think about "obligation" and *mesorah* (tradition), and at the same time, to lend authority and validation to the value of egalitarianism. In Rabbi Elyse Goldstein's language, we discussed and even practiced "traditional" rituals (i.e. shaking the lulav and reciting *kaddish*), "imitative ritual" (i.e. wearing distinctly feminine head coverings and prayer shawls and reciting a feminist *ushpizin* on *Sukkot*), as well as "inventive ritual" (i.e. new ceremonies for immersion into a *mikveh*). As a woman rabbi, I believe that I re-enforced, even just by virtue of my existence, the value that they could successfully navigate their way through tradition and innovation.

There was a great deal of emphasis placed on the communal experience. Personal sharing, active participation, and recitation of the *kaddish* prayer at the end of every class all embody the community ethos which I aimed to achieve. Extensive research has been conducted on adult education that points to the importance of creating a "community of learners" in which people feel personally connected to and engaged with the other members of the class. The notion that Torah study is ideally done in the context of community is a concept that stretches back thousands of years. A sense of sisterhood developed in the group and I expect that that sense will only deepen in the second year of studies. Dr. Isa Aron, comments further:

> All Jewish learning, whether it is devoted to a study of sacred texts, Jewish thought, or Jewish history, enables learners to connect their personal struggles to larger social and ethical ideals. When a group of learners engages in this type of discussion over an extended period of time, the bonds that form among the participants are strong and durable. Though the participants' original purpose in joining the group may have been intellectual stimulation, the solace they find in the text and the emotional and social connections they form with fellow learners are what keep them coming back. (Aron, 24).

Several of the women reflected in our individual sessions on how they had become friends with members of the group, seen them in a new light, or felt enriched by the diversity that the group brought to every conversation. Aron goes on to say that these bonds of sisterhood impact the broader community as well. She writes, "The congregation of learners is both a means to an end and an end in itself; it is an instrument for acculturating individual members into active participation in Jewish life, and it is also a model for Jewish community" (Aron, 28). It was also clear to me that these women engaged in this learning journey not only for their own experience of meaning-making, but also out of a desire to transmit this knowledge and these values to their children, grandchildren, and students—yet another way in which the individual/class experience impacted the broader community.

As the authors of the study on the Florence Melton Mini-School program recognize, there was a certain amount of "cliquishness," especially at the beginning, but in time, those boundaries and alliances softened and made room for new relationships and great sense of group identity. (Grant, Schuster, Woocher, and Cohen, 131). The most powerful tool in achieving this identity was the central role of personal sharing amidst our textual discussions. In most cases students were eager to share and delighted to feel the lines of connection between their own personal experiences and those of the others in the class—all within the context of our engagement with Jewish texts and ideas. One member of the class joked that she always had a glass of wine when she got home after glass as she relaxed and reveled in all the emotions that were brought out. Another student became the designated tissue supplier for the class, because so many classes inevitably prompted a level of sharing that inspired tears in nearly everyone.

As the teacher and counselor, I led and facilitated, but I also shared of myself. I felt strongly that material would come alive through the teacher—both the manifest content and in the way that I modeled care for students. In the class setting, I shared many personal reflections on Jewish life, ritual, and theology. In the counseling setting, I was more apt to share my own feelings for and with the student. I humbly sensed that *I* was a critical link in the development of community and the development of meaningful relationships. Lisa Grant (author of the curriculum used for this course) and one of the authors of the study on the Melton Mini-School argues that, "As much as the interactions between students fostered a sense of community in the classroom, their teachers were equally, if not more, important in creating an atmosphere of

warmth and openness (Grant, et al, 140). Additionally, I played a role in quelling the anxiety of certain students, while amplifying the volume of others students' voices. I made room for everyone's questions, to the best of my ability, and aimed to demonstrate a level of sensitivity to the most vulnerable learners in the class (i.e. those with learning disabilities, those with very few friends, those with little or no previous knowledge, those who had experienced a recent loss, etc.). This attention to both the individuals in the class as well as the overall group dynamics and group identity was an integral part of the learning experience, of which I was the leader. Aptly said,

> Teaching is an art of translation. The teacher's job is to help the learner encounter and interpret unfamiliar subject matter and build a base of knowledge… The teacher serves as guide or facilitator, helping people who bring their own "human texts to their learning experience encounter the multiple written texts of the Jewish tradition." For many students, this encounter results their recasting the narrative of their lives in some way… The teachers are part of a dynamic and fluid interaction between learner, instructor, and text… The curriculum provides the basic frame for instruction, but the students and teachers determine the ultimate shape of the learning experience. Teachers provide the road map. The speed and direction that the students take is ultimately left to each individual to decide. (Grant, et al, 199-200).

While my hope for the participants was to deepen their understanding of and commitment to Jewish life and learning, I am aware that as adult learners, they are ultimately the leaders in their educational journeys. Elsewhere, Grant states,

> One of the fundamental principles of adult education is that adult learners are the authors of their own lives, and as such, are responsible for the decisions they make and the directions they take as a result of their learning. While most teachers of adults implicitly or explicitly ascribe to this pint of view, paradoxically perhaps, they also hope to promote growth through learning. Without overstepping into the realm of indoctrination, effective adult educators must delicately navigate between imparting knowledge and encouraging their learners to think about implications of that knowledge for their own lives (Grant, 2003/2004, 18-19).

This balance was often at the forefront of my mind, in both the classroom and counseling contexts. I aimed to impart information that left open new possibilities for self-awareness and spiritual practice without it being coercive, imposing, judgmental, or intrusive. I am sure that at times, I was too imposing and at other times too ambiguous, but I took seriously this dance in adult education requires.

b. Clinical Principles

This demonstration project asks that we examine both religious and clinical principles and outcomes. Because my project falls into the category of religious "adult education" with a distinct pastoral component, I want to begin making connections between my outcomes and my clinical principles by reflecting on a theory developed by Jack Mezirow called "transformational learning theory." According to Mezirow, transformational learning theory refers to an educational process whereby participants develop a deeper self-awareness (Mezirow, 2000). Lisa Grant explains in her article, "Restorying Jewish Lives Post Adult Bat Mitzvah,"

> Mezirow argued that adults are transformed only when critical reflection on the assumptions, values, feelings, and cultural paradigms that have shaped their worldview results in a reframing and expansion of meaning… An emerging theory looks at transformational learning as a narrative process of re-casting one's life story… Through the life course, adults tell stories about themselves to help them to make sense of their lives and to give their lives a sense of unity and purpose. Such stories extend "forward and backward in tme to encompass my account of both where I come from and where I am going" (Randall, 226). They are influenced by inner dialogue, by relationship, by experiences, and by the social context in which one lives… People reconstruct their pasts to integrate them with how they perceive the present and anticipate the future. (Grant, 3-4)

Randall's notion of "re-storying" is at the heart of this bat mitzvah experience, and the counseling experience, in particular. Re-casting their stories is part and parcel of this transformative learning experience. The pastoral counseling component of this program offered them the opportunity to "re-story" themselves in a thoughtful way. McAdams' research on how women construct their life stories suggests that, "At mid-life, the process can shift from clarifying and defining roles, to reflecting on how the different themes in one's life might be reconciled or balanced… Adults over 40 seek to integrate the various aspects of self in a more balanced and harmonious whole. At this stage of life adults also begin to consider in more detail and with greater urgency the problem of construing an appropriate ending for their self-defining life story" (McAdams, 143). Additionally, most of the women in this study and the class at large, enrolled in this program in conjunction with some kind of transition (i.e. an important birthday, after the loss of a parent, at the start of a second-third career, in anticipation of a child's bar/bat mitzvah, etc.). Grant claims that, "Throughout adulthood, and particularly in midlife, adults tend to see education as a source of support to help them cope with new demands and

times of change in their lives" (Grant, 2003/2004, 6). This resonated deeply with the women in my study, many of whom were seeking an integration of roles, a harmonious story that linked together the disparate parts and periods of their lives, and even sought a contemplative approach to what it means to live and die. The women talked about moving from the first half of their lives to the second, moving from mother to grandmother, moving jobs, and experiencing profound physical changes and losses in these terms. In particular, women found themselves "re-storying" precisely when they encountered some kind of disorienting dilemma. When their story about themselves began to shift, the need for "re-storying" became even more important. Some of these shifting stories referenced moving through life stages, other shifts were connected to significant events and losses, and for nearly all the women, their shifting Jewish identity necessitated a new narrative. Both the counseling experience and the class experience contributed to women moving through these transitions with meaning, reflection, a sense of Jewish tradition, and community. The Biblical metaphors, "*Ayeka?*" ("Where are you?") and "*Lekh l'kha*" ("Go forth *into* yourself") were the catalysts for this re-storying process. Using Jewish narrative, symbols, and traditions as a language for examining this re-casting of ones story was part of my greatest joy through this process. My ability to speak in Jewish terms in a clinical setting, combined with an increased comfort and fluency in Jewish story and language among my students was incredibly satisfying and rewarding.

Using Randall's metaphor of "life-as-story" in the context of my project, Randall offers a number of functions for educators engaged in this sort of learning. Grant outlines them as follows:

> First, teachers are not simply conduits of information, but are characters in their learners' life story. Second, teachers can create a safe space for learners to make relevant connections to the subject matter through the telling of their own stories. Third, educators can serve as a helpful editor who facilitates a critical reading of one's story. This means helping people to identity beliefs that shaped one's story or world view. Lastly, teachers, can function as a co-author, serving as a catalyst for [learners] as they fashion an inside story is that more reflective of the breadth and complexity of their actual existence and more in harmony with their expression to the outside world. (Grant, 2003/2004, 20-21).

I believe that I served, at different moments, all four of these overlapping functions. Narrative was at heart of both the classroom and individual counseling experiences.

For most of the women in this study, the narrative process took shape along the timeline of midlife. Many of the women were indeed in the process of shedding the provisional personality, of which James Hollis speaks, and coming into a new Self (Hollis, 22). This process provokes a certain amount of anxiety, of course, but it also allows for an integration of life, including suffering and loss, which is ultimately of great relief—because it speaks more truthfully to their lives at this moment. In Hollis' understanding of the "Middle Passage," the pursuit of some grand notion of "Happiness" or "Perfection" is an illusion. The task of this developmental stage is to survive these experiences and feelings of loss, doubt, anxiety, guilt and despair (among others) and states and find meaning in them. That was certainly the backdrop for my experience and philosophy counseling these women. From a developmental perspective, Erikson's model was particularly helpful. The concerns (explicit and implicit) around "Generativity vs. Stagnation" as well as "Integrity vs. Despair" were quite often at the core of our work together in the counseling setting. My experience working with this project has only confirmed for me my hypothesis that midlife presents women (and men) an extraordinary chance to grow into one's self with depth and wholeness. It is a period of life marked with rich opportunity for asking existential questions and enhancing ones awareness and practice of spirituality and religious life.

My experience in the counseling setting was one of "attentive witness" (Dittes) or midwife. I felt that my primary job was to notice and accompany my students on their journey. Most times, this felt natural and almost effortless to me. There were times, however, in which this task felt incredibly challenging. In particular, a couple of women in the class were extremely defended (meaning that they were resistant to examine and articulate their emotions, in particular, their difficult and/or unpleasant emotions and broken "parts")—both in talking about their personal lives and a their Jewish beliefs. My goal in those cases was to gently notice the resistance and see if we might find another way "in." At times, we found our way around the resistance (and sometimes, even *into* it). At other times, we simply let it be and found a way to connect on a much more superficial level. There was also a woman (not featured in this project) whose husband had been physically and emotionally abusive to her and her children for years (and I was the only person whom she has told). Navigating my way through that relationship was challenging and I relied heavily on my supervision for guidance (both clinical and legal). My supervision was also critical for thinking through transference and countertransferance issues

which are always at play. I believe that my awareness of these transferential issues and issues around safe and clear boundaries were the primary vehicles in creating a relationship with my students in which it felt safe to explore, expand, and heal as well as enable the learning process to blossom and take hold.

Jane Vella presents "A Spirited Epistemology" in her attempt to understand and articulate the unique experience of adult education. In her essay, she outlines three assumptions that are at the core of my own philosophy:

1) Adults are the Subjects, or decision makers in their own lives and learning.
2) Every learning experience involves spiritual development in which "people practice being what they are—Subjects of their own lives and learning."
3) Transformation is not only about the acquisition of knowledge. Rather, it is a "change into one's new self, informed by the new knowledge and skills." (Vella in English/Gillen, 8)

For me, the experience of teaching and counseling started with trying to meet the need of the learner and respect the decisions, goals, interests, and limitations of the learner. That is why I asked that my students set the agenda for our sessions and why I tried to be faithful in keeping them on track, even when that meant moving through tears and uncomfortable feelings. I aimed to create a religious counseling setting in which they felt wholly respected and autonomous, valued for who they are, here and now. I also wanted to help them see that the experience of learning is inevitably a spiritual one if we but open our eyes to that potential for growth and increased self-awareness. My goal was not only to turn out more skilled and knowledgeable Jewish women. Rather, I hoped that their learning might invite them to live more meaningful, conscious, and spiritual lives, better attuned to both their own feelings as well as those of others.

As discussed in earlier chapters, the goal of this project was to match an intellectual learning experience with a psycho-spiritual one. By attending to these women's inner-experiences (in both the class and counseling settings), I hoped that making emotional connections would enhance their overall learning experience. With attention given to reflection and self-awareness, personal growth, and relationships (i.e. between each other and between rabbi and student), the project truly took on a transformative role. Grant reminds us that not all participants want to or can change. Daloz writes, "Most adults are richly enmeshed in a fabric of relationships which hold them as they are." (Daloz, 7). Nevertheless, I would claim that while

participants will complete this program with varying levels of change in knowledge, belief and practice, few will emerge from the program unchanged.

I. Contributions of Project to Wider Ministry at Beth Meyer Synagogue

I believe that this project made a significant impact in the lives of the participants and the wider culture of the congregation. First and foremost, this project offered participants a Jewish education. While it is only a beginning, or better stated, a continuation of their studies, for most students this experience represented a big leap in their Jewish knowledge, skill set, and emotional connection to Jewish life and learning. I would argue, as Lisa Grant has noted in her research on Adult Bat Mitzvah, the majority of the women now feel a stronger sense of Jewish identity, have developed a stronger commitment to ongoing Jewish learning, and have become more comfortable and connected to worship and Jewish ritual in the synagogue and in the home (Grant, 15). More than half of the students have gone on to become "regulars" at Shabbat services and nearly all of the women have attended services and other events with greater consistency and regularity.

Additionally, the impact of this project was felt by the participants' families and the community at large. When one person in a "system" changes, the whole system necessarily adapts in order to accommodate the changes of a single component. For families of participants, this has meant making arrangements to enable the women to attend class every Monday night and attend our individual spiritual guidance sessions. Many spouses have also begun to attend services more regularly. One husband has even learned to chant Torah on his own. Other spouses have attended group events like our family dinners and end of the year *siyyum* celebration (Demonstration of Mastery). Some of the younger children of participants, many of whom are approaching *bar/bat mitzvah* age themselves, have become more excited about their studies and encouraged by their mothers' involvement in their own learning.

The synagogue has also felt the spill over effect. We anticipate that our final Shabbat ritual on June 12, 2010, will be standing room only. More importantly, members of the class help fill the pews each and every week during services, classes, and special events and inspire excitement and interest in all aspects of synagogue life. Members of the class have joined synagogue committees (many of which are now led by members of the Bat Torah group), and I

believe, will be the synagogue leaders of tomorrow. One woman in the class now chairs the ritual committee and another chairs our synagogue's social action team. Three class members will be chairing events through the year to raise money for our new capital campaign and *mikveh*. And many others have taken on small, but significant volunteer roles that enrich the life our synagogue immeasurably. As these women have become more confident, more emotionally connected, and more informed Jews they are reaching out to impact Jewish life in their families and the communal life of our synagogue. This has been a process with roots in rites, texts and traditions of old, now imbued with new meaning, applications and relevance.

II. Implications for Future Ministry

There are three significant implications for my future rabbinic work as a result of my involvement in this project. First, I plan to take one year "off" from the work of "adult *bat mitzvah*" when this current group completes its studies in the spring of 2010. After this time, I hope to begin the course with a second cohort in the fall of 2011 and continue the work I have begun. I already have a small group of women interested and I anticipate that this group will grow in light of the *bat mitzvah* ceremony in June as well as some modest recruitment efforts. I see this as another opportunity to grow the synagogue and even more, to help Jewish women grow in their Jewish knowledge, spiritual practice, and relationship with God.

Second, I have been moved and incredibly enriched by virtue of this new model of adult education whereby the classroom experience is paired with ongoing individual counseling. My ability to teach to the individual needs of each of the students and to help them grow as human beings was increased immeasurably by virtue of this model. While it is not always practical to incorporate individual work alongside group learning, I look forward to seeing how I might make it possible, even on a more limited basis, going forward in the educational work that I do.

Third, and perhaps most significantly, I have come to believe that there are myriad ways in which I might meet the psycho-spiritual needs of congregants through my pastoral role. Perhaps not in this current congregational setting, but going forward, I would be interested in innovating a new role of Rabbi-Counselor or "*Morah derekh*" (spiritual guide/counselor). In the same way that many large congregations have begun to hire congregational educators who focus on the educational needs of the congregation, this role would specifically focus on the psycho-

spiritual needs of the congregation. While many rabbis perform pastoral work and counseling in a very time-limited capacity as part of their regular duties, few full-time rabbis have the time, skill-set, and interest in meeting the ongoing pastoral needs of the congregation. For example, when an adult congregant loses a parent, it is not uncommon for her to seek out the rabbi's time and support. Most rabbis would have no problem finding time to meet with her on one or two occasions over the course of several months. Very few rabbis would have the time and ability to meet with her weekly over the course of two months or alternatively, eight times over the course of a year. That sort of work is simply beyond what most busy rabbis can accomplish. My vision is that a large congregation with a significant staff and budget might be interested in hiring a rabbi who would answer precisely this need. This work would not replace or duplicate the important role of social workers in many Jewish Family Service organizations as well as those in private or group practice. Rather, this work would be specifically rabbinic (in that there could be a spiritual guidance component) as well as a psycho-dynamic approach (using the pastoral skills gained as a result of the course of study for the Doctorate of Ministry and any further training I undergo). My experience teaching and counseling this group of twenty-two women demonstrated the vast psycho-spiritual needs of our congregants—people who are unlikely to seek out the help of a psychotherapist (due to cost, stigma, time, etc.), yet are in deep need of ongoing support and psycho-spiritual guidance. If we want our synagogues to be places where we care for the hearts and minds of our congregants (the *whole* person) this would be yet another way to achieve that goal. I believe that my ability to support congregants (individuals, couples, and families) in need of these services would deeply enhance their lives and the mission of the congregation. This dream is still very much in the making, but I am thrilled by the possibilities now that I have seen both what I can do and what kinds of needs congregants have that regularly go un-met. Wherever my professional path takes me, I have no doubt that the time and energy I have devoted to this doctoral program and my involvement with this project will be formative pieces in my rabbinate.

Appendix

This appendix includes the following forms of assessment for each of the eight women featured in this project:

1) Reflection Piece #1: "What Being Jewish Means to Me" (September, 2008)
2) "Opening Assessment Questionnaire:" A summary of the information taken from these forms (found in the chapter three of this paper)
3) Class Presentation: An object they shared with the class which represents for them some meaningful part of their Jewish identity or journey (September, 2008)
4) "Individual Spiritual Guidance:" A survey of some of the salient issues raised and explored in the course of three sessions of pastoral counseling
5) Reflection Piece #2: "One Learning I Will Take With Me From This Year" (May, 2009)

Dina

1) Reflection Piece #1

What it means to be Jewish is something that is constantly changing in my life. I have come the realization that being Jewish means everything to me… it is a huge part of my life not only from an observance perspective but also from a "being "perspective." I find that not only do I identify as Judaism being "my religion, " but I have committed myself to also "living" Judaism, which is an expansion of my identity. I find myself thinking about being Jewish and leading a Jewish life on a daily basis. It is more than doing the right and moral thing; it has become a quest to follow certain commandments and customs so that not only do I identify with my "Jewishness" but I also remind myself and others that I am Jewish on a daily basis. This is done by taking off additional time at the holidays that normally I did not take off, not eating pork, observing Shabbat when out of town or by lighting Shabbat candles on my own, teaching my children the importance of being Jewish on a daily basis, etc. Being Jewish to me also means educating myself. I am trying to expand my knowledge and know that Judaism offers the opportunity to learn on a daily basis. My quest for a more Jewish life includes trying to understand why we do

certain things and considering the role that it may play in my life. An example of this is understanding why we do not east shellfish and then committing that I will follow this commandment even though I really enjoy eating it. Being Jewish connects me to my family both living and no longer living. I feel a connection to all of my ancestors before me as I observe and celebrate all Jewish events and observances. When I light the Shabbat candles or the menorah or say a blessing over the wine, I feel a connection due to the fact that I am reciting and observing a ritual that is ancient. I am observing something that has been done by my ancestors, grandparents, parents, and other for centuries; it can be overwhelming the sense of tradition that I feel when observing my Judaism. Being Jewish also allows me to take comfort in many of the traditions I was brought up with. There are certain customs and traditions that are so a part of my life that I am truly only happy if they are observed. This includes cooking certain things for Jewish holidays, saying certain prayers, etc. Being Jewish is spiritual; it is a feeling of peacefulness that I have when I am in services or listening to a Jewish song or taking a class. I feel a connection that previously was not there. I see importance in my life and the life of my family. Being Jewish is a commitment to God, my family and myself. It defines my life!

2) Summary of Questionnaire

Growing up, Dina was very involved in Jewish life. She attended Hebrew school, Sunday School and attended Shabbat services weekly. She did not, however, formally become a "Bat Mitzvah." She feels that she did not take that step because she was competitively swimming at the time and she was not comfortable with the Hebrew but was able to hide her difficulty through memorization. Additionally, her parents were not particularly interested in whether or not she took this step. She began "yearning" for this experience, however, when her oldest two sons began their bar mitzvah preparation. It bothered her that she did not know what they were doing. She also wants to set an example for her children, and ultimately to learn about Judaism and more about herself. She is most interested in learning about ritual, customs, holidays, prayer, mitzvot, and how to incorporate Judaism into her daily life as an individual and a family. Dina considers herself to be in midlife. She is "concerned with leading a good life" and being remembered for her goodness and acts of loving kindness. She writes, "I still need to model behavior for my children and feel strongly that I need to set an example by leading a 'Jewish' life

by daily practicing what I preach. I need by religion spiritually and want to improve myself." As a woman, she feels particularly connected to other Jewish women and the responsibility she feels to make a Jewish home. Dina looks to me as a rabbi and a friend. In thinking about God she says, "I tend to think of God in a few perspectives. I pray to Him daily and believe He is all-knowing but I am not sure of how I view His role in events both good and bad. I tend to pray not for 'things' but more for well-being and fairness. If feel very blessed by God with what is truly important and am so thankful for that. I am also a little 'juvenile' and superstitious in my beliefs of God." Through this process she would like to become "even more Jewish and observant daily" which she hopes in turn will help her be more a peace in the world. Dina thinks that her family will be positively affected by her journey. Her older two children are indifferent, but her three younger children think it is great are really watching how she grows. Her husband is supportive, but a "little freaked out" by her growing commitment to and observance of Jewish life.

3) Class Presentation

Dina brought a picture of her family (husband, self, and five children). She said that they are the reason she is here. She has treated Judaism as a "religion" for a long time, but now wants to really "live it." She hopes the class will help her live Jewishly every day.

4) Individual Spiritual Guidance

<u>Session 1 (11/24/08)</u>

Section A:

D: I just feel a tremendous amount of urgency about doing this class now.
J: Why the urgency? Tell me more.
D: First, I am now the age that my mother was when she died. I feel that this is the mid-point in my life. I hope this is only the mid-point. I feel an urgency to be a model for my kids to teach

them how to go through life. My older two have had so much trouble. I don't want the same thing to happen to my younger ones.

J: Twice a day, after the *Sh'ma*, we recite: "*V'shinantam l'vanekha*"—the commandment to teach our children.

D: Yes; I feel that. And it is also a very private, personal journey. I want to continue to find inner peace and to do my part in the world. I don't have any questions about God's existence; only about God's power. Not totally sure about that. But, I do know something about my own power. And, all I can do is to do what I know is right. I want my children to remember me as always trying to do the right thing. When Bryce was writing his "re-entry" essay to NC State after his suspension, he talked about me and how I was his model of doing for others and making the world a better place. I always want my children and community to be able to say that about me.

Section B:

J: What has this [your Jewish journey and deepening of commitment to Jewish life] been like for Ron [her husband]?

D: Well, this has been hard to tell you the truth.

J: How so?

D: Well, as you know, I see this as a very private sort of thing. It feels kind of vulnerable and scary?

J: What feels scary about it?

D: It just feels so private… you and Eric must talk about these things, but I don't think most people do. It is just so personal. You know Ron and I have our own lives. We love our kids and we enjoy spending time together, but we do our own thing most of the time. I treasure that he gives me space to live my life. To work. To travel. And he spends a lot of weekends on his boat. And that is fine. When we are together, we just don't talk about this kind of stuff.

J: Is there something, in particular, that you are scared of broaching with Ron? Are you scared of shaming him in some way? (Ron was raised by an adoptive father in a house in which Dina reports that religion was coercive, authoritarian, and judgmental). Are you scared of Ron feeling

abandoned by you in some way? (Ron was abandoned by his biological father as a baby and was extremely destitute for much of his early childhood.)

D: Yes to both of those questions. It is hard to know how to move forward with him in terms of sharing my journey.

J: Well, as you know I think marriage is the primary vehicle for adult growth. Relationships are where healing can take place. There is that great story from the Talmud in which God matches this one with that one and talks about matching lovers as being as difficult as splitting the Red Sea. It is miraculous how we come together.

D: I know that Ron is the right one for me. He lets me do what I need to do to survive. I have a strong personality and he has no problem with that. He lets me do my thing. Even though he is on a different path, and at a different pace, he is Jewish to the core. He would never have married a non-Jew. I am so glad I found him; I can't imagine taking this journey with someone who wasn't Jewish.

J: What would it be like to talk about these things in a non-judgmental way… deepening intimacy by sharing?

D: I don't know. I mean sometimes I think about talking with him about it when we are having dinner alone, but it just never seems to happen.

J: I don't have the answer for how or even if this conversation must take place, but I want to throw out there, that such a conversation, might be a healing for you both—for Ron to know he won't be abandoned and that religion can be non-shaming, and for you to enter this next chapter of your life with meaning, connection and purpose in a way your mom didn't have a chance to do—with Ron by your side even if he isn't sitting there with you in the pews.

D: I have told him that if it weren't for Jewish tradition and shul, I really would have lost my mind during what we went through with Bryce and Logan. That part he knows. But he has no idea why I am so eager now. He jokes that I am a 'born-again' Jew. I sometimes joke that if they don't get on board, I'm going without them and they can find me at Sha'arei [the local Chabad Lubavitch center in Raleigh]. Of course that isn't true at all, but I like to tease.

J: What if deep down he fears you *might* leave him behind? Why not open a conversation that is in the interest of sharing *your* journey with no expectation that he follow in your path?

D: Actually it was interesting because last night we sat down to a Sunday night dinner as a family and Ron said, "Ok, who is going to do the blessing?' "I was like, what?" We normally don't do that. But clearly he feels drawn to tradition too, in his own way.
J: How interesting. Why not talk about it? Explore it with benevolent curiosity? Something to think about…

Session 2 (1/26/09)

Section A:

D: I did talk to Ron… not like in a serious way, sitting down and saying this is what we are going to talk about, but more informally. I said to him that I feel very compelled to do a lot because of my mom and that she did not have the opportunity. I feel a sense of urgency. It's almost like I can't stop myself. It is something that burns from within. I have such a strong desire. I didn't go down the road of saying you don't need to worry about me becoming Hasidic. I will have that conversation, but that didn't feel quite important as the other. There wasn't a conversation, it's just a fact..
J: What did it feel like for you to put it out there?
D: Well I had pretty much put it out there before, but I think it was a re-affirmation of what I have said before. You know I think there is a part of him that admires that and then there is another part that wishes I wouldn't do so much. It's not like he is saying, I can't take this. I think it is just part of my inherent personality and he is accepting of that. It's like yesterday, I went with Pam to the Helen Wright Center at Urban Ministries to serve lunch.
J: Oh, yes. How was that?
D: It was wonderful! I highly recommend our whole group does that. I kind of put myself in their place. It could be any of us. I mean Pam said I am two paychecks away from being like them. And, these were normal women. They were white, they were black. Some had children, some didn't. I made all the desserts and didn't go out and buy them. I don't like store bought stuff. And if you could see the joy in eating with us. They were filling up the bowls and taking them home. My youngest son helped me cook the desserts, and Logan (second oldest) came and helped me to serve. It was so humbling and made me feel so good to do that. So, Ron said with

affection as we were leaving to go to volunteer, "I guess someone said this needed to be done and my wife had to sign up." Yep. You got it. He is accepting. I can't help it. This is what I need to do. I have to volunteer and do *mitzvot*. I guess it is not a bad thing as long as I can keep in check. We are still putting food on the table. Homework is getting done… so it's fine.
J: I have probably said this before, but I feel so much of life comes back to *gevura* (divine attribute of limits, boundary-setting, and judgment) and *hesed* (divine attribute of relational loving kindness and mercy) and keeping those two forces in balance. They have to exist with each other. Both equally important.
D: I know I can't cure the world. And that is overwhelming to know that I can only do a very small part, but I do have to do my part. And the kids' involvement is critical. I will be doing that again with my younger ones. Maybe Ron could even become in involved. I mean anything I give is half of his anyway, but to do it all together as a family… for him to feel that commitment.
J: That would make it an even greater, more meaningful family expression.
D: And I did talk to him a little about tzedkah more generally. You know we don't talk to our kids about the money we give to charity and to educate them about what and why we give. It is something that even my parents talked about. I know they gave but I never knew what and why. I love that my younger ones know they have to give 10% off the top. But we never talked about that before with our older ones. I don't know why we aren't talking about it. We can't go on this trip because we gave here and that is more important to us.
J: This is "*v'shinantam l'vanekha*." Teaching your children. Making these values explicit. This is what is important to us.
D: That is the beauty of this class because is brings it to the forefront. It's like I wouldn't be thinking about this to the same degree without our class and learning together.

Section B:

J: So what do you think are the next steps for you and Ron? Is there a desire to deepen the conversation or do you feel more at peace?
D: You know I think I feel more at peace. He is so supportive. He knows I have to do my own thing. It is a partnership, but he has a life and I have a life. And outside the confines of our

home, it looks really different. He has friends I don't want to have anything to do with. And part of that is an age difference [he is 13 years older]. I think for now, I see Peyton and Holden's b'nai mitzvah as an opportunity for him to get more involved and until then I think I want to shelve it. Like he told me today that he wants to go to some fishing school and it happens to be on Sisterhood Shabbat (when she was set to lead a significant portion of the prayer service for the first time). If this were my bat mitzvah date that would be something different, but I am doing this for me and I don't need him to be there. To me, it wasn't that important that he be there to see it. And I don't know if this is good or bad, but I didn't mind at all and told him to go to that school and have a great time.

J: I think if you feel supported and honored for the journey that you are taking, and there are many ways that he does things so that you can do this, and you feel that he cares you feel fulfilled, that is what is important. I am going to be honest with you that if you felt a gaping hole that you had reached this moment, and acquired these skills, and there would be a void without him there, I would encourage you to talk with him about it.

D: And that is just it. I am going to have many other opportunities and I just don't need him here. If he were here, he would be there. But he has something special going on and I want him to be able to do that too. You know I told you that I got this big contract signed at work and my boss emailed me a note of congratulations. And I forwarded it to Ron and said: "You are half of this. Because of you, I get these congratulations. Everything I am allowed to do in my life is because he is that kind of partner. I can be independent and do my thing." Now when it comes to the kids b'nai mitzvah, I will ask him to be more present and have no problem saying that. But, this is my thing. And I'm okay with that. I am not going to guilt him into anything.

J: You know, something that I notice is that you have a real gentleness about you, especially as it relates to him. You bring that and you have your own fire and drive as you discover your own spiritual path, but it is not done in a way that kind of emits fire around you and it seems Ron experiences a kind of gentleness from you about it and I think that is such an important way that we teach—and especially with those of us who have fragile parts, and we all do. And that is the kind of things a partner can do that no one else can do in the same way.

D: I appreciate that. I cannot and don't want to be his father.

J: A loving partner who can extend themselves through gentleness is a great gift that you bring.

Section C:

J: How are feeling about where Logan (second oldest son) these days?
D: You know what, I am exhausted. It is exhausting.
J: It is exhausting!
D: It is just exhausting… but I'll tell you what, God willing you and everyone I know will never have some of the issues that we have had with him… and we all have isSarahs, but, one day, and we will be friends when your kids are teenagers and you can come to me.
J: And you'll be there to say, I've seen it.
D: I worry about him but then I watched him yesterday serving at the women's shelter… and another thing I did yesterday when I cleaned out my office I came upon some old family videos and I watched a video of his sixth birthday party and I tell you, the child is just the greatest kid. I mean I love all my children, and love them for their strengths, but I have always had a special thing for Logan. And I think it is because he walks to the beat of his own drummer. And, I love that about him.
J: And so do *you*.
D: Yeah, and I just love that, but he has to get to the point that he does care about what others think of him and what society expects of him. He has to learn to contain his energy and use it for good. I mean, as his parents, we have tried to do everything for him, but I know ultimately, he has to do it for himself. That has been really hard. His choices are not what I think are right for him, but that doesn't matter. Only with time will he understand what he needs to do. I wish I could control everything he does and chooses, but I know I can't. It's awful. It's awful. I don't know what next year is going to look like for him at all. But, all I can do is pray that God helps him make the right choices for himself. A certain point comes when there isn't much more I can do.

<u>Session 3 (2/9/09)</u>

Section A:

J: So, how are feeling after Sisterhood Shabbat (in which she led a significant part of the prayer service for the first time)?
D: Wow, you know, I am relieved. When you do something like that it's like a presentation. I studied it, I did it, I feel good about it.
J: You put a lot of time preparing and putting so much energy and integrity into that. And now it is yours.
D: That's right. I even emailed Jim (another congregant hoping to do the same thing) last night and said, "I nailed it and I am here to help you if you need me."
J: That is great!
D: So I thought it was a great weekend. My preference is for the rabbi to be leading services, but the ladies did a nice job. I felt like I was in college and I walked into the test well-prepared, so I wasn't too nervous. And I hope that the younger ones will want to do it too. I loved that Peyton went up with me…
J: And just having seen you do it, I think there is so much power in that. Knowing that it can be done, in knowing that it can be scary and you can still do it because it is meaningful to you and in just having the courage to try something new. I mean a couple of years ago, you probably never would have considered this.

Section B:

D: This is what I thought we could talk about today. In last week's class we talked about Shabbat and I want to think about a game plan for how my Shabbat might look so I can take steps to be more observant and include my family in that, also knowing that there are limitations. What can that look like for me?
J: I love that. Let's do it.
D: So here is the question. I feel that Friday nights are very rushed. It is hard for me to think about lighting candles at 5 PM. Dinner is definitely not done by then. So I am kind of thinking that the timing isn't the most important thing to me. The fact that we light them is more important. So I am compromising on that if that makes sense. And then we all fight about who lights the candles, so what I was thinking about is getting them all a candle to light so no one has to fight over it.

J: Sounds great. That is very traditional to light a candle for each member of the family.

D: Okay, and then last week, Peyton is like laying her head on the table, and I'm like, this is not okay.

J: She does not have that "Shabbat feeling."

D: No, She does not have that "Shabbat feeling." And it's kind of like a race to them to get through all the blessings to be done. And I want to do all the blessings and want them to sing with me. If they don't do it, they won't eat. This isn't peaceful so I want to set it up so we can do a better job. I want to make it so it is less stressful on me. And then I was thinking, we brought in the hand washing and the blessing after the meal that I just learned thanks to your class. And, I want to make it more special for Ron too. Like I know you are supposed to have sexual relations on Shabbat and if I told that to Ron, he would be so all over that. And then, what is my Shabbat on Saturday after services. I can easily see committing to not shopping or going to the grocery store. And that doesn't mean Ron isn't going to go, but that is his business. And, learning how to do *havdalah* which we have never done.

J: Well, I think this is really exciting and you are asking so many important questions. I think you understand this is a process. Nothing is black and white and this may take time… One possibility is for you to have a family meeting. Even if Ron doesn't want to join in, in which you set forth the value that Shabbat is meaningful to you and you want it to become more so. And then open it up to the kids' and Ron's ideas about what they like, don't like. They may have their own creative ideas too. Then you can share ideas to. Everyone has a voice. And hopefully, once there is a family vision, everyone has a stake.

D: In fact, maybe I can have one child help me prepare the dinner each week and make that special.

J: Exactly. The whole point is that this is very special time. When we wash our hands before the blessing, we are *slowing things down*. So, if you can enable them to feel that have a special voice, like picking out the dessert, etc. then they will feel that.

D: I think I have do this really slowly.

J: You may see yourself as gentle guide in all of this. You can set some limits like, we will not watch tv or movies, but beyond that, everything is open. I want to spend special time with you.

D: Right; I don't want to police them and go down that road.

J: I don't think you have to. That is not the point.

D: I want to be more observant, but I am not ready to let go of everything because that wouldn't work for my family.
J: I think the clearer you can be with the kids about what your spiritual goals are: to spend special time, to slow down and to give them specific ideas, like we will also share our best and worst moment of the week at dinner. The more structure and ideas you can give them will probably be comforting to them. You can let them know that this is an experiment and a journey that we are discovering together and adults grow and change just like kids do.
D: Exactly, it feels like Shabbat is over when we get home from services on Saturday and I want to feel that I am becoming more observant and they are part of that… a whole 24 hours of Shabbat. And this is a process.
J: It is definitely a process. Take your time and move at your own pace.

5) Reflection Piece #2

Well, the first thing I did before beginning to write this "reflection" was to re-read the document I wrote on "What it means to be Jewish". I was thrilled to see that my thoughts had not changed since I began studying with our Bat Torah class. In fact, I continue to look for ways to feel more of the connection to Judaism that I am seeking. It is difficult to focus on just one "learning" that I took away from our first year of study. The big discovery for me is that I am so thankful that my parents did not insist that I have a Bat Mitzvah when I was 13! If I had become a Bat Mitzvah, I sincerely doubt that I would have taken this course. I think I would have thought that I had learned what I needed to know so there would be no reason to be in this class…and with time always being a consideration, I would not have taken the time. Just imagine how much I would have missed out on! Just imagine the lack of knowledge I would have thought to be acceptable because I was brought up Jewish and attended Hebrew school and Sunday school. If I had a Bat Mitzvah, I would think I knew what I needed to know in order to accept the responsibilities of becoming a "Daughter of the Commandments". The first year of this class actually taught me that we do no favor to our children by asking them to accept these responsibilities if we allow the learning to stop when the ceremony is over. How did I go through 40+ years as a Jewish woman and know so little? This truly overwhelms me! Did I love all we studied or even think it was relevant to my life? No, but I learned something new with

every class. And in addition to every week learning a fact or information that comes from my ancestors or something commanded by God, I learned about my fellow classmates and their quest of Judaism. I was able to see Judaism through the eyes of a woman that chose to be Jewish, through the eyes of woman that was brought up with little Jewish guidance, through the eyes of women that are more and less observant than me, through the eyes of women that are seeking something different from me and those that are not sure what they are seeking. Each of them brought something unique and precious to our studies. And then I was amazed more by the insight and excellence our Rabbi brought to each session. No matter the subject matter, I was drawn by her wisdom and thoughts and her patience at the questions and comments. So, actually the key of this past year is that the B'nai Mitzvah ceremony itself does not signify the beginning or completion of a journey; my big "learning" is that Judaism is a religion that is in fact comprised of many journeys and I am a little better because I have embarked on one that God willing will make me more knowledgeable and educated, more considerate and compassionate, more observant in my daily Judaic quests and a better wife, parent, daughter, friend, teacher, and employee.

<u>Pam</u>

1) Reflection Piece #1

I moved to Raleigh 11 years ago. I moved here to be near my son and grandson. I came with great hopes. I left a very active Jewish community. I went to shul almost every Friday night. I was attached to shul, the rabbi and my friends. I left with an oneg Shabbat in our honor. It was bitter sweet to leave but the future to be with my family was what I craved. As soon as I moved down here my husband was hospitalized. Life couldn't have been more difficult. How do you cope with living in a strange place? Your husband critically sick… and no friends. Somehow you function. You shower, dress, and walk one step at a time. Your life is like walking on glass. One bad stop and everything will go. Is there a God? How do I make my husband better? Where do I buy food? Where do I pick up medicine? How do I make a life for him and myself? Questions… and more questions. So, one night, I decide to go to Beth Meyer for a Friday night service. How strange this is to me. I look and see no familiar face. The rabbi is not someone

that knows my name. I am in a sea of unfamiliar faces. People smile at each other but not at me. And then the service starts. I hear the music and the tunes are the same. I turn around and welcome the Sabbath bride. I am home.

2) Summary of Questionnaire

Pam began this class after taking the first year of the Melton adult education program. She describes feeling closer to her "Jewishness." The more she knows, the more she feels herself growing. She says, "There is such wisdom and fairness in this religion… I truly feel that God is leading me in this direction." She wants to learn about Judaism, and also about herself because she is a teacher and role model for young children. She writes, "I love being Jewish and I want it to shine through my actions and words. It's one thing 'loving' being Jewish but its important that I have the knowledge to go with it." In thinking about the timeline of her life she writes, "I am searching for peace. I have much to be thankful for. I feel that I am on a journey and that my mission for peace will be in Judaism. I feel the more I learn and embrace my religion, I will be closer to God and hopefully peace." She has great hopes to be lead by me as her teacher and a strong willingness to follow. Pam believes in God and feels her life is a miracle. She believes that God has a path for her, including being a member of this class and doing acts of loving-kindness. She yearns to understand "why bad things happen?" and how to keep her love and faith in God strong when terrible things happen to people. She also longs to accept the tragedies that she has personally faced. She wants to "be free of guilt and open to love again." Pam also wants to learn to Hebrew, to pray with meaning and understanding. She hopes that her children and grandchild will be proud of her achievements and that her students will feel the love and knowledge of Judaism that she has gained. Most of all, she wants to feel closer to God and to feel God's loving embrace.

3) Class Presentation

Pam knew she was Jewish as a child because "she ate Jewish food". Her father played pinochle on Friday nights and her mother played mah jong. She never went to synagogue, so one can imagine her surprise when one day she found a bag of tefillin under her sister's crib. Her parents

explained that they kept the tefillin in a bag under each of the children's cribs and, as an adult, Pam asked if she could keep the bag and its contents. Pam reasoned that her parents must have believed in something and so did she.

4) Individual Spiritual Guidance

Session 1 (9/15/09)

P: You know we talk all the time, but I always assumed Rabbi Eric has told you about my life.
J: Actually we don't talk about what happens in pastoral meetings with congregants. I would be honored if you can share some of your story with me.
[She proceeds to tell me about the dissolution of her first marriage and her marriage to her second husband, move to Raleigh, and the difficulties of his mental illness that peaked after their move.]
P: He never ever got better. If I left the house, I would have to lock everything up, because he would kill himself. I came home from my haircut and he swallowed bleach. Just so you know what I was living with. I had no life. It was horrible. It sounds like I am cold talking about it, but I had just had it. I remember that if he had an appointment with the doctor at 2 PM, he would always be drunk and asleep on the couch. I couldn't ever get him up to even get help. I remember throwing water on him to wake him up to go to the doctor. It was the only thing I could do. What I am trying to tell you is that the love I had for him disappeared. After a year and half, I couldn't live like that anymore. And, to make matters worse, my son said that he could no longer bring my grandson over because Bill was so sick. My one joy. So what was I to do? I sought out a lawyer and she suggested I serve him divorce papers. How could I divorce a man who was mentally ill? Of course, I didn't do that. So my son had the idea that since he was in and out of the mental hospital for three weeks at a time, we would take my name off the family member list and my son would get the calls. Then my son suggested we get him a nice institution in Chapel Hill… how could we afford it? But my son reminded me that he was my husband and I used to love him, and so we did it. We moved him in on Tuesday and he hung himself on Wednesday. I have been in penance ever since. I was planning on going to Israel one day, you know, one of those community trips. So, every time a trip roles around, I don't go.

You know, to punish myself. So, I decided I would make a new life for myself, be a good grandmother, work here at the pre-school, love the children, saying kaddish every week, and do acts of kindness whenever possible. Then, one Shabbat I am standing there saying kaddish and I meet this man named Matthew. He is going through a divorce and he is looking for a Jewish woman. And I fell in love, like I never did before. So fast, so deep. He knew all my problems and I knew his and we were going to make a life together. He moved into my life and we had such a good time together. He loved synagogue and I thought I was in Jewish heaven. He had a lot of problems but together it seemed like we are going to be okay. Then one day, I get a call at home and they say, do you know Matthew H.? Sure, I said. He is in such and such hotel and is lying on the floor from a drug overdose. He is alive so I get him in the car and drive him to a hospital. I am hitting him and saying, how could you do this to me? So, he recovers in the hospital and comes home and says he is so sorry and all this stuff. My psychiatrist starts seeing him and we start having a life together again. I was so scared but I wanted it to be okay and he was getting good help. Then one day he didn't come home. I knew it was bad news. So, I called the police and eventually he was found at a hotel. He shot himself. And that was it. So, I just realized that in some ways I was done. But, I had to get back on my feet and teach to keep my job and prove I could take care of myself. It wasn't easy and it has taken seven years to get to the place I am now. I don't know why I am here and why I am doing this Bat Mitzvah thing, but here I am. I feel like God has brought be here in some one and what I am seeking is peace. I decided to make my life as good as it can be. To be a great teacher and to live my life in synagogue. But I am not in peace. How do you be in peace after something like this? Two suicides. Two eulogies. You know I think that a number of years, if you said, who do you feel most sorry for at the synagogue, people would have said me. I would have been the poster child for the pathetic person.

J: Do you still feel that way?

P: No. I feel like people respect me a lot now. It has been seven years. I have worked hard to get where I am. I am at much more peace now. But why? Why did all this happen to me? Clearly I go to the wrong men. I know I am attracted to people who have a lot of needs and sadness. I know there is something going on there, but don't know why. I know there must be something in me that is doing this… it has just been a hard life. And then life goes on. I know on the outside I look like a really happy person, but on the inside there is a lot of sadness. There

has just been so much death. I can't help but thinking about the worst with things. But I always go to every funeral and as difficult as it is, I know it's the right thing to do. And it looks like my destiny is to teach children and live a real Jewish life. And adding this bat mitzvah onto it all, that is such a huge thing for me. I think it is really God driving me to do this. And maybe you are here, God has a strange way of bringing us together so that I could heal. To go to Israel To finally forgive myself. I don't want to make you nervous about this, but maybe you are here for me for a reason. I feel I can share all this with you.

J: First I just want to say I am so sorry for all the traumas you have endured. I cannot imagine moving through all these difficult experiences.

P: So it is miraculous that I found myself here. All those traumas were connected to me coming to a synagogue. It all comes back to being Jewish and God.

J: So for you, this place is a *m'kor hayim*. A source of life. Even though there was all this death and destruction here, you were drawn here. But you also made a choice. And that is what we are taught in Deuteronomy: "Choose life." Every day we make a conscious decision, some days more conscious than others, to choose life—whatever the day will bring. And by making your home here, and community here, and work here, you have chosen life.

P: And as you can see, I just love it here. I love it to bits!

J: When I think of people who have found their calling, I think of you.

P: Definitely. And the more comfortable I am in Jewishness, like Hebrew, the more I can give. When I take the children for a walk in the woods and talk about God, and the children don't doubt the Godliness that is everywhere, I can affirm that. I feel God here too. That is something that I can give. [She goes on to tell me stories about the children and their understanding of God.] So you see there is also a deep happiness that lives inside of me too.

J: It's not a switch you turn on and off. It's a process. It sounds like there is a deep brokenness, but that is something we carry forever. It doesn't mean that the tablets can't be made whole again.

P: Oh, yes definitely. But suicide, well, there are some things I'll never heal from.

J: I hear you. You know there is a story in the Torah when Moses smashes the tablets in anger, he later tells the people to put the tablets in the ark. But the Talmud asks the question: which tablets? The whole ones or the broken ones? And the rabbis say: both. And I treasure that midrash because we are commanded to carry with us both the broken pieces of our lives and the

whole ones. And inside of you, live both. You couldn't do the work you do, without some whole pieces. You couldn't have the resilience to make it all that you have been through without a very whole core.

P: But suicide feels so hard. There is no one to talk to about it. It is like the elephant in the room. But now that I am with you, I feel like I can talk to you. I feel good about with you.

J: I am glad you are here and I feel honored to be able to be with you here in this way.

P: You may remember that I told you last year how much guilt and remorse I had about not going to his grave. I was too afraid to face it. I live with guilt and remorse. And I went with your husband. It was rough at the beginning and then we found it and that was a big thing.

J: You did it.

P: And I apologized for what I did… what I couldn't do.

J: Let's continue to talk about this when we meet next.

Session 2 (11/24/08)

Section A:

[For this session, Pam asked that we study what Judaism has to say about suicide. Her "Melton" class was going to do a session on this topic but she did not feel comfortable to attend. Instead, she suggested that she bring the course texts to me and we study them together privately.]

J: How would you like to begin?

P: What I have learned in Melton, above all, is how important a human life is. If I learn all this, this makes the suicide isSarah so much harder.

J: Tell me more.

P: Life in Judaism is the most important thing. How do I accept that two people I love did this? How can I find any peace in that? How long can I punish myself for this? When can I pay my debt? I know you're not a miracle worker…

J: I'm definitely not. I hope that in looking at some of these texts, my goal is to help you see an approach to suicide has evolved over time and how Judaism leads in direction of life… not just your husbands', but YOUR life too. Your life is worth saving and honoring. So, yes, life is the

most precious thing and that is what makes this so difficult. But the historical adjustment of the laws to suicide is to honor the living.

[Overall, I think Pam was astonished to see that the way that Jews thought about suicide in the Bible, and the way that those views have changed. These changes represent our changing understanding of mental illness. Pam was particularly moved by Saul's suicide in the Bible. We talked about the law evolving to make every allowance to forgive the person who takes their own life and to extend mourning rites to the survivors. She felt that everything was opening up for her and God was leading her to study with me. I suggested that God is inviting her back into life. She may not always feel she needs to punish herself. This takes time, of course. She was moved by the rabbis' leniency—both in the direction of the one who committed suicide and the survivors.]

Section B:

P: Wow. These texts are so beautiful. I think everyone should really study this stuff. I had no idea, to be honest with you, where this was going to lead me. That it would end up being so positive.
J: Well, I want to acknowledge how much courage it took for you to bring these texts to me.
P: Well, I couldn't have done in a room full of people at a Melton class, but I knew that if I was going to be in your Bat Mitzvah class, I needed to get a handle on this, and I trust you so much.
J: I am so glad.
P: I think we have an interesting relationship, because I know you trust me with you son, and I trust you as my rabbi. It's kind of nice that the tables have turned now. I know you trust me. That makes me feel good.
J: I do. It is very special that we can teach each other in this way. Thank you for saying that.
P: Thank you for all of this.
J: Thank you for having the courage to share with me. It is a process. It is not going to change all at once.

<u>Session 3 (2/23/09)</u>

P: I believe in God. My life is a miracle. I was so close to ending it. I have so much to live for now. Here is where this is going. I need your advice. The man I am dating now really wants to have a love. He wants me to be his love. I go to his house and there is a picture of me on the wall. And I don't know how to do it. I am so afraid. I am so worried that I am going to start loving him… I want to feel that if he didn't show up tomorrow, I'd be fine. But once you start loving…. So it is so scary. And I think I remember some kind of quote you told me about this and I don't remember it. It was from the Torah and I remember you didn't even look it up. You had it in your head.

J: Hmmm… what was the feeling that you got from the words?

P: I don't remember but it just touched on exactly what I am facing now.

J: Ah, I remember. I am wondering if I shared with you that beautiful line about the moment that Jacob kisses Rachel and weeps? Rashi, French commentator from the year 1000, then tells us that the reason Jacob cries after kissing her is that he recognizes that they will not die together. Once you love, you also must anticipate loss—even in death.

P: Yes, yes. That is it. Will you email me that quote as well? That is how I feel. And, I feel that if I don't get this, I am going to lose something very, very special. He is so Jewish. He volunteers at the women's shelter. He busies himself with acts of loving kindness. He mirrors my love of volunteering. We light the candles together for Shabbat and do havdalah.

J: Tell me what is similar and different about this relationship.

P: He cares about me; that is the same. But there is such a big danger here. The fear of another loss.

J: Tell me about what is different about him.

P: He is more mature. The other one was all passion. So much passion. This, I don't have that kind of feeling. That upsets him, but I don't have that. But maybe it could be different… to grow into a lovely kind of companionship. There are all kinds of love aren't there.

J: Sure. And there are different rhythms and paces to finding a deep relationship. Do you feel he is understanding of where you are?

P: Sometimes and sometimes, not. That's why I am here. I want to find a way to make peace with this. Maybe I never will? How do you learn to open up your heart to love again? I mean so many things have happened in life that God took care of. A scholarship to the Melton class.

Health insurance in this job that arrived just when I thought I would have to quit. The scholarship to this Bat Mitzvah class. So the path has showed me that I belong at this synagogue and I belong in Judaism. And now I know Hebrew—my vowels and my letters. Everything I thought I couldn't do, I can do. Now I know I can be a bat mitzvah. In the beginning I didn't think so. I feel so much in love with teshuvah and I am passing my lessons on. But how do you love again? I remember what Rhoda (another vibrant elderly congregant) said to me when she married Al. I thought she was like the bravest lady in the world to get married in her 70s knowing that she was going to be a caretaker eventually. And Rhoda said, I don't know how long we'll have, but we are going to have a good time. Wow. So, how do you do it?

J: See, I think you *do* know how. Because you have done it already. You have faced multiple tragedies and losses and perhaps you wondered many times, how will I wake up in the morning? How will I take another breath? How will I go to work?

P: Yeah. That is how bereavement works. Baby steps.

J: Yes. And this is the most natural question to ask, but you know how to love.

P: But I am afraid.

J: I hear that. Love is scary. People go through treatment for cancer and are they afraid when they go to their first check-up post remission? Of course they are. You know, I can't offer you advice on whether or not this is the right relationship for you or whether you ought to love this person, but what I can tell you is that you know how to do this.

P: I do.

J: And you need to go at your own pace.

P: Yes.

J: Have you shared with him your fears? Do you feel that you can be you—in your strength and in your vulnerability?

P: I have. It is slow.

J: I think God implants within us a compass of sorts. And you have to be in conversation with the compass. Because the compass will tell you what direction to go it, but it won't always tell you the speed or the way. You have a strong intuitive sense that this is a holy, happy relationship in which you feel there are shared values and interests. And at the same time you have a speedometer inside that is saying "whoa." And I think you have to honor that.

P: Part of me is that I feel that in loving again, I am forced to let go of Matthew (her last love, the second lover that committed suicide).
J: Does it feel like a betrayal?
P: Something like that. Mourning him. Letting him go. But I know if have to.
J: Well, you do and you don't. I often quote one of my rabbis who said that death is the end of a life, but not the end of a relationship. You can hold onto Matthew inside, even as your life goes on.
P: Well, I think you're going to ask yourself, did I help Pam? And I think you did. Just having someone to talk to. To share this with someone I can trust.
J: I want to echo that I don't know what will come of this relationship…
P: I know that you are not Ann Landers.
J: True. But I want to give you my permission to be happy, Pam. [She cries softly.] You deserve that…At the beginning of Genesis, God said everything is good. And then the first thing God said isn't good is for Adam to be alone. God doesn't want us to be alone.
P: It is safer to be alone.
J: I understand that. But you have also shown with your life that you can feel afraid and acknowledge and honor that, and if it feels right, take another step forward…. If that is the right thing.
P: Yes; I hear that. I so much want to just enjoy this. Like tonight I'm making us a Shabbat dinner. I'm off to pick up a challah for us. It is so nice. You know when you are alone, you don't do these things. It is such a joy to share this with somebody. Such a real joy. I always believed in doing these things, but now to do it with someone.
J: And remember, you can check in with yourself about the fear: is this fear because I am afraid of losing someone I love, or is it because I don't feel safe in this relationship, or that this isn't the right relationship. If your inner voice tells you that the fear is coming from the fear of loss, I think you can acknowledge that this is such a normal, natural feeling, especially having had your experiences in life. Be compassionate with yourself. If the fear is coming because your guts tell you something isn't right about this relationship, then I think you have to listen to that voice.

5) Reflection Piece #2:

Teshuvah means, “turning,” “answering, and “returning.” I have never learned this…. When I read this it touched my soul. Teshuvah speaks to me. Teshuvah tells me to look inside my soul. A kind of balance sheet of who I am… where I am going… and my conduct. I was so impressed with the six steps of repentance. How wise the rabbis are to find ways to forgiveness. As I go through life and being human there will be mistakes that I make. Judaism has the steps to go through forgiveness. I find this beautiful and so touching. This is a wonderful skill to teach children. We have to accept our frailties and find a way to ask forgiveness. And the best part is to improve our selves. To have a better relationship with God and the people we love. I am practicing teshuvah every day. I contacted an old friend in the synagogue who is suffering with breast cancer. After I read this chapter and listened to you discussion I contacted her the next day with a note. She wrote back telling me that my note brightened her day. So, I am sending her one of those “cutesy” cards weekly. Teshuvah has made me see that ignoring her pain, I was at fault for doing nothing for her. Teshuvah is done before Yom Kippur but we learned to look into our hearts often, I truly want a relationship with God and the people I love. Teshuvah opens up this for me. Teshuvah gives me permission to look into my soul. To give me a kind of check-list of how I am connecting with people that I work with… people that I love…and the universe. It gives me permission to see my mistakes and gives me a road map of asking forgiveness. This is very refreshing for me to learn. And now I can put this treasure to use. Let me take this opportunity to thank you for your wisdom. I have learned so much this year. Besides the knowledge that I am grasping I am now able to practice what I am learning. Like lighting Shabbat candles. Trying to observe Shabbat. Seeing the beauty of Shabbat. Relating to my Bat Mitzvah sisters. Thinking of mikveh in a brand new fresh way. Reading all those beautiful prayers. And yes, teshuvah will always be with me. And, I want to thank you for the counseling. I have had difficulty talking to you about the suicide, but in doing so, it really helped. As we read the texts and studied the words I got the message. That suicide is an illness and since our talks I can accept this. To be honest, sometimes I still feel that I could have done more… and then I close my eyes and remember your teaching and remember the words we read together and I feel better. How wonderful this must be fore you, to know that you have taken major pain from my heart. Thank you.

Sharon

1) Reflection Piece #1:

My Jewish journey actually has a beginning point: it began at age 16 at the recognition when I began to reveal the secret of my Jewish heritage which my parents had kept hidden from my sisters and me. That was over three decade ago, and since that time I have come far in my knowledge of Judaism and in my understanding of my family's history. The discovery of my Jewish ancestry has had a profound effect on me. The grandparents and aunt, whose lives had been kept secret from me, were an uncomfortable unspoken presence in my early life despite my parents' attempts to keep them far from my childhood. After my heritage was reluctantly acknowledged, I began to explore and learn about Jewish history, culture, and tradition. As I was raising my own children, my women friends become beloved and important as they modeled holidays and Jewish traditions in the home and welcomed me into the Jewish community. As I became more familiar with the traditions and made them my own, I realized that I was reconnecting to my people, discovering and loving the birthright which had been denied to me. As I continue to study Judaism, I feel that it represents a victory over the Nazi regime's desire for the "Final Solution." Was it a miracle that my parents fled German and survived, met in New York, married, and produced three daughters? Undoubtedly. Was it a miracle that two of the three daughters have chosen Judaism despite its hidden presence in their childhood? Perhaps. I believe that this miraculous passage, despite so many horrors and the unlikely possibility of its occurrence, represents the power of the Jewish people to sustain and believe. I feel that being a Jew is a link to Sarah and Abraham, a powerful link that time and time again has never been able to be severed. My desire to learn about Judaism is deepened by the connection I feel to those who were denied the right to study and purSarah it. The concept of *tikkun olam* is the part of Judaism to which I connect most readily. I find inspiration in the Torah as it teaches us to work for justice and peace. That we continue to seek justice and shalom, despite millennia of denial and persecution, inspires me to learn more and do more. While I identify a beginning to my Jewish journey, I recognize there will be no end until my life ends. Learning and becoming is life-long.

2) Summary of Questionnaire:

Sharon has wanted to take this kind of class for years and now that her three children have grown up and are out of the house, the time is finally right. She hopes to use what she learns to "be of service" and to remind herself that she is still a student of life. Sharon feels that she has 66% of life behind her and 33% ahead. Her experience has a Jewish mother has deeply impacted her sense of being Jewish, shaping the home and spiritual life of her family. She has endless questions about Judaism and hopes that I will offer her personal and spiritual guidance in our one on one time. In thinking about obstacles to a deepening relationship with/understanding of God, Sharon feels that "emotions interfere with thoughtful and contemplative prayer." She hopes to work through this and to have a greater understanding of formal Jewish prayer and the Hebrew language. She feels blessed to have the support of her husband and three children and feels she is slowly gaining confidence in her knowledge and abilities.

3) Class Presentation:

She brought a picture of a display from the Jewish museum in Germany where her father's personal belongings are displayed as artifacts. These objects were the only things her father left with when he fled Berlin in 1944 for Switzerland. She would play with the briefcase in the picture in her basement as a child. It was only years later, when her father was healthier, that he explained to her where the briefcase came from. Her father died ten years ago and when they memorialized him they passed on some of these precious possessions to the museum in Germany. Though she grieved the loss of her Jewish identity as a child, not knowing that she was in fact Jewish, she now sees her parents' act of concealment as an attempt to protect their children from the dangers of the world, and that is something she can relate to on a deep level. She doesn't have childhood memories but she has created them as a mother and she is eager to begin to create new memories as a Jewish adult.

4) Individual Spiritual Guidance

<u>Session 1 (10/20/08)</u>

Section A:

S: This has truly been a process for me. And sometimes I feel like a convert, and yet I'm not. But most often, I feel like I have the best of both worlds. I have a foot in both worlds—feeling like I am on the inside and also know what it is to be on the outside. I think I remember that Martin Buber said something like there were two types of learning—the learning from our ancestors out of tradition and the learning that is more intellectual. I feel like I come at Judaism from the intellectual side. And now, I am coming at it from an emotional perspective. And, one of the things I want to do is be much more aware of letting my three friends know how they have helped shape my Jewish life. I don't think they know how much of an impression they made on me. And, I always get stuck on the historical piece. The War always bring so much up for me. I didn't think I was going to tear up…. Well, I always try to focus on one person and that person is my father's middle sister whose name was Marion, one of three girls. She was deported to Auschwitz when she was 11 or 12 and she didn't have a chance to do this. That's who I am doing this for. She didn't have a choice, and I am so grateful to have this chance. So she is kind of where I begin the journey with my forefathers. But I get stuck with her.

J: Tell me more about getting stuck with her. What does that mean for you?

S: It's because there are so many generations before, but I don't know anything about them and so I always start with Marion.

J: I think many people don't even have a place to get stuck. So, the link you have is a very intimate. You are continuing the chain of tradition. Who would have expected?

S: And that is the miracle of Judaism for me… that we are still here. That I am still here. Who would have expected?

J: Yes; I often think of this when I teach about the destruction of the temple. If the rabbis hadn't created a new kind of Judaism, we wouldn't be here. There is always a kind of loss and shedding, but hopefully a new beginning as well.

S: Yes; so that is what I am doing. It is a heavy burden that I have not been ready to take on until you offered this class. Thank you for offering this when I was ready. That is part of the miracle for me.

Section B:

J: What does your Jewish identity feel like now, since we have started the class? Have you noticed a shift in any way?
S: I would say identifying as a Jew is definitely strengthening and I guess that comes with doing it more; living it. Going to shul on Shabbat, practicing my Hebrew almost every night, wanting to do Jewish rituals. You know it's funny. Jeff's parents who are Jewish stopped practicing Judaism for all intents and purposes, as soon as their children left the house. And we are almost the exact opposite. Our children have all now left the house, and I have never felt more strongly about making Judaism a serious pert of my life. We are at the opposite end! I can't imagine that our kids are doing their thing, and we are doing ours.
J: Your journey is taking off now. You are doing this over on your own terms.
S: Yes; and it's hard because Jeff's parents are our closest models and they are so disconnected from Jewish life now. So I really don't have any sense of what to expect as a Jewish adult.
J: Yes; and it is developing in some ways in contradistinction to the models that you have had.
S: Yes; and that's okay. Sometimes I feel sad about it and then other times, I feel it is okay.
J: It sounds like there is both the gift you feel of navigating these waters on your own terms and a certain sense of loss in not having models and guides to show you what to do.
S: Exactly. Like what you said about your tefillin in class. You never had any models of men or women wearing tefillin so you had no baggage that that was a "male" ritual. At the same time, you had no one to show you what to do.
J: Yeah. A rootlessness and at the same time this possibility.
S: One of the questions I want to ask you is that most of the time when I come to services and kaddish is said, I stand. It is for my Aunt Marion whom I mentioned died in Auschwitz. And if not for her, the millions more… Most of the time, I feel that is fine… is it?
J: What feels not fine about it?
S: To be honest with you, what other people might think of me. Is that ritually right? I feel I don't know enough. I don't want to be doing the wrong thing.
J: I think you will have to feel out what is right for you… and that might change over time. But from my perspective, let me share some of the things that were taught to me. The whole tradition around saying it, when, and how is ultimately to help us receive strength and comfort.

It is a prayer for the living. I think it is so compelling that you would want to say that for her regularly. Her memory is so much a part of why you are at services. And here is something else that an Orthodox rabbi taught me while I was studying in Jerusalem. He felt that everyone should stand for kaddish. The kaddish is about *kedushat Hashem*—words of praise for God. He bases this on the idea that what we are doing when we say kaddish to is to bring glory to God's name. Each of has a unique way of doing that in our lives. When someone dies, their unique contribution is lost. As witnesses to that loss, we stand out of our commitment to work even harder to add our voices to bring more Godliness into the world in light of our loss. We are all *standing* witness to that. I find that so moving. And the idea that he brought from this, is that if we are truly witness to this, we ought to stand—and this comes from a man who prays in a community in which that is not the norm.

S: That is a wonderful explanation. That you. That is really, really helpful.

J: And I think this is also about your knowledge expanding. I can say from my own experience that as I learn more and more, I feel more confident and rooted in my practice even when that diverges from the norm. The more we feel we don't know, we can feel tentative, but as your knowledge expands and feels more integrated, what you find is right for you will organically grow.

S: That is true and I can see many examples in other ways of that in my life. My latest struggle is with tallit. My deep hope is to feel comfortable wearing one and I have a beautiful tallit that one of my dear girlfriends I mentioned made for me. But, up until now, it hasn't felt right yet. Occasionally I try one, either mine, but also my childrens' tallitot which are all at home, and it just doesn't'fit. You know, I watch you pray in your tallit and it is beautiful. It just fits you. And you are really of model that. Maybe one day, I will feel that.

J: Can you tell me what doesn't fit?

S: The whole thing. I know I am supposed to say a blessing before I put it on. Which I can actually learn now, thanks to your class. But I am just not sure how to do it.

J: Okay, just so I understand, there is an awkwardness there in getting started with the blessing with which you are not familiar?

S: I feel like I'm faking it But then if I can move past it, I still feel that I am adjusting to something that doesn't feel comfortable yet. Also, it feels like I am demonstrating a kind of observance and piety that I am not ready to show or not living up to.

J: Hmm… is there a feeling of unworthiness there?

S: Probably (smiling and chuckling), I was trying to avoid going there. I feel a bit undeserving. And maybe there is that sense is that you get the tallit when you deserve it and have demonstrated the work to prove you are ready. Yeah. Unworthiness, that fits. So, I don't know, maybe over time that will change.

J: Well, that would be my prayer for you. Is that over time, which is nothing I can bestow up on you, somewhere along the path you find a sense that is your *yerusha*—your inheritance—both by birth and by choice. It is obvious to me that you understand that intellectually, but to come to feel that from inside out, spiritually… with wherever your practice takes you.

S: Any suggestions of how to get there?

J: I think putting one foot in front of the other. Living Jewish. Being gentle with yourself as you grow, but also pushing yourself to try new things. And see where it goes. There will be moments when you feel, I need to air on the side of compassion here. And other, moments when you feel strong enough to be pushed.

S: That sounds good.

J: But I think happens in little steps. It doesn't have to be halleluya moments or accepting a creed with perfect faith. You know, I had a wonderful teacher in Jerusalem, Rabbi Levi Lauer, who said that discomfort is a Jewish value. That is how we grow.

S: I get it. I don't have a timeline, but this sounds good.

Session 2 (1/12/09)

Section A:

S: Well, I have not worn a tallis yet.

J: Tell me what is getting in the way.

S: I don't know. I walked away from last session, and I said to myself, okay the tallis feels like a big step and I can take baby steps. So I started wearing my special kippah. And not only that, I am keeping in my car, because recently I arrived at services and forgot it. I didn't want to wear that generic white one. And I thought to myself, oh, this is good. I am becoming more accustomed to this—even attached to it. So, I guess that is small step.

J; That's a big step. You missed your kippah that you left at home. You even had a twinge of longing for it. You had made it your own.

S: Yes; so I feel like the next step is to pick a Shabbat and try to wear it.

J: It is not the same thing, but you might think of it as trying something on.. the way you might go to a store and put something on that you say from the get go, there is no way you are going to by. And then put it back on the rack.

S: Oh, that suits me. I do that all the time. So, I was thinking maybe Sisterhood Shabbat? Then again, maybe that is too much? I don't know.

J: You know, you don't have to sign on for a lifetime contract.

S: Oh, so I can just do it once?

J: Yes; and my only caveat with that is to do it with a sense of openness. You don't know what might come up for you in the experience. So enter it in the spirit of curiosity and openness.

[We proceeded to study the blessing for the tzitzit together, practicing putting it on, as well as setting an intention/*kavana* for it.]

Section B:

S: I'll tell you what my intention is right now. I wore a tallit two times when I was truly, truly moved and felt what it was meant to do. Several years ago, one of the first times I really participated in a *yizkor* memorial service and I saw what people did and wore my tallit and felt so embraced in doing it. And another time, it was a different, but equally powerful feeling. It was at the end of Yom Kippur services when you and Eric invited us to come up as individuals or families before the ark to utter our last prayers of the day. So, at the time it was just our youngest daughter and Jeff. And Eric invited us to wrap our family in a tallit. And we did. It was very, very powerful. In a different way. That's why those two episodes made me think, well, if it happened then, maybe I am limiting myself by not having this as an opportunity.

<u>Session 3 (3/16/09)</u>

S: So, I wanted to share with you what you have obviously have seen.

J: And…

S: So, no big deal. I mean it's a big deal and no big deal at the same time. It's been just so easy. I had this false perception of this large barrier which it was not. Thank you for helping me see that. Now I am at the point of having fun with in. You know, in a spiritual way.

J: I understand.

S: So, I have just been normalizing it. I think one of the things you helped me see is that it is an object that can be helpful, but I was making it much more than what it was. And I have many from which to choose. Because each of my three children left them home. So I trade off. This week is Sophie's week. Next Hannah's. And then, oh, Ben it's your turn too. And it just brings that piece with me. What I love about Judaism and what you have taught me is that this can fit *me*. I just love that. I had, what was my tallis that was made for me, and it is so big. It is gorgeous, but I haven't worn it. I always thought, that's mine, but it doesn't fit.

J: It doesn't fit.

S: And maybe it will one day. But for now, I have other choices. It is truly a blessing. This past Shabbat, we had way to much going on, and I rushed out of the house without it, and when I got to shul, I was so upset.

J: You missed it.

S: I did! And it happened so fast! I even have been wearing Jeff's bar mitzvah tallit that he grew out of. And, I just love it.

J: First of all, I am just so pleased to see you grow in this mitzvah and find your own connection. And another thing that I think is so beautiful is the way in which tallit has been a way to feel connected to your children now that they are no longer living at home. When I think back to some of stories you shared at the beginning of our time together and how you spoke of Marion, your aunt who perished in the Holocaust and your longing for Jewish connections here and now. And here you are wearing the tallitot of your children. You found a new way in which is a reaching back, but it is a reaching forward too.

S: It's so true. I hope one day they want them back, but for now, it is so nice to have this piece of them.

J: All the more so, now, that they are not home and you are transitioning into a new family rhythm.

S: I also wanted to tell you that I got rid of email and all computer use on Shabbat.

J: Wow.

S: Yeah, and that has been great. A real conscious decision. I love it. And Jeff still doesn't and he is so respectful that I don't. I don't even have the urge to ask him to check my email for me. Next step for us is havdalah… and re-newing our vows in a Jewish ceremony [Jeff and Sharon were married by her sister who is a Presbyterian minister], and so many other things… but there is time. I don't feel rushed. One step at a time.

5) Reflection Piece #2

As the first year of adult bat mitzvah class concludes, I'm asked to identify the topic which had the greatest impact during this year of study. I've pondered this question numerous times during the past few weeks and have considered several areas: I've finally learned to read Hebrew; I've gained a better understanding of the division of the service; I feel more comfortable wearing a tallit. While these issues have all been important, it would minimize the impact of our Monday night Bat Mitzvah class if I selected a single topic. The most profound learning experience for me this year is that I have become a regular attendant at Shabbat services. My attendance at Saturday morning services was not a single conscious decision, but has evolved during the year. Initially I went to services to have the opportunity to practice my Hebrew during congregational prayers. Then I went to practice feeling at ease wearing my tallis. Occasionally I went to keep my husband company or because I was interested in the guest speaker. Soon I began going because I was eager to hear the next section of Torah and D'var Torah. What became an occasional Saturday morning activity has become a habit, a spiritual and ritual occasion. I've experienced moments of true prayer and deep spiritual reflection on Saturday morning; certainly not every Saturday, but I now know it's a possibility. I've come to understand the rhythm of the service and have learned to appreciate communal prayer and ritual. The rich texts have prompted me to extend a discussion about a reading or a commentary on the Torah with my husband on the way home from shul or later during the weekend. During Shabbat service I've taken opportunities to ponder a line from Torah, a reading in the siddur, or simply mediate as I watch the sky change through the windows behind the bimah. I have become more comfortable in the study of Torah and Prayer/Avodah during this year. I don't anticipate that I'll be ready to

chant from the Torah next June, which is fine with me. “Becoming a bat mitzvah” is a process, and this year it has allowed me to discover the joy and beauty of the Shabbat morning service.

Sarah

1) Reflection Piece #1:

I am not sure what being Jewish means to me. Having been born Jewish, I have never lived another way, so it is just a part of my life. I grew up in a family where both parents were raised Orthodox, but after they got married they rebelled and became secular Jews. They go very active in Yiddish and Zionist movements, and joined the Sholem Aleichem Institute of Detroit. I was raised celebrating all the Jewish holidays, learned Yiddish and Hebrew, but we did not belong to a synagogue. I never really thought much about the spiritual aspects of being Jewish, but I know a great deal about the history and ritual parts of being a Jew. I feel that being Jewish is more of a way of thinking of the world and growing up with rituals and holidays that make you feel part of something bigger than yourself. It is a shared history that I hope we have passed onto our children. I have never connected much with the spiritual aspects of being Jewish, although I feel strongly about the other aspects of being Jewish. I don’t know if I believe in God or not. That part of the religion has never been very important to me, although we did raise our children as Conservative Jews, if for no other reason than we made some friends at Beth Meyer when we first moved her and decided to join. I have taken Melton and a number of other adult ed classes over the year and none have helped me to answer the question about God. Maybe this class will.

2) Summary of Questionnaire:

Sarah wants to learn more about Judaism, particularly Jewish prayers and practices. She is not sure where she stands in her life or what spiritual questions she faces. Being a woman has made her cynical about traditional Jewish practices. She hopes to get to know me better as her rabbi. She is not sure she believes in God and not sure how she would like to feel based on this process of learning. She did not feel the class would have much of an impact on her husband as he is used to her taking all sorts of classes and doing his own thing.

3) Class Presentation:

Having visited cousins and family in Israel many times, Sarah brought something with us that she bought on one of her trips that related to Rosh Hashanah (which was fast approaching): a jeweled shofar.

4) Individual Spiritual Guidance

Session 1 (9/22/08)

Section A:

[For the first 15 minutes of the session, Sarah discussed her mother-in-law's (a Holocaust survivor] unveiling which had occurred the day before outside of Chicago. Her mother-in-law died 8 month's ago very suddenly of a blood clot after being quite healthy. Sarah talked rather dispassionately about the ritual and reviewed the events leading up to her sudden death. Eventually, she paused and this is where the following conversation picks up.]

J: Do you miss her?
S: (crying all of sudden) Yeah, I really do. She was just really, really hard to describe. Now I am sort of at the age where….I mean I love my parents. Mark's parents were the super independent ones and did everything right up to the end. My parents were the ones driving us crazy. And his parents are gone now, and mine are still going. It is an irony of sorts. We were always together with them for the holidays. So that was kind of hard. But, we wanted to get the unveiling over with…
J: Well, the holidays will certainly feel different this year.
S: Yes; they will. Though the rest of Mark's family will still come to be with us. Then there are my parents who are all along out in Michigan. That's another story. [She then reviewed her Jewish life growing up, and Jewish journey as she grew into adulthood, married, and moved to Raleigh. In particular, she drew attention to the fact that she grew up with secular parents and

Mark grew up with semi-traditional Jewish practice and carried the weight and identity of being the son of a Survivor. From the time they married, however, she has been the one more interested in living a Jewish life.]

Section B:

S: The irony is that in a way I know more about …. I mean, his idea of a good service is the faster the better. His parents were like that too. His idea of a Jewish life is minimalist. Some survivors go really religious, some leave it all together, and some just barely hold on. That was Mark's parents and Mark for that matter. Mark's mother didn't necessarily believe God saved her. She used to talk to young children about her experience. She believed there was only one thing that saved her. Pure luck. She didn't keep kosher or go to synagogue, but she kept the holidays. But Mark always had a thing that when you moved somewhere you should belong to a synagogue. I never did that before given my family's history. If it hadn't been for Mark, who knows if I would have every joined a synagogue. But we joined here primarily for social purposes. We joined here because it was closer. Over time, I took a lot of classes. I took Melton. He didn't take the classes with me. It's hard to explain. He likes being Jewish, but he never feels that he can get into it. He could never do the Hebrew. He still comes, but he cares for the social thing. But I really like the Hebrew, and to follow things. So I took my own path to learn more. I still don't' know if I believe in God or what I believe in. I have had nice moments, but I don't know if that is God. Maybe I will someday. Maybe it is because of the way I grew up. I don't look at life that way like some of the people in the class.

J: I don't have an agenda for how anyone comes out of this class, so I ask this only out of curiosity, but I am wondering if you feel an openness to spirituality?

S: I do. I do. I think that is why I have taken so many classes. Do I want to believe in God. Part of me would like it and another part of me is just so down to earth and scientific. I know you can be both, but part of me is more skeptical. It's like when my son was sick with cancer, and a doctor friend said to me "Did you guys turn religious over this?" And he said, "People either get divorced or turn to religion when they go through something like this." And neither of us considered either option. I don't necessarily attribute his remission to God. For a while when we were going through it, I had this sort of superstitious thing that if I went to synagogue

every Shabbat, Ben would be better. But then I couldn't go to shul every Shabbat and so I knew that wasn't going to work.
J: That is such a natural thing to do when you are going through something like that. We bargain with God.
S: Right, so when Ben got better, I couldn't attribute that to God and my going to shul. Mark never liked with the rabbi came in and prayed with us and Ben in the hospital. I knew they were trying to be nice, but he never like it. I think he felt that the only reason they came it was because he was really sick and he didn't want to think that way. I was on some support websites for other parents whose kids have this kind of cancer and some of the women are so religious. But there was this one mom who could not have been more religious and her child died. That's when I knew this had nothing to do with religion.

Session 2 (10/13/08)

Section A:

S: It's hard for me to think about spirituality. I am not one of those people that it comes easily. I know we spent some time in the Melton course going over different philosophical approaches to God. And I had never really read much about that.
J: If you think back to that class, I am wondering if there was a conception of God that you held on to.
S: There was only one that stuck with me and if I believed in God, this is what I would believe. It was the view that God created the world and then left, or stood back, and no longer interferes. Where did he God, I don't know. So, if you think that way, I don't know what good it does to pray. But this sort of explains to me how all this bad stuff could go on. But that is the view I could most understand. I mean if there was a God acting in this world, how could God not get involved to stop horrible things from happening. So, it is not a "God is dead" belief, but pretty close.
J: You have the sense that is hidden or removed, perhaps. Many Holocaust thinkers talk about *hester panim*—God's hiddenness.
S: I understand perfectly why people want to believe in God….

J: There is a piece of you that wants that…

S: Yeah, I mean when I think back on when Ben had cancer, we saw that the outcome for these kids had nothing to do with their parents' religiosity. But there is nothing more you can do as a parent then pray. So I get why people do that. But it didn't do much for *my* spirituality. I could have equated the fact that Ben is fine to that, but I don't. That just wouldn't be right. If Ben hadn't been okay, I couldn't have said it was because I wasn't religious enough.

J: I have no vested interest in you believing in what I am about to share, but I want to share it with you in the interest of your own spiritual growth and understanding. So feel free to take or leave anything I offer, and this in particular. I am just thinking about a compelling theology I came across years about by Rabbi Nancy Flam who wrote about the idea that God exists in the world in these two kinds of manifestations: *din* (law, structure boundaries, nature, limits) and *ra<u>h</u>amim* (love, mercy, compassion). And both of these aspects of God function in the world. When we think about people getting cancer, being hurt in car accidents… that is not God saying you get this, and you get that. It's just that people drive cars and you are in the wrong place and the wrong time and as humans with free-will, some people make poor choices and are bad drivers. And there are genes that mutate and cause cancer due to the way cells function in our bodies. That is the part of the *din* that God created in the world. At the same time, we experience God's presence through the comfort of each other, through moments of beauty and grace that we still find amidst suffering.

S: That sounds more like something I can believe in.

J: I have an article by Rabbi Flam that articulates her theology more fully. Would you want to read it?

S: Yes; I would be happy to.

J: I'll copy it for you.

S: So this all calls into question why we don't sit and pray for things. I always feel like people are sitting in the hospital and praying for the one thing they want which is for their kid to get better. And there is nothing else you can do… but that doesn't work, but I guess the answer is that it makes you feel better so in that way, I suppose it does something.

J: That may be, and it may also be a sense of when you are talking to somebody, at least you know you are in a relationship. At least you know you are not alone. And that in and of itself is powerful.

S: That's true. I mean one of the values in believing in God is that people do better in dealing with crises. Like after Ben was better, there was a woman on the support group I joined that was very religious and a leader in her church. Her son died from the cancer and I'm sure she fell apart but at least she felt that God had a plan. There must have been some reason even if she couldn't understand it.
J: That works for some people; not for others.
S: Right. It wouldn't have worked for me. But, I can see that it worked for her. At least she felt she wasn't alone, and when your kid is really sick you really feel you are alone.

Section B:

J: I wonder if you felt, in retrospect, God's presence at all throughout that trauma of Ben's cancer?
S: There were several times I did. We had a lot of bad experiences and some good ones that I try to remember.
J: Can you tell me some?
S: The good ones? The bad ones?
J: Either one.
S: Well one good one started from something really bad. Soon after Ben got home from his initial diagnosis at the hospital, they put a port in for the chemo and sent us home. Basically, once a week, we were supposed to flush. They give you like 5 minute instructions and you are in such stress. This was one day after a shocking diagnosis. They scared us to death about all the sterile isSarahs. When we get home, neither one of us can do it. It was a disaster. I kept thinking, oh my God, we are going to kill our kid. I was so scared. I never wanted to be a nurse. This was not my thing. And we were screaming at each other. They said you are on your own. There was no one to call. But Mark said, I don't care how much it costs, we are going to call one of those home health places. So we called this home health thing and we got this woman who … she was like my savior. If there is a God, it had been a God who sent her to us because she pretty much saved our lives. She was from Duke and it wasn't just what she did, she taught *me* how do it. She was the most wonderful person. She was *so* nice and I'll never forget what she said to me: She said, "I could never do this for my own kid, and I'm a nurse!" So she said we

would take it slow, and week after week she came and helped. She was also someone I could just talk to. She would always say, "I don't get may calls for kids and I love coming." She would sit there and just talk to me. Insurance ended up paying for it, because on her own volition she wrote a letter to the insurance company saying that I was such a wreck. I always say that if there was a God, then God sent me her.

J: Sounds like an angel to me.

S: They could of just sent me a mean nurse. God knows there were plenty of them. That was a one very good experience.

J: When I read about angels in our liturgy, I always find it hard to conjure them up in my mind, but earthly angels, that I understand.

S: Yeah. This person really found her calling. I we thanked her and thanked her, but I don't think she ever even knew what a difference she made. She didn't want a gift, a check, anything. But she would have been insulted. She wasn't doing this for money…. Our other good experience is that our friends' the Rosenbergs' here… there was a time when Ben was very sick from a subsequent surgery in which Ben ended up with a bowel obstruction from scar tisSarah. It was so, so bad for a month. We were running to the ER twice a week. There was a point when we had to take him in all the time, and we would have Rachel, our 10 year old at home and the Rosebergs were just always there, no matter what the hour to drive with us, keep Rachel at night, whatever we needed. That was really a blessing. We thank them tons of times, but I don't think they even knew how that helped us…. I don't know…. I mean I don't know what I learned from that whole horrible chapter of our lives. I have been thinking about it a lot [this happened 12 years ago]. I think I learned that when we first went into the hospital, we got a lot of support. By the second time we went in, there were barely any calls. People just didn't know what to do or to say. And I think about families who go through this for years. I would just tell people, don't just do something right at the beginning. Because we felt kind of abandoned eventually. I have gotten a lot more charitable about it now. For a while I was kind of angry. But I think I understand now. I think people just don't know what to say and the people who heard it wasn't going well probably didn't want to know. I tried to take the good things from it, but there weren't many. You know I don't think about it every day anymore, but it helps to go back and remember from time to time. Sometimes people who are going through the same thing ask me, how long does it take you don't think about it every day, and I say, "about 10 years!"

Session 3 (10/27/08)

Section A:

S: I think the class is going good. I think I am learning a lot. Ummm, I am trying to think of how to say this…
J: You can just come out and say it. No reason to be afraid.
S: Well, it's nothing bad, it's just that sometimes I feel that I am the only one born Jewish in that class. And I know that's not true, but it just feels that the most vocal ones are Jews by choice (converts to Judaism). They are all so interesting, but sometimes the things they ask, I feel so out of place. I know I am not in the minority, but sometimes I feel it is a class for converts. I don't want to criticize anyone, it's just that I feel that they are trying so hard to do everything right, and as a person born Jewish, I just don't care so much. Maybe part of that is how I grew up Jewishly… like, I just don't think that way, like here is how to do something and then I'll follow. I don't feel they are judgmental, but they don't understand why anyone wouldn't follow all the commandments. And that is what got me about the mikveh thing. I got so bent out of shape because I questioned it and I felt the other person said, it's a mitzvah, so of course we should do it. For some of us who were brought up Jewish, it's just not easy. In all the other Judaism classes I have taken, this was not the dominant voice. I mean I think it's interesting to me and I think it has been kind of good for me. Opening up my eyes. But I have to admit that sometimes, I just feel it's annoying.
J: You know I am glad that you shared this, because I think about spiritual growth in the same why I think about other kinds of development. So, for example, sometimes I see someone who says or does something that reminds me of how I used to be and I find that really annoying. Does that make any sense?
S: Yes. It does. It's just that I feel like I have to really think about what I say in class. Like, is this going to come out wrong? I mean sometimes I feel constrained, that other people won't understand where I am coming from. Like in the last class… [She describes an incident in the last class that demonstrates a time when she spoke up with a challenging remark and Sarah perceived that it was not welcomed.]

J: I think your opinion was important and there may have been women in the room who had your experience and agreed with your point. As the facilitator, it is my job to be aware of both of those opinions and feelings voiced.
S: So sometimes, I feel like should I have said that, or not?
J: Well, I will work harder going forward to make sure you and others have time to clarify if they feel something has come out wrong. But, I feel your point was fine and welcome.
S: Oh, that makes me feel better. Now I cannot vouch for what other people heard and what emotions that raised for them. But I want you to know that I heard and value the point you made and I recognize the intention with which you shared your point. You were trying to protect the feelings of some of the people in the class. I hear that. Yeah, a lot of stuff happens in life that you think you have control over and you realize you really don't. That is what I was trying to communicate.
J: I get that. If you have questions or comments that you feel aren't being lifted up, I want to invite you do so in a gentle and respectful way. Be prepared for being to come out on all sides of the isSarahs, because we are all exploring. But, I am glad your voice is being heard and that you feel compelled to participate.

Section B:

S: You know another thing is how sometimes in the class, I feel people are telling stories and trying to show how they are the better Jew. I know they don't mean it and I am sure they do what they say they do, but I feel like it is a kind of one up-manship. I have found that in other Judaism classes too.
J: It's kind of silly, huh?
S: Yeah. Because you are learning all these things and you want to show you are doing it… especially the newer Jews. That's why I decided to be honest last class and say that I have been backsliding since the kids are grown. But it did help what you said about the idea that there are different life stages.
J: Yes; but I also want to underscore that when other people share stories about what they do or believe and that really annoys you, there may be an opportunity to consciously re-evaluate what you are doing and if it makes sense for you now. It is a journey spiritual meant to last a lifetime,

but some things you did with the kids when they were little may not make sense anymore. So, what does make sense? That's the question I want you to ask yourself.

S: And for me, part of the challenge is that I have a husband that is in a very different place. He could not keep Shabbat. Doesn't want to. He will tell you that the worst experience of his life was staying with my cousins in Israel for Shabbat. I loved it. But to him, it was hell on earth. To him the peace and solitude of Shabbat is absolute misery. He is talking taking walks and playing board games. He likes to relax watching sports games. That's it. I would certainly be more observant in Shabbat if I had a different husband. So it is sort of funny, but I wonder, if it is just a man thing. Is he odd or are men and women different? I try to make Shabbat different, but as for what we learned, there is no way.

J: What I hear is that his conception of Shabbat is very different from yours. So what I am wondering is what is it like for you to be on a spiritual journey that is connected to his, for sure, but is also yours alone?

S: Well, I guess sometimes I try to do my own thing.

J: What is your ideal Shabbat? What do you hunger for?

S: Mine would be hanging out with friends, getting together, talking. No shopping or running errands. That would probably be it. Right now we go out with friends Saturday night, but that is not a Shabbat thing. But he didn't grow up with anything special. And we always did in my house. Mark was happy to do it when our kids were growing up. He was really into everything in the pre-bar mitzvah years, but after that we stopped going. But you are right, now we are just sort of finding our way and I'm not sure about it all. I don't think Mark will ever be on a spiritual journey. He doesn't think about God and just doesn't care. He hated philosophy in college and he is just a really practical person. And that's exactly how her mother was. She wanted her children to be Jewish and to know they were Jews, but she didn't do much of anything and didn't believe in God or anything. She was Miss Practical. Anyway, in a way it may be harder than when people are totally unified in their approach, but I don't feel like we are living separate lives or that I am married to a non-Jewish spouse. It's hard and it's not. Sometimes it feels hard, like I'm caught in the middle.

J: Yeah, like I am imagining that you want to protect him and not force him to do things that are uncomfortable…

S: And I have done that already so many times…

J: Yes, and at the same time, you are on your own spiritual journey and you hunger for something, otherwise you wouldn't be here. So my nudge for you… my charge is to give you permission to think about that… not in a way that will compromise your marriage or shake things up beyond repair. And I don't know what that may be, but it may mean, lighting candles by yourself, or a re-structure of your Shabbat afternoon. And not just for Shabbat, it could be for anything else too… but just to think about that. What is it that you want or need to do as a Jew, here and now?

S: Okay, I got it.

J: Just as Mark is doing his own thing and you are respectful of his way, I want to see that you are pursuing your own path.

5) Reflection Piece #2

The learning that meant the most to me this year was the class on tzedakah. I feel that this is one of the aspects of Judaism that makes me most proud to be a Jew. I'll never forget when a friend of mine (who is Catholic) said to me, "Boy, you Jews have it so tough, you have to give so much money to help other people, while what all we have to do is to go to church and pray a lot." I don't think she really understood that we don't "have" to give a lot of money to help other people, but it made me feel good to think that the world's perception is that we do. I particularly liked the reading by Kurzweil for this class. I liked the way he presented all the issues and didn't pretend to know the answers. The isSarah of beggars is one that I find particularly troubling and I was pleased to know that I am not the only one that is inconsistent on this isSarah (giving some times and not others). This is also a troubling isSarah for me because I once got thoroughly scolded by my mother-in-law for giving money to a young man in a parking lot who claimed his car had broken down and he needed money to get where he was going. She felt strongly that begging in any circumstance was wrong and that giving money to them was just about as bad (because you were encouraging dependence and they are all frauds). So it was good to read an article that quoted Jewish sources that said that giving money to beggars is a mitzvah. I also liked this class because I have been involved in the Raleigh-Cary Jewish Federation for many years and getting local Jews to contribute money is an uphill battle. It helped to confirm my belief that giving to Jews locally is the greatest mitzvah, and it felt good to hear that this is a

Jewish belief (not just my own). In summary, I liked this class because it was about making the world a better place, which to me is much more important than saying the prayers correctly, keeping kosher, and following all the other aspects of Judaism that we studied.

Toni

1) Reflection Piece #1:

Being Jewish means:

1) a core identity
2) memories—good and bad
3) as a child of the Holocaust—listening to gruesome stories in the coffee houses of 1950s Vienna and absorbing my mother's furious outbursts at the Nazis and those who kept silent
4) a lifelong identification with victims and the oppressed
5) a commitment as a child that my lesson from the Holocaust was to "speak up" against injustice—whether for my own people or "the other" and my ongoing failure to keep that commitment
6) a major (but not the only) source of my personal ethics
7) Time after time, seeing religion drive a wedge and cause pain in my already too small family
8) Boring synagogue services—feeling lost and feeling too ashamed to ask.
9) The warmth of shabbos and yom tov table in my aunt's dining room—candles blazing—singing the bits and pieces of z'mirot I knew.
10) Guilt for not believing I was there among the 6,000,000.
11) A sense of somehow believing in God but so far utterly incapable of defining that God for myself
12) As a lonely, isolated, only child—a connection to community
13) Moments of transcendence and oneness
14) Intellectual dialogue that initially engages and inevitably tends to lose me in its abstraction

15) A lingering sense that traditional Judaism is the only authentic Judaism and that the other denominations are watering it down to the lowest common denominator.
16) Guilt that I am not prepared to make the personal sacrifices to observe kashrut, be shomer shabbos, or devote sufficient time to prayer
17) Hypocrisy—my own and other people's.
18) Personal warmth, plenty of food and genuine curiosity in other people's life stories
19) Curiosity about the world and eagerness to learn
20) A desperate need for the existence of Israel and profound disappointment when Israel fails to be a "light among the nations."
21) Trying to make these disparate stands cohere into a Jewish practice and set of beliefs that feel authentic and I can live with

Struggle. Struggle. Struggle.

2) Summary of Questionnaire:

Toni was motivated to join the class because she had not been involved in the Jewish community in Raleigh for 18 years after moving here. Until a few years ago, she hardly knew any Jews in Raleigh and wanted a connection—"to feel part of the community." After three cancer diagnoses, she was increasingly aware of the possibility of death and felt it was time to "develop her spiritual side-- to make sense of my life and prepare to complete my life's story." While she had no strong motivation to have a Bat Mitzvah ceremony, I did want to "take a spiritual journey -- shared with others." Though she was raised in an Orthodox synagogue, she still feels she is "woefully ignorant about Jewish theology, beliefs, and practices," and wants to fill in the gaps. She wanted to think deeply about what she truly thinks about God, religion, and her Jewish heritage. Toni also wanted to discover whether the spiritual rewards of Jewish observance would be sufficient for her to change a number of aspects of her long established life style "which was mostly devoid of Jewish thinking and practice." In terms of the timeline of her life, she writes, "I have stumbled into an unplanned early retirement. There was no conscious decision to do so, but due to a combination of decreasing consultant work and an extended period of cancer treatments, I found myself without gainful employment. It's been confusing. I don't know how to label myself --retired or unemployed. I don't know what I would like to see as a next step --

trying to find a job (so tough in the current economy) or starting a nonprofit -- or doing nothing. So I am in a place that I can't seem to define for myself. For all of my adult life, I have been primarily defined (and sustained) by my work. Without meaningful work, who am I?" Toni has many questions: "Do I believe in G-d? What do I mean by G-d? What is my relationship with G-d? How do I become more deliberate and aware of my spiritual self? Why am I happy to be a Jew? I love my religion because it provides me with 1) an experience of awe and gratitude about the universe; 2) a sense of community and belonging that has been missing from my life ; 3) a recognition of religious experience as a lifelong struggle (not a certainty); and 4) ethical guidelines that (for the most part) make sense to me. How do I build on each of these values to enrich my life? How do I deepen my understanding? What else resonates for me? How do I translate this awareness into practice -- or can I?" Being a woman has played a large role in her Jewish journey. She writes, "My early experience of Jewish worship was peering over a balcony at the 'real' service in the men's section below. Women were mostly voyeurs and spent their time gossiping or assessing each other's new fall outfits modeled at the High Holy Days each year. They competed to see whose latkes at the Chanukah celebration would disappear first. They cooked treats for the periodic classes the Rabbis held for the men. I felt that as a woman I didn't belong in the most essential aspects of Jewish worship. The first time I stood at the bimah I cried. Part of me still feels uncomfortable wearing a kippah or a tallit. Despite attending a feminist college and coming of age during the height of the feminist era, somehow I still don't feel 100% entitled to full participation in Jewish worship service. But as a result of the Bat Mitzvah class, that is changing." Toni also has great hopes for what her relationship with me might offer. She says, "I would like you to understand my struggle and help me resolve the obstacles I face in accepting Jewish practice. There is still much that is hidden from myself. I want you to share my journey to uncover these feelings." She describes her relationship with God as "still tentative." She explains, "There is a residue of guilt from my childhood when I was ashamed because I didn't think I believed in G-d and I felt that was evil. I perceived nothingness after death and projected myself into a Godless void. Now I get glimmers of an awareness of G-d -- as connection and relationship and then I lose it. I forget and have to struggle to remember. And, for long periods I can't find my way back. There are many obstacles. The G-d described in the Torah is often so violent and cruel that it makes me want to reject it all. I have difficulty reconciling such harshness with my positive feelings about Judaism. I get confused. I am a

literalist and metaphors seemed forced and false -- rationalizations. I feel that my spiritual journey zigs and zags and I don't experience forward movement. My husband's lack of interest in Jewish practice creates tensions. I often feel torn between attending Shabbat services and spending weekend time with my husband since he often travels during the week for work. I am also very torn about the Israel -Palestine situation and when I see racist statements by Jewish extremists (including my own West Bank settler family), I want no part of that Judaism." Toni wants her life to feel "whole and integrated." She also wants to share her spiritual journey with her husband (who is Jewish). But, the tensions abound for Toni. She says, "I would like not to continually feel I am taking steps backward -- especially when I read disturbing ideas in Jewish texts. I would like to have the tools to put these negative feelings in a broader context -- to reach an accommodation and learn how to sustain it." When asked about how this process might impact her family and those closest to her, she responded, "Right now, there is only my husband who does not feel the same need to explore his Jewish identity. My closest friends are not Jewish. This journey would be so much easier if it could be shared with those closest to me."

3) Class Presentation:

Judaism, for Toni, feels like "bit and pieces that have never cohered." Her mother, who died forty years ago, was a storyteller. Toni brought a piece a glass from a glass factory in Bohemia that came with a wild family story from the old country. After telling the story she said that it is the *story* that connects her to her mother, whom she misses. And, it is a "piece" of a story that she yearns to make part of a larger Jewish story of her life.

4) Individual Spiritual Guidance

<u>Session 1 (10/20/08)</u>

Section A:

[This conversation opened with ten minutes in which she shared "how she got to this moment" Jewishly, i.e. family of origin, involvement with Tikkun, the support group I led, etc.]

T: I am not doing this for the need to become Bat Mitzvah. But really for the journey. For the chance to integrate. It is so fragmented.

J: It is interesting the way that you presented your reflection piece. Because you numbered them. Which I can understand, but on a deeper level, in some way all the things you mentioned felt so sincere and authentic, yet you didn't piece them together into a single narrative.
T: That's what I tend to do. I am a listener and I have a hard time integrating things. Knitting things is really what the journey is about. What do I feel spiritually and emotionally? What do I believe in God? I mean, sometimes I say this makes sense and other times that makes sense. It all feels like contradictions and I find it hard to live with those contradictions. I am hoping this class will show me but I don't know how.
J: And that may be your spiritual growing edge… to take these disparate fragments of thoughts, ideas, feelings, experiences and weave them into a coherent life narrative that makes sense to you. I hope that will take shape for you and I feel privileged to help you do that. As you know we are a religion about doing, so I hope that as you begin this process, consciously, it will indeed some together. As you are immersed in thinking about this stuff, it will take shape a bit.
T: This *is* my story. I went to an Orthodox shul with non-observant parents. My cousins who are "black hat" at least their life is coherent.

J: I hear that. We live with one foot in the modern world and another foot yearning for structure and connection. That is challenging.

T: You know there is something really beautiful about that religious world. And I have a lot of longing around that, but I always had the sense that wasn't for me entirely. [She goes on to talk about family rifts bases on those who lived an ultra-Orthodox life and those who remained secular/modern.]

Section B:

J: How would you describe your relationship with your parents?

T: Very close with my mother. My father was a refugee. They were both in their 40s when they married. My father was deaf. He has lost his hearing as a young boy in Austria. He came here and couldn't find work. He had learned how to do farming so my mother who had come from New York, took all her savings from working at Gimbel's department store, and they bought a farm in rural Virginia. No running water, no electricity. And I was born right after the war at which time they got some utilities in. She was very isolated and I was an

only child, so we were very close. [Crying] She was the kind of person who people went to with problems. She loved to tell stories and be there for people. I was more like a peer to her, in some ways. I heard about every problem as a kid. My father lost all his family in the Holocaust and she was very angry and sad about that. I that way, I take after her. She was caring but also quick to anger. She died when I was twenty.

J: So young… you must miss her.

T: I do. I still do. I was alone. Very solitary. Even more, being on a farm. Very isolated. Always in search of connection and belonging.

J: And your dad, who was deaf, how did you communicate with him?

T: Lip reading. He didn't speak English, so I spoke German as a kid. They spoke German with each other. He was a real character. He worked very hard on the farm. He tried to make friends and people were very kind to him up to a point. He was also very volatile and demanding and controlling. But my parents were both loving. But there was a lot of yelling and screaming too. He wasn't someone I took very seriously, because he was paranoid about a lot of stuff. I couldn't depend on him for much.

J: Your mom was the rock.

T: My mom was the rock. She was the one who gave all the guidance… and then she died and I was on my own. I had a hard time finding a relationship. It took about twenty years to find my husband. I was the same age as my mom when we got married. We were going to have children, but it was only a few months into the marriage when I was diagnosed with breast cancer for the first time which put me into early menopause. And that is a big thing not having kids. So many things in Judaism are family centered. Not to mention friendships. I feel it more here, since joining here and being in this class. A lot of the discussion revolves around kids. And yet, this is my life. I wasn't one of those people who always felt that I had to have kids, but I am feeling it a bit more through this experience.

J: Does it feel like a re-opening up to a life that you didn't have and a sense of loss that comes with that, or more of a sense of alienation from the experience of others, from Jewish tradition?

T: I think it is more the alienation. My vision for my life was not necessarily kids. It was more about finding a partner and a way to help our world. It just feels alienating to some degree about being in such a family friendly environment.

J: Well, I think that is something important to be aware of. I can totally see why you might feel that way…

T: So, you know, part of that is about legacy. My mom talked a lot about giving roots.

J: So that feels very alive for you.

T: It is alive. Knowing I won't have those roots to pass on. Lots of issues I have to deal with.

J: Yeah. Yeah. I hear that. Do you think that your legacy might take a different form?

T: I have always thought about my political work in those terms and I have things I want to do, but I find it difficult to get moving. I am not an initiator. I find it difficult to find someone to partner with. I used to have one in the field of computer technology—how people build community through technology. We worked together for ten years and did some great stuff with the British, New Zealand, and Scottish governments. But he has moved on to something were my strength is not. So I am still figuring how I do this thing on my own or find someone new to work with me. And, I have had three cancer diagnoses now (breast cancer, endometrial, breast cancer again). I guess I feel very fortunate to be here, but not very confident this is going to be a long life. [Crying.] So I guess I feel a pressure to seek out the spiritual and to explore that and try to integrate that. That is particularly important. And (more tears…) to figure out what my legacy is. I guess I hadn't thought of it before in exactly that term. But that is what it is.

J: Yeah… what are the footprints that we all leave on this world? What are the footprints you have left and what are the ones you still hope to leave. Because none of us stays forever and none of us knows when our time will come.

T: It is time for us to me to think through that deeply in a way I haven't before. To be clear in what my priorities and goals are right now. I feel I have a lot to learn.

J: Me too. [At the end of the session I advised reading Larry Kushner's, *Invisible Lines of Connection*, a recommendation she welcomes enthusiastically.]

<u>Session 2 (12/8/09)</u>

Section A:

T: I think a big part of my pain is feeling alone in the struggle. I hadn't really acknowledged that fully… that has been such a theme for me. I don't feel that way now like I did when I was a kid, but I still feel it.

J: Sounds like it is a part of your identity.

T: It is. And another thing that scares me is I used to jump at anything, any opportunity to be with people and now, I am kind of hibernating. That concerns me.

J: How long has that been going on?

T: I think it really started with my chemo two years ago. I expected that that was situational, but now find myself less interested in being around people.

J: Do you feel a little depressed?

T: I am starting to feel a little depressed. Yeah. I think so. I think it wouldn't be a bad thing for me to look at that.

J: You know, I was thinking that it might be helpful for you to see a therapist on a somewhat regular basis, just to talk through some of these feelings and concerns.

T: Do you know anyone? If you have a few names that would be helpful.

J: I think it would be a good idea, Toni. It doesn't have to be a super long term commitment. But, a place for you to take a closer look at the obstacles that are getting in the way of you achieving the goals you have for yourself and the things you know you can do, but can't manage to motivate yourself to move on. Also, to see if there might be some part of this that can be helped medically. I mean I have no idea, but I think it would be helpful to take a closer look… you know there is a great story from the Talmud about a rabbi from the Talmud, Rabbi Yohanan, who was known as a great healer. He would visit colleagues and through conversation and touch, would heal them. But when Rabbi

Yohanan himself was sick, he could not heal himself. Rabbi Hanina went to visit him, and said, ''Give me your hand.'' The two men held hands, and Rabbi Hanina was able to raise him from his sick bed. And the rabbis ask why couldn't Rabbi Yohanan raise himself? The rabbis answered, ''the prisoner cannot free himself from prison.'' It takes other to help us heal. I share that story only to say that when we feel trapped and stuck, we can't get ourselves out without help.

T: I agree. Let's try to go forward and find the right person.

Section B:

J: What are your earliest memories of God? What are the feelings?
T: I have to tell you that my earliest memory is thinking as a kid that there was no God. And feeling a dark empty void. That was my deepest darkest secret. I worked so hard not to let myself that that, but that is was I felt. But the positive, was sitting around the table on Shabbat, the warmth, the connectedness, and relationships, singing *zemiros*. Two very different feelings. One of me alone, isolated, blackness. Probably more about my own isolation that about God. [Crying] But it is about connection and finding ways to be in relationship. That is what it is about for me.
J: And that may be kind of the the growing or evolving nature of God for you… because people get stuck with one image of God and when it no longer works, they sort of disengage with God. It just doesn't work anymore. It is not useful. That's fine, but part of this endeavor, is giving those feelings and images room to grow and change. It is almost like in your description, you had the real experience of being deeply lonely on the one hand and real family on the other hand with warmth in connection. And you felt God in both?
T: I don't know. Where is God in the absence of God?
J: That's an important question.
T: It's a hard question I can't answer yet. [Long silence] I have this image of this kind of big slippery ball and I kept trying to find a place to get my hands on to connect and it always eluded my grasp.
J: What a powerful image.
T: Yeah... and it wasn't only my childhood and I had some tough times in my 30s too. I even had a suicide attempt right before I met my husband. Which is…. God? I guess that is the answer. In my darkest moment…. I am sorry for all this crying. I haven't thought about this stuff in a while.
J: No need to apologize. This is why we are here together…
T: And this is why social justice is so important to me. There is a whole continuum of coping mechanisms out there and we have to keep as many life lines out there as possible so that people who are most in need can find their way back.
J: You know what it is to suffer, in your own way, you are sensitized in a way that you can't

help to care. And unlike that ball that you couldn't get a foothold in, it sounds like with social justice, you found your footing. It was real. It meant something. A deep kind of connection.
T: That was always my home, I guess.
J: And what means to be a force for justice in the world. It is really different.
[Crying] How are you feeling now?
T: I think things are focusing for me. [Crying] Thank you.
J: You are welcome.

Session 3 (3/9/09)

[Toni began seeing a therapist. She was also prescribed Wellbutrin. Toni was happy with the therapist referral and feels happier, more focused, and more motivated. No extreme change in mood, but a small and meaningful overall shift in a positive direction.]

Section A:

J: You mentioned how you have been hearing a lot about cancer lately—among your friends, reading. Do you think about it much any more?
T: I think about the cancer in terms of coming to resolution with my life. Time feels different. Time feels more precious. It's more meaningful. I guess I am looking for a sense of integration. Looking at death is in some ways a gift. The first time I was diagnosed, it was so terrifying. I was paralyzed with fear. Now, I am so much more accepting of it. I was thinking this morning that in some ways I look at it as a wave coming in and your are seeing the shore and you fear the wave is going to break, and then you realize that it is all water, and all it has ever been is water. I feel it is sort of about paying attention to the rhythms of life and what it is all about. Feeling less attached.
J: sounds like there is an kind of integration for you…
T: Yeah… and people don't often talk about it, but there are gifts that come with this. Don't have to worry about shampoo. I only use deodorant under one arm and not the other. I don't have to shave. There are those little things at the trivial level. But also on the deeper level, I wouldn't be surprised… there is a sort of inevitability about it. I have been very fortunate.

J: Absolutely.

T: And then I guess the other thing is that so many things I have read about it and made me feel it is almost too big to deal with. Look at the world and what people have to go through. You are not the only one going through stuff. Dell always said, why *not* me? And that is kind of how I feel. I did a lot of work with crime victims… they all have this thing, "there has to be a reason." They need to have some control.

J: The illusion of control.

T: Exactly. And I don't know why, but I never needed that. And some people's reasons are really screwed up. So punishing. Rather than using their situation to understand the rhythm of life, they take it all so personally. It's not enough that they have to go through this crap, but then they punish themselves.

J: The search for meaning can go awry.

T: Which is the job of the rabbi… to help people's search for meaning to keep from going awry.

J: We try…

T: For me it is about struggle. And that is what keeps me tied to Judaism. Not certainty of belief and faith.

J: It sounds like there is a kind of opening happening for you. A certain lightness..

T: Really? I'll take that. I just want to get moving more.

J: But you are *doing* things.

T: You are right. I am doing a lot of things. Things are changing and it feels good.

5) Reflection Piece #2:

Before the Bat Mitzvah class I experienced Judaism as family tradition, special foods, celebrations, but mostly as a religion of strictures – of don'ts or seemingly trivial activities like tearing the toilet paper before Shabbat (my job). So many things stood in the way of giving myself over to it – to claiming it as my own. I saw religion as an "all or nothing" deal. In my aunt and uncle's "frum" household, there was no compromise. There was one way to do everything. There was one Yiddishkeit and anything else was a fake – watered down – might as well be Christian. This sense that there is only one way to be genuinely Jewish had and to some extent still has a powerful hold on me. But the Bat Mitzvah experience has helped me shift my

view to understand that there is more than one way to be a "real" Jew, Real Jews may not accept the historical truth of Genesis or the giving of the Torah at Sinai. Real Jews may look at the text of the Bible as metaphorical. Real Jews can "tune out" Torah portions that deal with violence, abuse of women, and incest and "tune in" to other texts that are more personally meaningful. Real Jews may not strictly observe Kashrut and Shabbat, but may take small steps to observance through actions that are symbolic for them. Real Jews can include all the peoples of the world in their prayers not just other Jews. Real Jews may question whether they believe in G-d. What I now see as the most important gifts of Judaism are a sense of awe about the universe and its mysteries, appreciating and blessing the special moments of the day, understanding and reverence for what is truly important in our lives, a structure for meaning, a sense of community and belonging, and an ethical framework that (mostly) makes sense. How I carry those lessons forward in my life is my challenge for the coming year.

Rachel

1) Reflection Piece #1:

Being Jewish is really more than a religious belief. To me, it encompasses my heritage, my traditions and really is a culture in of itself. But what do I really mean by this? Although I know very little about the religious tenets of Judaism, know very little Hebrew and don't even understand much of a service, I feel very strongly about my Jewish identity and very proud of my Jewish heritage. The hard part of the question is "why." I really don't know the answer to this question—perhaps the answer is related to the reason why at the age of 58 I am in this adult Bat Mitzvah class hoping to learn Hebrew, to learn more about Jewish history, more about the meaning of the traditions, holidays, etc. Perhaps I am trying to define and understand what being Jewish really does mean to me. Someone in class mentioned being a "bagel Jew" and that struck a chord with me. I know being Jewish means more to me than all of my favorite foods (i.e. chicken soup, matzo balls, brisket, kugel, etc.)—but, certainly my love of Jewish foods, customs and traditions are a big part of what being Jewish means to me. At the end of my two-year journey in this class, combined with my anticipated trip to Israel at the completion of this class, I am hoping the basis of my Jewish identity will be deeper and more meaningful.

2) Summary of Questionnaire:

Rachel felt motivated to take the class in order to learn more about Judaism. She feels she finally has the time and energy in her life to take this step and feels that it "opens up new doors and keeps her brain active." It also affords her the opportunity to meet new people. She is hoping to learn about the history of the religion, the meaning behind the rituals and holidays and to learn how to follow and understand prayer services. She also wants to learn the basics of the Hebrew language and how to recite familiar prayers. Rachel sees herself as "at a comfortable point in life, past her peak with a lot of her life and experience behind her, but still hopeful of having much more ahead, but with less pressure, demands or expectations." She is trying to connect with what it means to be a Jew in deeper more meaningful ways than ever before. She feels that spirituality is important to her and means more and more as she knows more. As a girl, her parents did not send her to Hebrew school. Unlike her brother who received a formal Jewish education, Rachel always felt that this lack of basic knowledge stood in the way of her having a meaningful relationship with Judaism. She hopes that I will be a mentor, teacher, and friend to her. Sometimes she feels that God is close to her and sometimes she feels that she needs to work harder at feeling closer to God. She tries to communicate with God at least once a day through thought and prayers. She struggles, however, to understand "why terrible things happen to people—why God doesn't or can't protect everyone?" Rachel longs to feel that life is more meaningful and that she is more deeply engaged with others, the world, and God, than she already is. She is concerned that while her husband supports her learning, he doesn't really "get it." The biggest impact on him is that she encourages her husband to attend more synagogue events with her. He is supportive and proud and that means a lot to her. Her adult children are also excited and she delights in learning the *alef-bet* with her four-year-old grandson. She feels that they are taking this journey together.

3) Class Presentation:

Rachel feels that her Jewish journey truly began when she was married, so she brought her ketubah. She felt connected to Jewish life for the first time as she started her own family.

Though she raised her children as Jews, she never understood much about Judaism herself, but taking this class is because "now is *her* time."

4) Individual Spiritual Guidance

Session 1 (10/13/08)

Section A:

J: How were the holidays for you?
R: I am not just saying this because Rabbi Solomon is your husband, but I have to honestly say that these services were the first time that I actually enjoyed the prayer. Because as I wrote before, I didn't have a very nurturing growing up. We didn't celebrate the holidays. My mother wasn't much of a mother. Wasn't around. I sort of fended for myself a lot.
J: did you have siblings?
R: I have an older brother who never was a part of my life. We are in touch, but barely. So when I got married, I just knew that I wanted to have the holidays, to go to Temple, to have a Jewish home. I think I wanted everything that I didn't have growing up. My mom worked, so I wanted to stay at home with my kids. You know, that is how it went. But, we joined a Conservative shul in NY because that is where my husband belonged, but I just never felt any connection. The rabbis were cold and distant. I just went through the motions. I didn't understand anything. But here, I have been coming on Friday nights with my grandsons and they took me in immediately. The melodies. The spirituality. The singing. This is just great. That hooked me in. It's short and geared for my level to understand. I have come to more services this fall than I have my entire life. My husband is looking at me like who are you?
J: He doesn't know that part of you.
R: Right. He doesn't know that part of me. He went to Hebrew school, but he doesn't remember a thing. I'm appalled.
J: You are going to be helping him pretty soon.
R: You got it. But I just enjoyed the holidays so much. I even stayed until 1 or 2 on Yom Kippur. That's a lot for me!

J: Sure.

R: But I really loved it and I am saying that honestly. Not just to flatter you.

J: I hear that. It is very sincere. I am really just so glad *for you*.

R: Me too. I am just so happy. You know at my stage of life, I am ready to find another part of myself. A new part of myself. Because I don't have children running around.

J: There is something about this moment that you feel free to explore yourself and your life in new ways.

R: You are right. It is exciting.

[R goes on to describe her move from Long Island, NY (at the age of 50) to Las Vegas where her daughter was teaching. It was a difficult transition and she missed New York and her women friends terribly.]

Section B:

R: My daughter got pregnant after a lot of trouble trying and everything was great and then I was diagnosed with breast cancer right when she was due. The two things coincided at exactly the same time. That was a crazy time. 2004. That kept us very busy for a while. Then she had some miscarriages. One in her 19th week. Then she finally had another baby. And things finally quieted down. We all decided as a family that we didn't like it out there and wanted to move together. We did a lot of research and chose Cary, North Carolina. So, that's how we got here. It's not home yet, but it is a lot better than it was in Las Vegas. I do like living here. I don't have anything bad to say, other than it is not New York.

J: I hear that. It is still a transition… Can you tell me more about your breast cancer diagnosis? What was that like for you? [Tears start to flow…] You can cry.

R: I know but I have to go back to work. It was probably the biggest shock in my life. I have always been a healthy person. I exercised every day. Still do. Don't smoke. Don't drink. I was always Miss Healthy. Then it just came in a routine mammogram, fortunately for me. The suspicious mammogram came in September. It didn't look bad to the surgeon, so we proceeded slowly. When they did the lumpectomy in January, we found out it was cancer. So I went back for another surgery. The lymph nodes were negative and they got clear margins. Two surgeries in two weeks. Then two weeks later, my grandson was born. And I guess I looked at it as God

gives and God also takes away. This was my trade-off. I wouldn't have changed it if I could. I met with the oncologist and he suggested I start chemo. He didn't want to see me in another two years with a recurrence even thought they got it all. I had my grandson, and that was amazing. Everything else was like, we'll deal with it. I was pretty calm about it. Then I went to the chemo orientation… it was very humbling. All these sick people around me. I never wanted to think of myself as being sick. Anyway, I walked out and decided I couldn't go through with it. The horrible side effects… my cancer was stage II, so it wasn't clear to *me* that I needed it. I went to New York to Sloan-Kettering. They agreed I should have chemo. But I did some soul searching and I decided I was not going to do it. My kids were kind of upset with me. [Crying] Michael was supportive because he understood that I didn't want to be a sick person. If I did the chemo…. But I did radiation for months, every day. I did that, but it came down to giving me a 2% less risk if I had the chemo. But 2% doesn't feel like a lot. I just could never feel it was worth it to me. So, I'll never know if that was the right decision or not, but I am coming up on five years, cancer free. I take all my medication. I go for my check-ups. That is a life-altering experience.

J: You don't come through something like that the same as you were before.

R: No. And it has made me a better person… In some ways not…

J: In what ways?

R: I feel I have lost the sexual part of my personality. Because when your breasts become this thing that everyone is touching and diagnosing and handling. Drawing marker all over you. Somehow or other it changed me. That is a sad part. Some part of me died inside. It made me feel very unattractive. Maybe it coincides with my age. Just not so attractive. I don't know. One is bigger. To be scarred. But, that is the only negative. The positives [crying] are that I appreciate things so much more. [More tears] Every day is a gift when you don't know how many more… every day I wake up and I'm thankful. Going back for tests is always stressful because you never know what they are going to find. Before I go I am very nervous, and then I put it behind me. So far, I have had little scares here and there, but nothing major so far. So, it has made me a stronger person, a more thankful person, and you really see what's important to you. And it is not the material things. It's the people. I was very lucky my husband was there for me. I went to a support group when I was going through radiation, and so many of them had

nobody. So, I think I am a happier person, which sound crazy. I am just a happier, more grateful person.

J: That makes sense…. You can see how you would never wish such a diagnosis on yourself or any one else, but it has been a blessing for you in some powerful way.

R: It has. It has. Because I feel like nobody gets everything. Everyone has their sadness. It's just life. I have come to the point that I'm okay with dying. I just don't want to be sick. I don't have children who depend on me anymore. I know people will miss me, but it is not like I have young children anymore. I just don't want to be a sickly person who is suffering and everyone around them is suffering alongside them.

J: Did you know people like that?

R: Ummm, well… my mother was like that in the end. I lost my mother and my father in the last year and a half. I did not have a good relationship with my mom. As I said, she was not a nurturing person. She really had her own problems. She would always say to me, "I did the best I could," but I never bought that. But that when she got sick with dementia and liver problems for years, I wound up moving her out to Las Vegas.

J: That was an act of love.

R: It was. My brother was not going to do anything. She was alone. She was my mother and I still had compassion for her. And that too was a blessing. And it really gave me closure with her. She was always a very angry, difficult, mean, bitter person. Always yelling and criticizing me and my father. But when the dementia set in, she lost that. She became very gentle. And I am very compassionate and she brought that out in me. She was so pathetic, and helpless. I never wanted to be like that. A burden…. [She describes her mother's progression of care in Las Vegas]. And then Frances the hospice nurse, that angel, called [More tears] and said if you want to see your mom, come now. And when I got there, she had just passed. She was just laying there and she looked peaceful for the first time in her life. I never saw her like that. And I realized, I had let go of all the anger I had for her. No more hostility. I was done with it. I had forgiven her. But I do have that fear of being helpless… of being a burden on someone else.

J: First, what a gift that you were able to find that peace in the end with her… to love her and to care for her. Not to say that you forgot your history together, but to have worked through that enough that you could find compassion for her… not everyone finds that in the end—especially in relationships that were fraught.

R: It's so true. What a blessing. Because I think that I would have lived much more tormented as my life went forward had we not had that time together. If you had asked me what my worst nightmare was twenty years ago, it would have been that my father would go first, and I would be left taking care of my mother. So my worst nightmare happened, but it turned out to be a blessing. Just shows, you never know how life is going to turn out. It's all good. I have a lot to be thankful for.
J: This is all what it is to live. To live life, awake.

Session (1/26/09)

[She spent half of this session describing a cancer scare with a recent mammogram and biopsy that occurred in the weeks previous to our second session.]

> J: Have you felt fears around inadequacy in other areas or is there something specific to the Jewish aspect of this course that has been intimidating for you?
> R: I have had those feelings in other situations too. In fact, I tend to avoid situations in which I feel that way. So for me to put myself in this Bat Mitzvah class is an indication to me that it is something I really, truly want. To learn and purSarah. I know I have a long way to go, but hopefully it is just a first step. I think about how much I have learned since the beginning of the class—about Judaism and Hebrew. So I say to myself, don't be frustrated. I didn't know what an *alef* was at the beginning of all this. There is a part of me that is a perfectionist and wants to feel competent and I don't feel that way. And basically, deep down inside, I am a shy person… until I feel that comfort level which I have not attained yet.
> J: Well, I want to honor where you are and to lift up that you have made a choice to put yourself in a situation that is uncomfortable and somewhat scary. I'm sure there is a part of you that is excited too. But it is inspirational to know that and for you to know that for yourself. And I also just want to add that when you hear that voice inside of yourself that says, my classmates know so much more… they are farther along on their journeys, I want to say that I don't think it works that way. Their path is not my path. It is as individualized as anything could possibly be. The knowledge that one has acquired

doesn't necessarily imply how far along they are on the spiritual journey. There are people who know a lot about Judaism, but haven't thought about what it means to suffer. Or what is like to live in life's murkiness. I think that stuff is spiritual.
R: Well, in that case, I am very spiritual. That is what I know, to my benefit or detriment. I am always thinking through things and analyzing, reflecting. Thinking.
J: Yeah… my goal is to relay a certain amount of content—that is part of becoming literate Jews. That is the language. But beyond that, this is about using the language to find holiness, make connections, live more consciously. Some haven't even awoken to that. So, I just want to expand the possibilities of what it means to be knowledgeable. Don't place yourself beneath anybody. You are where you are.
R: Okay, well that makes me feel better. Because I really am integrating this bat mitzvah experience with my life. I mean every morning, I have this conversation with God. The context started with the cd of prayers which you sang and shared with us. I listen to it every single morning. Even though I don't understand all the words yet, there is something about it that opens me up to prayer. And after I listen, I find the conversation can begin. I try to do it like the three parts of the Amidah. But I always find that I start with thanks.
J: That's how I find my way in too.
R: Well this practice has had an impact on me. And I say, wow, that shows I am absorbing some of this.
J: It is taking root.
R: You know, I am 59, so learning is not as easy as it used to be. But what it comes down to is that I am hard on myself and then I just bring that to the class.
J: I hear that. And I can relate to that too. And my hope, over time, is that you can find that quality of God's compassion and really extend it to yourself. You have that voice within yourself being such a kind and gentle person to others. The growing edge, for you, may be coming to bring that energy that you often direct outwards, and take it inwards. So your *kavana* (intention) for your morning prayer might be to amplify the volume of that voice as it relates to yourself.
R: That would be a wonderful thing for me to keep in mind. Because every day I say to God, I am trying to be a better person. Things I said or did that I wish I didn't… or an

unkind thought I had. I ask God to help me be a better person. Maybe I can tone that down, and ask God to help me be kinder with myself. *You* emanate such peacefulness and warmth. That is why I am here and why I continue to stay. You just emanate that. You are certainly in the right place.
J: Thank you… we are a good match.

Session 3 (2/9/09)

Section A:

[This session opened with a discussion of Nancy Flam's article from the *Sh'ma* Journal on her theology of illness and healing.]

R: My question is why did God create a world in which there are limitations, so that bad things can happen?
J: I don't know that I have an answer to that. The rabbis have been asking that for a long time, but there are some questions we can't answer. And, part of faith is a willingness to live in mystery. If we are honest, we all have to live in it.
R: Could it be that if there wasn't bad, we would appreciate the good? Like it would be hard to appreciate vacation without work. But sometimes the bad is so bad. So tragic. When I see a sick child. I struggle with that. How could God make or allow this child suffer?
J: And I have trouble believing in a God that would assign this suffering for this person and this for that person. I think that is what Nancy Flam's article is addressing. That God has created a world of limitations. Sometimes things go awry. It is amoral. It is not a simple equation of this person was good, so they get this deck of cards and if you did this in life, you get that set of suffering. People have all different approaches to understanding evil and suffering in our world, but I personally cannot imagine a God that would pick out a young mom to get cancer with a newborn baby.

R: Sometimes people say that everything happens for a reason. Part me of agrees and part of me is not so sure.

J: I would agree. I think that we are wired to create meaning. That is part of the godliness that God implanted within us as beings created in God's Image. So I think we can create meaning and understanding to even the most challenging of circumstances. But I can't imagine God picks us out as individuals for suffering.

R: And you are a rabbi… so has a rabbi how do you not believe everything happens for a reason. Is it all arbitrary?

J: Well, I think God created an amazing world where people can be born, and live, and care for one another, and it is our job to help makes things work well and that is an ongoing process. That is part of how I experience God's presence in the world. There are wonderful, awesome moments and then there is darkness and the ways in which we bring each other through that. Part of the task of being a spiritual being is finding meaning in that.

R: I think it is interesting that when really bad things happen, people either get closer to God or think how could there be a God.

J: What has your experience been?

R: To get closer. I think it is more comforting to say that God is going to be with me and help me through this. But I could see how other people might go the other direction.

J: You see suffering and an opening to come closer.

R: It is almost easier if you don't think about these things and go along your way.

J: Unconscious.

R: Yes. Like my husband (laughing). I mean he is much happier and carefree. But I don't operate like that. I don't know how you turn that off.

J: We are all wired differently.

R: So maybe we balance each other out and over the years, we have probably impacted each other. He is just not a reflective person. Here are some examples… but I am not like that.

J: In my experience, part of spirituality is learning to live as awake and conscious as possible. To have the courage and space to reflect on myself and the world around me… my relationships, my work, my sense of purpose. What thoughts and perceptions really

belong to other people? Which ones are truly mine? I think to make time to think this way, is a spiritual discipline.

R: It's just more complicated. It is hard to have peace sometimes when you are always analyzing. But I see how far I have come when I see my son. He does things that I no longer do anymore. I am much less of a perfectionist. I know not to look for perfection anymore. I look at my son and almost feel badly. I feel like those qualities came from me.

J: You know what that is like… but part of life is developmental. We grow through that. We can't take away our kids' troubles. A time comes when we say, we are no longer aiming for perfection. But you can't tell somebody that in their 20s'.

R: I feel like I am just so much wiser now, than I was thirty years ago. I mean sometimes I am annoyed because I don't remember things the way I used to. But that is really the surface level. When it comes to the deep things, I just feel like I have some really wisdom. That is the nice part about getting older. You have just this unbelievable wisdom. And I think it takes it takes some adversity and life experience to find that wisdom. To develop real character. As Jewish parents, we are so protective of our children, but we don't do them a favor that way.

J: And going back to the beginning of our conversation, God created a world in which we all inevitability face adversity and that is how we grow.

R: I just don't know why some people have so much bad stuff.

J: That I don't have an answer for.

Section B:

R: Well, you know, I had no idea until I took this class that things like *tzedakah* (charity/pursuit of justice) were so important in this religion. I was like, wow. But the people whom I was in contact with never did this stuff… sure, they prepared kosher food and went to Temple on such and such days, but these are nice, admirable things I didn't know about. Very eye-opening. Like *teshuva* (repentance) too…

J: That really touched you.

R: It did touch me.

J: You know I often think of the *u'netaneh tokef* prayer that we utter during the High Holy Days as a road map for Jewish living. You may remember, it is the prayer in which we say… "who shall live and who shall die… who by fire and who by water…" The end of the prayer says that "*tefillah, tzedakah,* and *teshuva"* help us live a better life. We don't know what life holds for any of us, but these are things we can do. So *tefillah* is about taking regular time to pray, reflect, judge ourselves… *tzedakah* is about pursuing a just world… and *teshuvah* is about repentance and always working to improve ourselves. This is our job. The rest is icing on the cake. It's hard work… but we are all in it. And if we are in it, I think this is what it ought to be about.

R: Well, I think some people are interested in the trimmings, and not the heart of the matter.

J: When God chooses Abraham to lead our people, according to the Torah, God chooses him to purSarah *tzedek u'mishpat*. To purSarah justice and righteousness. I try to remember that.

R: Yeah, I mean keeping kosher and all that may be there for me down the road for me, but right now it feels unattainable. Like going to shul every Shabbat. I want to strive toward that, but it makes me tired even thinking about it.

J: I think it is about baby steps. *L'at l'at.*…slowly, slowly. One step at a time.

R: I feel I am taking baby steps-- especially with the Hebrew. I have a long way to go, but I can kind of read now. So, it is baby steps. And whatever I have absorbed with all these other things I am learning it has given me a whole other side of Judaism that I never knew about it. I loved learning about the prayers.

[The session closed with an introduction to basic meditation and Rachel's interest in incorporating that into her practice.]

5) Reflection Piece #2:

While I have learned many interesting things throughout this past year, the one lesson that stands out for me is the lesson on Teshuvah. I had never heard the term "Teshuvah" and so of course, I did I know that it was an integral part of Judaism. I was interested to learn that God does not expect us to be perfect and therefore, we are given a way to atone

and repent for our sins. In a way it lifted a weight off of my shoulders to realize that God knows that no one is perfect and that we all have a second chance to redeem ourselves if we have knowingly or unknowingly sinned. To me it seems that to be able to perform teshuva is a gift given to us by God because no one is perfect and God is forgiving. That is a comforting thought.

Cheryl

1) Reflection Piece #1:

When my mother passed away nearly five years ago, I received many cards and phone calls from my Christian friends. Most of them echoed the same sentiment, something to the effect of, "You should rejoice that she is in a better place." I wasn't rejoicing. I was feeling the worst pain I'd ever experienced. When we returned to Raleigh following the funeral, I went to our regular Shabbat service. What would have normally been a small gathering was a nice –sized group, most of whom were Jewish friends of mine that had come, without being asked, to support me while I said *kaddish* for the first time. No one said anything to me about how I should feel, or how I should act. They just sat there with me. That weekend, food began to arrive at our house. People from the Jewish community pre-school that I hardly knew were keeping me from having to worry about dinner. That is when I first felt like a part of the Jewish community. I don't think my personal theology changed much with my subsequent conversion. I have always believed in one God. I've always believed God created every person in God's image. I think the three major religions are all really the same at their core. The differences are basically window dressing. How we pray and where we pray don't matter much. Who we pray with is really the important isSarah. Being Jewish, to me, means having a group of people to pray with me, stand with me when I need them, and hold me when I cannot stand up on my own.

2) Summary of Questionnaire:

Cheryl sees herself as being right in the middle of her life. She wishes it was still the first third, but she recognizes she is somewhere in the middle. Cheryl is struggling to figure out what is central to Judaism and what is custom, but not necessarily required. She is still searching for a framework through which she can understand the notion of "mitzvah" and observance. She does not feel that her life falls neatly into any particular Jewish denomination so she feels she is making her own way to find a Jewish expression that is meaningful, comforting, and uplifting. At first, Cheryl felt that traditional Judaism seemed very sexist. Now she sees being a woman "as allowing her journey to take its own path." She sees being a woman as offering her liberty to create new traditions. She expressed a hope to have individual time with me and smaller group learning. She is curious about trying on tefillin and finding a safe space to experiment with rituals and ideas. Cheryl writes that her relationship with God is constantly and changing and seems to change situationally. Sometimes she distinctly feels God's presence or knows what God would have her do/feel, and other times, she is frustrated and feels that God is totally unknown to her. As a teenager, she had fewer questions and felt like her relationship with God was more solid. This is frustrating for her. She would like to find a way to use her religious practice to rise above the stress of daily life and to feel as though she has the knowledge to participate in every aspect of synagogue worship. She still feels somewhat intimidated by the choreography of prayer and worship. Cheryl feels that her increasing knowledge and observance of Jewish life is intimidating to her husband, but hopes that it will spur him to step up his practice. She doesn't think her kids have caught on yet—only that she attends more meetings. She hopes that her children will enjoy seeing her on the bima and not have the same feelings of intimidation that she is still working to overcome.

3) Class Presentation

Cheryl brought her *ketubah*. At the time of her wedding, she was a Methodist. The only available *ketubot* for interfaith couples were not to their liking. Instead, she found a design she liked and together with her husband, they re-wrote the entire text in Hebrew and English. It was her first Jewish object and her first experience in creating something Jewish for their new family.

4) Individual Spiritual Guidance:

Session 1 (9/15/08)

Section A:

C: And I think also that my view of God is kind of skewed. I had this view of God that was kind of fed to me.
J: Can you tell me what that view was.
C: Well my parents grew up Southern Baptists. We belonged to a Methodist Church yeah because my parents have social conscience. Actually that's a bad thing to say. Steven's family used to say just the nastiest things about Southern Baptists. The Southern Baptists that you see in the news that are spouting off… things. They are the vocal ones and they are not the majority. And my family's all still Southern Baptists so Steven's family just used to say such horrible things… These are my people. See they're not all like that. Most of them are very tolerant. But their view of God was very different. It was kind of, you know, very parental view and a very judgmental view. To be feared sort of.
J: Geared toward reward punishment
C: Exactly and then when I got, the Methodist Church, I don't know that they force one view of God. It was a very open. Which I always kind of liked… I hope that we have a soul and that all of our souls are kind of some how make up God. And I don't know, I've always tried to reconcile the scientist in me and the whole religious thing. I've never, I don't really understand the whole anti-creationism debate because to me you can believe in creation and not have a problem with evolution.
J: Yes, I am curious about what it is like for you as a scientist and a person with a spiritual life.
C: I've never had a conflict because something had to set the ball rolling and its not and I don't think that there is any way that pure chance could have come up with what we have. That's incomprehensible to me. So I think that I believe in God as a creator and I also don't believe that everything started in 7 solar cycles. That doesn't seem right. But then I don't think that Methusala lived to be however old. I don't think that I've ever been able to take the Bible completely literally…Apart from letting go of some of the childhood weirdness, I don't think that my view of God had really changed any.

J; Do you still have the sense that there are expectations that God has for you, or a certain standards that you strive for?

C: You know I think the older I get the more I think that I do it to myself. You know, if something awful happens, my first thought is, I still think, what did I do to deserve this? Like there's got to be some kind reason of that this awful thing is some kind of retribution for something

J: Something *you* did…

C: And I don't know if I'll ever be able to let go of that even though I know logically that's completely wrong. But I used to think that, because my parents told me that God had really high expectations for me. I think that they were my parent's high expectations

J: We have those two relationships…each is so important to how we grow to think about ourselves.

C: I set really high expectations for myself and I think I probably, and I can't imagine as a child and in retrospect I think my expectations were probably higher than my parents too. I think I'm just that way. You know, but I don't think I see of God as setting those for me. At least not anymore. I may have at one point but I don't now.

J: You understand that there is an internally imposed system and you don't need anything else on top of that (said wryly).

C: And my internally imposed system is so much worse than anything…

J: So in some ways is God becoming more for you a source of compassion, of perspective?

C: Yeah, I think it is.

Section B:

C: I see my religious journey as having two parts, the before my mother died and the after my mother died.

J: Tell me about both of those parts.

C: Before my mother died it was more that I never thought about it. It was whatever the Methodist Church told me it was what it was. And it never occurred to me to question it. Then mom died,

J: How old were you?

C: It was 4 years ago. It was pretty recent. Ellie was a baby and all these people kept coming up to me at the funeral kept saying rejoice she's with God now. And I'm like thinking, I'm not rejoicing. There's no rejoicing going on. It's just not right. And I found that very, very hard. I thought there was something wrong with me because I wasn't rejoicing.

J: Yes, that was very dissonant for you.

C: It just didn't fit with what was going on at all. But when we got back from the funeral, the rabbis called and said do you want a *shiva minyan*. There was uncharted territory. What do you want? You know really I wasn't sure. I hadn't really thought about it. You know, don't set anything up. But we wanted to come back Friday night so I could go to services. So I got there and it was February and it wasn't a Bar Mitzvah, there probably would have been normally 20 people there. There were probably 50. Most of them were friends of mine who had probably heard that we were coming back. You know, I was supposed to get some kind of feeling of relief or something from my religious beliefs and Methodism was not helping in this situation at all and I got back and you know, this is where my community is. And I think, that was really a big shift. Also, that religion became in a way less "spiritual" for me, and more about community.

J: And there is nothing to say that community is not spiritual.

C: That's true.

J: It sounds like that was part of the source of the comfort.

C: Right.

J: You were not alone.

C: It became less God focused and more community focused. I think that was like a big shift in my thinking. I don't know if Eric ever told you this, before I converted I made an appointment with him because I was just completely confused. I knew I wasn't Methodist anymore. I've had several health scares in the last couple of years and it bothered me that if I died, what kind of funeral would I have. Not many people think about that probably, but I thought about it a lot. It really bothered me. I couldn't stand to think of this dismal thing in a funeral home with some random person officiating. So I came to talk to him and you know I don't know what I am. I'm not a Methodist. I'm not Jewish. I don't know what I am. We talked for a while and he said I think you're Jewish.

J: He never told me about this story, but truthfully it is hard to imagine you as anything other than the Jew that you are now.

Section C:

C: Well I feel bad about *hevrah kadisha* because even though I have coordinated it in the past, I can't do a *tehara*. I just can't do it. I've done one. I just can't do another one. It's just too hard for me. That's why I do all the calling.
J: I was just going to say that you make it all happen. Absolutely.
C: I'm learning to say no. And I still run around like a crazy person and I feel like I'm completely out of control of my life. Yeah, I don't know how people with more than two kids do it cause I am really having a hard time getting my… I told Steven last night that my biggest nightmare is I'll completely forget someone's child. I haven't done it yet but I'm really afraid of it. So we'll see. I'm trying to do better about everyone asking me to do stuff. In some ways, I think I really kind of have lost myself. I don't know what I like to do anymore. I don't know that I like to do anything anymore. I keep joking with people that I haven't figured out what I'm going to be when I grow up because I would actually like to have a career of some sort. I have no idea what I would do. I'm starting to be getting old to be thinking that. Hopefully not too late. Yeah, I was talking to Tami's husband the other day [Tami is a congregant, mother of three, who is about to graduate college at the age of 36], he was joking that she was going to have her retirement and her graduation party at the same time. That's kind of how I feel because I probably will go back to school someday. Then all the older people that I know say, but this is such a short time in your life and you should really just enjoy every minute of it and I feel like I'm juggling. There's not much joy going on there. I feel like I'm in a weird place. I was hoping that when they both went off to school that I would kind of have a quiet time. It turned out that Matthew's school has an early bell and Ellie's school has a late. So by the time I get them both gone and before I pick them both up, I've got 4 hours which is exactly what I had last year.

Section D:

C: I don't know where I am. I have no idea. Steve and I discuss this all the time. We're kind of having a, well I wouldn't say that we are ecstatically happily married either but I think it is because neither one of knows who we are so how can we be a "we" together if you know what I

mean. We have no common interests anymore and Steven says we have no interests. Apart from our kids, neither of us has any interests. I sew. That's my one thing. But even that I don't have a whole lot of time for. And he works around the house. But again, it becomes a chore, especially when people are asking me to do things.

J: Instead of being a thing that you derive pure pleasure from to being like another think that you have to check off.

C: Yeah, yeah. I was listening to this thing on NPR today about, it was this woman who has written a book about how, it was about marriage in general and when a school did a survey or study on unhappy marriages and then they would look at them again in 5 years. And the people who got divorced out of the unhappy marriages were still unhappy. And the people who didn't, their marriages actually became happy. Steven and I would never consider divorce. It's not in our, you know, I don't know.

J: Not on your radar screen as an option.

C: But If you stick it out it will, and I'm kind of hoping, it will get better. Like if I can get through this manic, crazy part of my life then I will have a chance to figure out who I am. And be happy. I just feel like I'm in manic crazy mode all the time.

Section E:

C: Steven quit *davening* when we had kids. He used to get up earlier than me. When we first got married it weirded me out. The *tefilin* thing was a little weird.

J: It's weird.

C: If you've never seen…

J: It's weird even if you have (smiling).

C: It's true. I'd woke up and what the heck is that. I'm sure I'll never want to do that. But actually, there's a part of me that would like to learn. Yeah, I'm not sure. I don't know.

J: So maybe, I'm planting a seed-- don't feel that you have to let that seed grow-- but I'm planting a seed that perhaps you might consider finding 5 to 10 minutes a day that wasn't scheduled or predetermined where you did some guided meditation or prayer or breathing. Some time for you. Unstructured. No particular goal in mind. Prayerful time. One day that might

even include *tefillin*. Who knows? But I think finding a couple minutes a day to get quiet is a powerful and meaningful place to start.

Session 2 (2/23/09)

Section A:

J: How are you in general?
C: I'm okay. My life is still completely out of control. I don't know that there's a lot I can do about it. Eric will kill me if he hears me saying this.
J: He won't hear you say it and I assure you he won't kill you. What is on your mind?
C: Steven thinks that I should, well we probably both agree that I should cut back from what I do. So I sit around kinda thinking what can I cut back on and we were kinda talking about it and we had this special *hevra kadisha* [Death and dying committee] crisis this weekend. I don't know if Eric told you.
J: No, we typically don't about shul things.
C: So Rabbi G [from another synagogue in town] called me and just chewed me out on the phone… well she called me at Saturday at 10am and of course, that is Shabbat.
J: Is that even typical?
C: Well, I don't know, but Steven said well you should have been at Shul and you wouldn't have even gotten the call. Well, yeah, I guess that's true. But someone passed away Friday night and they had the funeral yesterday and apparently it was somebody unaffiliated. They get the call for the unaffiliated. Then started about how Beth Meyer doesn't help the community and I wasn't being helpful because I told her I couldn't get a *hevra kadisha* together.for an early funeral. I said okay. And Steven and I got to talking and I while the *hevra kadisha* piece while I started doing it while Ellie was an infant and within weeks of my mom dying. It was a very important thing. I felt it was a very important thing for me to take on. At the time that I took it on, I was home all day cause I had an infant, I wasn't working.
J: The infant napped.

C: Yeah, the only volunteer commitments I had were over at the preschool. They were manageable. And my role, I'm a first responder, so I get the *hevra kadisha* all together. So when I get a call, I have to be able to drop everything and do that.

J: It's time dependent.

C: It is. I can't and just worrying about getting that call is adding so much stress to my life I feel like I have to give it up. So Steven said do I have to find a replacement and I said I think you have to give them an amount of time to find a replacement. So I think Eric's going to kill me.

J: First of all, I think this is really important. Eric wants what's best for you.

C: I want to do it; it's something I do feel very strongly about. It's just not a time in my life when that's something I can do.

J: There are lots of things that I care about deeply. I don't know a person, with a family to take care of and limited time, energy, resources who can do everything. It's such an incredible mitzvah that you've taken this on, now, five years. Okay. You really led this for a number of years and what a beautiful thing. Not only was it a mitzvah in and of itself but you took it on when it had special meaning given the death of your mother.

C: Yeah, …Steven said if you step off, I'll put my name on the list of men who will do the ritual washing. I've tried. I've done one. I can't. It's very hard. I can't. So he said he would do that which makes me feel a little better. And, he's like so detached and unemotional that I don't think it will be a problem to be with a dead person…

J: He can do it.

C: Yeah, and he's lost his grandfather and for me, every time I would walk in that room, that's my mother right there in front of me. I can't get past that. Despite all reassurances that I would eventually get past it… Maybe when I'm much older cause I think when we age, death becomes less of a …

J: That doesn't have to be a goal for you. Last time we talked about the *hesed* and *gevura*- idea. It is important to remember that *gevura* is as important as the *hesed*. And I think as girls and women we are trained, and I think we are naturally more inclined for the *hesed* and we are unconditionally loving of our children and if not we would have even bigger problems with society.

C: My children won't… or we'd both be dead.

J: Yeah, exactly. So we are biologically predisposed in a certain way and I think we also live in a society that expects us to be endlessly giving. And we can't. So I think it is really, a powerful spiritual expression of …to say for everything there is a season. And for this too. Somebody else needs this mitzvah. Somebody else is going to take this on, you don't have to know who they are, if you come up with an idea, great.

C: Steven said if you agree to find your replacement, you will never be replaced.

J: Yeah. You can't.

C: I am not a person who can needle people into doing stuff, so instead of bothering someone else, I'll just keep doing it.

J: Exactly. And what a gift to know that about yourself and to hand it over. As I said, somebody else needs this mitzvah and will have the meaning and the joy and the potential healing that comes from being a facilitator.

Section B:

C: I want to tell you something about the class. I feel very intimidated during your part of the class. I look around and it's not everyone in there but there are a few people who are in there that are on this other spiritual plane and they are the most intimidating people I have ever met in my entire life. It's like everything that comes out of their mouths is like brilliant and insightful and I don't have that kind of brilliance and insightfulness. Like this is why I didn't take philosophy in college and I took archeology instead. I think differently and I learn differently and I find it, especially when you do group things. That's why Cathy and I are good in a group because I think she and I

J: You get each other.

C: We get each other and she doesn't have that piece of her personality that has her being intimidated by the other people. She sees that she's not like that and she's fine with it. I'm not really fine with the fact that I'm not really like that.

J: Where does that come from?

C: I don't know. I honestly don't know. It's not like, well my parents weren't deeply spiritual people. They were deeply religious people. I'm not sure I would call them deeply spiritual people. Cause they were Baptists and spiritual isn't really something, it's more of a Methodist

concept. Everything was very clear and delineated and Judaism has these two splits. There's the spiritual aspect and then there's the taking things apart in the incredible minutiate. And I don't necessarily feel comfortable with either although I feel completely comfortable dissecting something into little bits and arguing about something but I don't see the point of it. I can do it but it's kind of foreign. Yes, it's like why are we doing that. What's the point? But, yeah, I don't know. Maybe I felt like I was missing something that I don't quite get. I grew up in a weird way cause I was a Methodist. I went to a Methodist church and all my friends were Methodist. But at home, the doctrine was very backwards, cause that's what my parents grew up with. I don't know, I sit in class sometimes and …

J: It almost sounds to me like the class is somewhat like a microcosm of the split even that you felt home where you had this Methodist community and this kind of Baptist drumbeat coming from the inside. There's a foreignness about the feelings around spirituality.

C: Yeah, it's just really uncomfortable. I feel judged.

J: I am curious about that. The judgment part.

C: That's probably the Baptist part. Well, part of it is a competitive thing. And it's fun because I am seeing this now in my son and it drives us nuts. And we don't know how to make him better or … in his classroom with it. I have this need to feel like I am doing well at whatever I'm doing. And if I don't feel like I am doing well at it generally, I just don't do it. Well, that's fine for an adult and you can make choices at what you will and will not do, we're having a problem with Matthew because

J: He doesn't have choices.

C: And he doesn't want to do it. So when it comes to writing a book report where you are exposing some of yourself he won't do that but his science projects he's fine with. So I think that's part of it. I feel intimidated in class because I know if I say something it's going to sound so much dumber than something someone else would say.

J: I want to share something very sincere with you. Nothing you ever say sounds dumb to me.

C: Okay, well thank you.

J: You don't have to believe me … this may or may not change your voice that you have about yourself but that is never the thought or feeling that I have about anything you have to say. Ever.

C: Thank you.

J: It never dawned on me that what you have to say doesn't have intellect, insight, import, you know. Everybody in the class approaches these things differently, because everyone has a different journey, a different narrative of their lives, different upbringing. You know, so wildly different, which makes it so interesting.

C: I feel very comfortable in learning Torah trope because I'm good at that. It's like a jigsaw puzzle.

J: Figure out the parts and put it back together.

C: In that class too, Cathy and I sit right next to each other and I feel bad about … intimidating the heck out of each other… And I think it is a lot easier to come at trope from a background of nothingness than to have heard stuff your whole life and never really learned to read it. I think Cathy and I really have an advantage here. I feel bad cause I am kind of making some of the other ladies feel a little intimidated. I'm not doing it intentionally, we're just really enjoying it.

J: Right, and you want to learn it.

C: It's like the class switches to the other half of my brain.

J: Yeah, and you can take a deep breath.

C: This is the relaxing part.

J: Can we go back to why you, why it is so important for you to feel like you are doing well. There is a harsh critic waiting at the door.

C: There always is.

<u>Session 3 (2/23/09)</u>

Section A:

C: Thank you so much for helping with her mom's *shiva minyan*.

J: You are welcome.

C: After my mom's death, it was too confusing to claim *shiva* for myself at the time of her mother's death, but now, things. I had a real observation there… I had been to many *shiva minyanim*, but until it was my own, I never realized, and quite loved that everyone says Kaddish with you. Because, when I came back to Raleigh after the funeral in Savannah, it was very hard for me to stand in services and say Kaddish by myself. It was very, very difficult for me to be

alone. It was so much easier when everyone was there with me. I almost wish we did it like that all the time. I mean, it is not something you want to stand out about or be recognized for.

J: Yes. I hear you… and I imagine part of what you are saying is that losing your mom is such an alienating experience.

C: Yeah it is.

J: In some ways, your mom is like your spiritual umbilical chord.

C: Yes; that is really true. And being so young, I didn't know anyone who has lost their mom at my age.

J: So it was even more alienating in terms of your self of who you are. It almost sounds to me, the way you describe it, that your shiva was cut off and in so doing, your bereavement process.

C: The rabbi offered it, but I just didn't know who I was and what I needed to do at that time.

J: In many ways, it was such a liminal space…

C: Yes; and I do think it would have been very helpful. I really missed something there. But, at the time, I was still identifying myself as a Methodist, though that was the start of the transition. I would not have converted if I hadn't had such an experience in which I felt, you really don't belong here anymore.

J: I believe that sometimes things just don't fit… and we find what we need even when we do it in an unexpected way or time.

C: Sometimes I wonder if I hadn't married a Jew, would I be a Jew? And, I don't know. I can say for certain that I wouldn't be a Methodist or any form of Protestant, but I don't know what I would be. And that is weird. It feels strange not to know that. It is a weird feeling.

J: What's weird? What are the feelings that come with that statement?

C: It makes me feel like that I am uncertain of myself and my own ability to make independent choices. Which I always think I have questioned. I never gave myself space as an adult to make a lot of independent choices. I never even chose Steven. We met when we were 16 and it just happened. I always feel that somehow I started a path and then it just sort of took off and I followed it but I didn't make any big decisions, and here is where I am. It wasn't a conscious decision. I always felt that I was following a path and then I ended up somewhere not knowing quite how I got there.

J: It sounds like a fore that carried you that didn't demand your engagement.

C: Right. And that isn't necessarily a bad thing, but it makes me feel like I'm not good at making decisions… because I haven't really made any.
J: Do you think that is true?
C: I don't know… like we didn't really consciously choose when to start a family, ok I guess it is the right time. And so too with my career… which I hope to choose again for myself one day. No idea what that would be. And I guess, I consciously chose to convert, but it happened because I met Steven. There was a ready made religion there. I am in awe of people who do that out of the blue, in a vacuum, without a relationship?
J: But you didn't *have* to convert, and you didn't for a while. I'm not out to convince you at all, and I think it is powerful to even give voice to that sense about yourself… there is a part of you that feels that you haven't been in the driver's seat of your own life… but I want to lift up the fact that you chose to identify yourself with the Jewish people. And that is pretty big. Just because it feels right, doesn't mean it isn't your decision.

Section B:

J: So what would it look like for you to feel like you are more in the driver's seat of your life?
C: That is a good question. Well, I think that would involve letting go of a lot of things people have come to expect me to do. Things that I cannot stop. I have gotten myself into a corner in which I don't have a choice about what I do anytime soon. I have a little dream inside that one day when the kids are much older, starting to make choices about where I spend my time and what I devote myself to do. But so much of what I do is in relation to my family and children right now. I am working on learning to say no to people, because as much as I totally support Jewish Family Services, sitting on their board and doing publicity materials is not exactly what I would love to be doing. And yet, someone asked me. And that is what I would like to see myself learn to do someday, to say no to some things, so that I have time to do what I want.
J: It takes a lot of strength to set those limits. And, you are not alone. In some ways, it is goes against our way of being in the world as mothers. We are supposed to be giving, to always meet the needs of our kids. But boundaries are important too.

C: Yeah, like I think about my mother. And, she was not a particularly happy person because she got carried along her life's path. I remember asking her, did you always want four kids, and she said, no. I wanted two. But now that I have them, I can't imagine which two I would keep.
J: How funny.
C: But, I look at that, and I think… she did some great things in her life. When I graduated college, she went at the same time and graduated with an RN. It was very late in her life, but she did it. Still, I would like not to wait that long.
J: Cheryl, what do you think she would say to you if she were here right now?
C: That's another good question. She would not want me to think she regretted her life (crying). Because she didn't. She didn't' resent her life. But she might have wanted different options for her life, but she didn't have them. I mean she got married in 1952… it wasn't like had a lot of options. I think she would be so glad that I finished my degree because when she died, I had not yet gotten my master's degree in chemistry. But, I think she would be very happy that I was at least thinking about it… even I choose to stay a house wife, at least the fact that I had the ability to think about it and chose to think of it.
J: I am sorry, Cheryl, but I cannot see you as a housewife in any way. It is fine for you identify yourself that way, but I don't see it. Community organizer, educator, volunteer, parent leader… that's what I see..
C: Yeah, I know. I was joking with my friend that she "works." And she said, to me, "You work!" You just don't get paid for all the work I do. And I do work. I earn money and I don't earn money. But for some reason, because I do it in my house, I think of myself as a housewife. When Steven gets home at 6 and I am still sitting at my computer and haven't thought about dinner, I can tell that he is a little annoyed. I mean, my friend says that she makes her husband cook, or they go out. And that is actually something that I am getting better at… beginning to tell him about things that are bothering me instead of stewing about them. I mean, he probably things I am being mean, but it makes me feel better. I am trying to e nice in the way I do it too.
J: That is *gevura* (God's attribute of limits/boundaries/judgment) too.
C: Well it used to build up until it would overflow and that was never good for either of us. I think six months ago neither of us were particularly happy with each other, but we are working hard together and things are getting a little better. But, yeah, so I am trying to a better job communicating with everybody and not just stewing about everything

J: Yes… because we often try to silence ourselves… and it never really works, sometimes and inflict the violence on ourselves until there is an opening and the floodgates open wide, and it all spews out. But, I totally see that as connected to the big headline of *gevura*—of finding strength in communicating healthy boundaries so that you can have the life that you want and share yourself in a way that feels good. Still, I wonder what your mom would say about your generalized sense of discontent now and your feeling that you have to put your desires on hold… especially when life is so short.

C: Oh, I think she would just say, "Honey, that's just what you got to do." She was so stoic. She did the same thing I am doing. And I cannot imagine doing these things. Girl Scouts. The synagogue. Running the book fair at Matthew's school this week. Her sense of responsibility to her family was so strong. And I don't think she would imagine that I would do it any differently. And that is where she got her satisfaction. I am not a mom who gets on the floor and plays or breaks my back holding the bicycle when they are learning to ride. But they know I love them when I am leading their scout troop and at the book fair. If I didn't do those things, I would feel like an inept parent. That's how they know I love them and care about what they do. But, I also know that there are some things I can set better limits with and I am trying to do that. (She went on to explain her reasoning for letting go of running the "Death and Dying committee" after five years. I affirmed her decision and reminded her that everything has its season. We commented on how the committee has survived and is thriving and I attributed that to her leadership which she took in for herself—at little.)

Section C:

C: Since mom's death, I feel like I have grown up a lot and I am a very different person. I am a lot more adventuresome in every way. Now I want to go to Korea with Steven on business. I have gotten to be a lot more open to trying new things and not so afraid of change. And that is relieving.

J: Well, I think one of the central ways I think about a spiritual path is one of "opening." When I think of the great redemption story of the Jewish narrative of coming through Egypt (*Mitzrayim*)—from a narrow place to one that was ultimately, more expansive is the path—internal and external—and sometimes the death of a parent helps up move through to that more

open place… in a way we can do when we are still in the womb, so to speak. There is some freedom and blessing in that, as much as we long to still have that person by our side.
C: Yes; and to a certain extent I never felt like a grown up, before she died. But now I do. I am the parent. I have to be the grown up.
J: You *are* in the driver's seat. The buck stops with you.
C: I am… in some ways.

Section D:

J: This is our last session for this year. And my blessing for you is that your discernment process continues. That you not feel that you need to shelve important core parts of yourself for the sake of others until your children reach high school. And, I see that things are moving for you and just want to lend some positive energy toward that end for you.
C: Thank you… and even I see Steven changing. He is getting stuck with more household stuff and kids' stuff that he is used to.
J: And that will be a process of negotiation. But that's the spirituality and difficulty of change. You are a family system and you cannot change without everyone else changing too. But that is the beauty of it. In fact (she says in a whisper), he is also getting a little jealous because I am spending so much time working on my Jewishness and I think he is thinking, "I am the real Jew here, what am I doing?" I mean I am reading Torah for the first time in two weeks and I am signed up for once a month going forward and that is something he wants to learn but has not yet done. He finds that really galling that I am beating him to it. This was a part of the class that I could really grasp and do. I am excited.
J: And he will have to find his path too. But that is the beauty of it… in a good marriage, no partner is perfect, and that there are lots of hard times, but just to be able to grow together in tandem with each other.
C: Yeah…
J: It is very meaningful to share your life with someone.

5) Reflection Piece #2:

When the assignment was first given to choose a particular teaching and write a reflection on it, my mind went completely blank. With so many interesting classes, I couldn't even focus well enough remember any of them individually. After pulling out our enormous binder, and flipping through my handouts—which I had categorized to make them more accessible—I immediately settled on the discussion of Shabbat. Our family has observed Shabbat in some form since Stephen and I married twelve years ago. Over the years our rituals have changed—both for better and worse. But I never really thought about it much. Being married to someone who will probably always be "more observant" than I am, I simply followed along with whatever made my husband comfortable. Much of it seemed a little silly or arbitrary. For example, while still newly-married, we got up early each Saturday morning to be at synagogue when services began. We enjoyed shacharit and the Torah service. As soon as the scrolls were safely returned to the ark, we left to have breakfast at IHOP. While we had no trouble buying breakfast (and at an establishment that tries to serve bacon with everything), we would not make a long distance call because that was a monetary transaction. I did not *get it*, but I enjoyed the special time together, and found spiritual meaning in the services we attended. As our family grew and our time together became more constrained, our observances changed. We began to focus on the importance of the family Shabbat dinner and the Friday night service. Our Saturday Shabbat observance was winnowed down to sleeping in before beginning the rat-race of sports, birthday parties, projects, and house work. While prayer had become more important in our life, the true ideal of Shabbat as a day of rest and reflection had been getting lost. I found true inspiration in hearing my classmates stories of how they find meaning in Shabbat. I had always considered our family fairly observant, but I began to realize that we were missing the much larger point. I cannot remember whose suggestion it had been, but I decided to follow one of my classmate's example and completely stop checking e-mail on Shabbat. It is amazing how freeing the small-seeming act can be. I have also signing up to read Torah at least once a month. This has two outcomes: First, I'm learning more Hebrew and becoming more comfortable with the scrolls and on the bimah. Second, this forces me to attend Saturday services, at least each time I read. While I don't find service attendance restful, it prevents me from participating in other less-restful activities, such as the mile-long list of household chores. Having the broad age range in our class has also been inspirational. It has allowed me to look forward to my later years with great

anticipation. While I treasure the baseball games and ballet recitals, I long for a time when the daily stresses of parenthood have subsided, and Stephen and I can truly enjoy a restful Shabbat.

Leanna

1) Reflection Piece #1:

Growing up Jewish in the south meant, at times, hiding my Jewish identity, so that as an adolescent, I didn't appear different. As most teens desire to fit in with the crowd, I too wanted to be accepted, but being Jewish meant that there was a difference; especially since I went to a private Episcopal high school. I stopped wearing my "chai" necklace as I grew tired of people questioning me about eh cow I wore on my chain. Exiled from the local country club depicted the anti-Semitism in my community; being Jewish was more of an embarrassment than something of which to be proud. However, when friends made anti-Semitic comments, I would cringe with anger and then portend their ignorance. Yet, I remained active in Jewish youth group throughout high school as the group allowed me to practice my being a Jew without shame and ostracism. I had a secret involvement with the youth group as no one from high school knew of my membership. USY gave me a sense of religious entitlement and place to be proud of my heritage. In college I drifted away from my religiosity, as school, friends, and academia took precedence. I met my husband who was not Jewish and I strayed further from my religious roots although when we decided to marry, our wedding would be a Jewish one and we vowed that our children would be raised as Jews. When the children started coming along, we held strong to our commitment to raise them in my faith and enrolled them in Jewish preschool with the hope that the school would assist me in nurturing their heritage. During those years, I once again identified with my religious customs and enjoyed participating in our Jewish lives. Btu then the feeling wavered again when we changed synagogues… especially when it came time for our children to become a Bat Mitzvah. However, with the cookie cutter atmosphere of service and the insincerity of the congregants, I, yet again, lost whatever connection to Judaism I had left. So here I am trying to figure out what being Jewish means to me because I don't know except for the fact that I was born a Jew with a long family history form the "old" country. At this time of my life, being Jewish has become only a cultural meaning rather than anything spiritual. As I flounder around, I think of the following:

1) holidays at my mom's with the whole family
2) rugalah
3) chicken soup
4) kreplach
5) accents from NY
6) Yiddish words
7) Lighting candles at Hanukkah
8) Periodically lighting Shabbat candles
9) Wearing Judaica jewelry every once in a while
10) Having my children become bat mitzvah
11) Going to services out of obligation but not really wanting to
12) Matzah balls

I hope to find a deeper meaning in my Judaism to guide me through my second adulthood so that I can peaceably reconcile issues of my own mortality.

2) Summary of Questionnaire:

Leanna feels that she is in the middle of her life. She wants to learn more about Judaism. "Who is God?" "Is there life after death?" "Why don't a feel a relationship with a higher power?" She comes from a family in which her brother was exalted. This has given her the motivation, as a woman, to explore Judaism now. She hopes that I will offer her guidance and discovery of her spirituality. She is looking for a relationship with God, but doesn't feel she has one. Leanna hopes to feel happier and less anxious as a result of this experience. Ultimately, she hopes that the experience will enable her to feel more supported in her family and to help her support them in turn.

3) Class Presentation:

Leanna didn't bring anything to hold or share with the class on the first night because she didn't feel connected to any symbols. Instead, she had a piece of paper with a large

question mark that she lifted up at her turn. This is why she entered the class: she wants to "figure it all out."

4) Individual Spiritual Guidance:

Session 1 (10/6/08)

Section A:

J: Where is the feeling? Where are you?
L: I have been coming to services and I kind of feel like an outsider looking in. What is it that other people feel? What are you feeling as the rabbi? I see you and the rabbi up there? You look so engrossed? How do you get that? What do you draw on? How do you do that?
J: You are asking important questions, but I want to begin by going back to being "an outsider looking in." Is there a sense of self-consciousness, that you don't feel a part of? Or there is something there, but you don't know how to find your way in.
L: That's it! The latter. I think back to my USY days and it is was as though I was mimicking others. I saw what they were doing and so that is what I did, but I wasn't feeling anything. I feel so neutral. So lacking. Am I looking for something that doesn't exist? Am I looking for something magical? It's almost like I feel very concrete. I feel like I have missed it all along. I don't feel anything. People talk so poetically about their spirituality. How do I get that? Maybe that is because of the way I grew up. We never talked about this kind of stuff.
J: Is that okay for you?
L: I didn't know.
J: So what I hear is that there is a curiosity about a part awakening inside of you… wondering what it might be like to feel something spiritually… and not sure exactly how to find your way in, without a prior reference point so it feels kind of foreign. It's a beginning point, but if feels like shaky ground because you are not sure what it will look like and how it will fit with your life. Am I getting it? Is it scary? Is it exciting?

L: Not scary. I feel inquisitive. I feel a yearning, but I'm not sure exactly what it is that I want. You know I am on the cusp of a major milestone. I am about to turn 50…

J: Mazal tov!

L: Thank you very much. It's just so hard to believe. And I see my mother getting older [her father passed away 15 years ago]. And, there has been more disconnect between me and my mother, and some of that stuff that makes me realize my age. It's like the second adulthood. How did I get to the second adulthood? I am starting a new business. I just changed synagogues. We left the Y for another gym…. All these changes.

J: Lots of changes.

L: Lots of changes. I look at my children and I see how much older they are. I have a junior a college. It is like all of a sudden… so I am looking for something to guide me, to help me, to hold me, to steer me. You know, I have grown up in the south and I grew up listening to Christians talking about "turning it over to God," on the one hand that makes my skin crawl because I believe we have to be responsible to make our own decisions, but on the other hand, they get something.

J: They have something to hang on to.

L: Yes. Are you getting a picture of where I am at?

J: Yes. I think I do. And you are in good company. It seems to me you are approaching an important moment in your life, very rich, ripe, somewhat confusing, but open and expansive time to ask big questions. I think that this period of time is amazing and really an opportunity and you are seizing the moment. These are the questions I have, these are my dreams, these are my longings…

L: I feel like I am on the verge of tears. I often feel that way these days. And, it you know it is also the end of my fertile stage life. It's a lot!

J: I believe that there is not a body and a soul. And this is a very Jewish idea—we are embodied people. We live in our bodies. Our soul is encrypted on every cell in our bodies. Our experience of ourselves as physical beings is also spiritual. So, I think, the physical changes you experience is not separate from your spiritual longings.

L: You got it. In my second adulthood, I want to be spiritual and I just don't know how to. This is my mid-life crisis!

J: It is. What I see from the outside, is a beautiful opening. This opportunity.

L: Yeah, but it is also a grieving. A mourning of what I am leaving.

J: Absolutely. There is no question. There is a loss. There is a self that has to be shed to find yourself anew. Those things just go together.

L: I think that is where I am at.

J: Yes, and I think both of those parts have to be acknowledged. Both the loss and the opportunity that awaits. Especially when you have spent so many years raising your children and that being at the forefront of your identity. And to see your children growing up and being more and more independent, which is of course what you want, there is a also a certain sadness in that.

L: It's true. You know my girls are entering their adulthood and I am leaving mine. Not that I am dying, but I am leaving that youthful kind of adulthood.

J: I hear that. This is big stuff. And I can't emphasize enough that the difficulty with change is often leaving that old part behind. There is a kind of loss that goes with that. I think it is important to say that.

L: Actually, I think it is the first time I have *said* that. There is a loss. I didn't really recognized it as that. There truly is a loss. I don't think we talk enough about this.

Section B:

J: I really believe when you listen in, and that is what prayer is all about, the process inevitably leads you in… helps you understand what your soul yearns for.

L: When you say the word "prayer," growing up in the south, hearing so many Christians talk about prayer, it turns me off. It's like *we* don't do that. I am going back to this feeling of being thrust into this lifestyle that was all about church. Know one understood I was Jewish. So, I think I have almost put of this wall, and yet now, here in my own congregation, it's like a I still have that wall. I just realized that! I used to wear a Jewish star in high school and I eventually took it off because I was tired of people saying that they "liked my cow." I just wanted to blend in. So, now I am here knocking on the door and saying, let me in, after putting up all these defenses. It feels like going into a foreign country.

J: Do you feel guilty for distancing yourself?

[Long silence.]

L: How do I put this? I raised my children as Jews. We put them in Jewish pre-school, religious school, bat mitzvah, celebrated the holidays at home… but I felt like I just went through the motions with them. I hope I did a good job, but I never *felt* what I was trying to give to them.

J: Well, I feel a tremendous amount of compassion for you for not having grown up with this kind of education and desiring to give this connection to your children. Even more, having married this person you so clearly love, but who is not Jewish. That is a lot to carry. That is a lot to take on.

L: It's true. You know it is just now, that I have put a Jewish star on. I put it on today, subconsciously, I guess because I was coming to talk to you and class is tonight. I suppose if I dress the part, maybe I will feel something.

J: That is often true. That can be real. Nothing is magical about this, but what I think it is, is an openness to a certain kind of experience and sometimes we have to do things to create that open space. And that happens slowly, over time. So, my hope and prayer for you as you head into this year is that you are compassionate with yourself. You know becoign a parent is a slow and detailed process. And so is this. The baby comes out in a dramatic moment, but a lot leads up a birth and the hopes and dreams for a child take a lifetime to emerge.

Section C:

L: You know listening to the other people's stories in class, tearing up, and everything. It's just so amazing. I am not ready to do it, but I love it and I feel like I'm in the right place.

J: I think you are too. I think the key is to look at others and yourself with benevolent curiosity. And just being kind to yourself as you grow is an important part of it.

L: Yeah; I want to feel like I am connected to other Jews, rather than, this sounds like of abrasive, but "turned off" by other Jews. My mother often says, who grew up in NY, that she feels a connection with other Jews. I don't. I want to feel I can embrace… and that is a process of letting Judaism back into my life. And the people too.

J: So feeling you can let the wall down and be open to new ideas and people. To feel that connection, is what you are aiming for. This is your heritage. It is yours. You are a part of it and have a way into it. And you can have a connection to other people who are on this journey. But that is all a work in progress for you.
L: So, I like what you said that this takes time… to nurture it. There is no rush. Let's see where I am next year. It's a growing process. I can be nicer to myself as I move through.
J: Yeah, and I think the question to ask along the way is "how do I feel… where am I?" That is a Jewish question. In fact, that is my favorite question or word in the Torah. When God asks Adam where he is in the garden, he says "*Ayeka?*" This is a rhetorical question. God, who is all-knowing, knows exactly where Adam is physically. God is asking Adam where is emotionally, psychologically, spiritually… and that is our question today. To ask ourselves without any expectation of what we are "supposed" to be feeling.
L: And another chapter is who is God? Where is God? What is God?
J: Sounds like a good place to pick up next time!

Session 2 (1/26/09)

J: So, how are you? How are you feeling? How is the class going for you? Tell me.
L: I feel very overwhelmed.
J: Tell me more.
L: I said it to you in email, but I am just in awe of that information you have your little head! In some ways, I feel cheated. And then it makes me wonder if I cheated my children. I have to tell myself, I sent them all the way through Hebrew school, so, no I gave them everything. But *I* feel cheated. And I am also very much in awe by all these women who have converted-- all that they have learned.
J: It's inspiring.
L: It is inspiring. And here I am born Jewish, and I don't know half of what they know and I don't feel that they feel. I may never feel that. And that is something I have to be nice to myself about and not hit myself over the head with.

J: You know, I just want to say that we can only give what we have and there is a piece of your Jewish education which is just beginning to open up in a meaningful way. We learn about Rabbi Akiva, when of the great Talmudic rabbi, who started learning Torah when he was 40!

L: Really, wow. And there is another part of me that feels a lot of doubt. I am very concrete about my spirituality, if I even am spiritual… which I don't know if I am spiritual?

J: What would that mean to you?

L: I don't know!

J: Well, brainstorm it…

L: I think when you are spiritual, you have a faith, you have a connection with a higher power. That's it.

J: So it is a sense of faith, necessarily to a higher power, or could it be a kind of faithfulness?

L: Faith in what? Bob (her husband) said something to me this morning. He is actually renewing his relationship with the church now as well. He was a very devout Catholic for many years. He was religious up until we married and then he let it go by the wayside while we were raising the kids. I knew it was in there, but we raised the kids Jewish which is what we had decided before we got married. And last year, after 26 of not going to church, he decided to go back. Just about the same time I started doing this. So something he said this morning about my soul, and I said to him, what is my soul? What are you talking about? I just have no connection with that. He has faith. He can talk about his faith in God. I don't have that. It's kind of like…it makes me very teary… maybe like a woman who can't have a child.

J: A barrenness.

L: Yes, because the whole idea of spirituality and faith just isn't there for me. I didn't grow up with it and I didn't see it. And I want it and feel like I am missing something… something I didn't get. It feels like of false and superficial looking for it. Some people feel it so deeply, and I am just not that way. I am not there.

J: I am even thinking that in Hebrew, someone who is barren, is *akara*—and that word, meaning "barren," actually means "uprooted." So there is a kind of uprootedness that you are feeling. There is a sense of both loss and emptiness, and also disconnect.
L: Yes! And I also feel cheated that I don't have something you have, or others in the class have…
J: Is part of the loss about a body of knowledge or literacy that you wish you had and/or is the loss a sense of spirituality that is missing for you?
L: Yeah; both. I don't even know what spirituality means.
J: I am wondering, when you think back on your life, what were the most profound, transcendent moments? What would they be? How would you describe them?
L: You know I would have to think about that question. That isn't something I could answer right now. Hmmmm.
J: It's fine for you to take some time, but I don't think you need to research this… what feelings come up for you?
L: Well you know, one thing does come up quickly… that is becoming a mom. This was the most unbelievable, extraordinary thing that I ever done? Giving birth.
J: Why?
L: For me, giving birth was like climbing a mountain. I was very fearful the whole pregnancy. It was like there was an alien in there. It was a part of me and not a part of me. There was a being in there that was totally dependent on me, and I was always dependent on my parents. And to be strong, on my own, I had to be in charge and engaged in this on my own. And interestingly enough, when I gave birth, I felt this incredible separation. I felt so sad, in some way. I mean don't get me wrong, I was thrilled too, but to leave my baby in a crib. That was such a loss for me. And that is why, for as long as my body could bear it, I kept my babies in that snugli. So, that was a major transformation for me. There is nothing like becoming a mom.
J: What helped you move through the fear of it all?
L: Interesting question….well, the first thing that came to my mind was faith in myself. There was another time, I must have been 12 months pregnant, and I said to someone at work, "I just need to take 'this' off for a minute." I got a little claustrophobic. And then

I had to just get strong again and move through it. And I guess that's what it was—faith in myself. But faith out here, I don't know about that.

J: Who says it has to be "out here?'

L: Well then where does it come from?

J: That's an important question. I have my answer, for now, but my only agenda is to help you find your own answers.

L: Like Glinda.

J: Yeah, a little bit like that. What happens in the "Wizard of Oz?"

L: Dorothy had to figure it out for herself. Glinda was there, but she had to do it on her own.

J: And she had projected all that power out there, but it was inside of her all along. Oz was an illusion. So, one of the things that I hope you will do with this space, and you *are* doing this in earnest, is to explore your image of God. Because often what happens, is that we develop an image of God as a child and we never revise that image. So at a certain point, the image or images no longer work for us, but instead of re-investigating, we just reject it outright. The image of God that is appropriate for a 6 year old, is not the same as for an adult. So, my hope is to examine what images are more developmentally appropriate.

L: What is the adult version?

J: There are many.

L: But if you do follow along this path, you are still stuck with the 6 year old concept.

J: And it doesn't work. So we have to work through it…

L: But for me the class is more like a history class. That is the concreteness in me. I want to know what are facts and what aren't facts. The Bible… the whole concept of the Bible… who is to say that these things happened?

J: Well, I believe God is gray. And when I say that, I mean there those who see Scripture and God in black and white terms. People who adhere especially to doctrine. And my connection to Judaism, and I think I stand on the shoulders of generations of faithful Jews, is that life is much grayer, more nuanced than that. The Torah is holy and divine not because God spoke those words literally like you and I are talking now or because all the events detailed actually happened and one day we will find archeological

proof to substantiate it all, but rather, because these words are a response to a moment, or a series of moments of encounter between human beings and something beyond. And in that conversation, or dialogue, this text emerges. And the Torah isn't perfect, but it is the holy product of that conversation.

L: But I expect it to be perfect.

J: And, I want to break that open. It's a story. I have a story and you have a story. Your husband has his story. And I can't way whether your story is true or not. It's your story! This is the story of our people. Did it happen exactly has it is written down? I don't know. For some people, that is really important. But I say it matters only to the extent to which I can say, these stories are valuable. They have what to teach me in my life. They are a set of glasses through which I can create meaning and a narrative out of my life. Judaism and the Torah become a frame, a container, a vessel, or glasses for us to make our connections and meaning out of life and then couch it in a larger narrative.

L: You know I defend my Judaism, but what am I defending? My people, my past, my culture? I know that I connect because I defend it, but…

J: What I hear you asking is whether it is an ethnic or historical connection or something *alive* in you—something you are living and breathing that is the core of your being?

L: Exactly and for me, right now, it is the former. Cultural and ethnic. I want something to wake up inside of me, but I am waiting for some moment of revelation. You know I listen to my Christian friends and how their spirituality enters their every day lives. They have a faith in God and it is in their everyday language.

J: And, I am going to nudge you to imagine that awakenings don't look only one way. So you are waiting for a grand awakening, and yet you are here. You are reading, thinking, feeling, and considering new possibilities. I want to suggest that that too is an awakening. Not just Mt. Sinai moments.

L: You know when I come to services, which is just when I feel an urge, I get a lot out of the Friday night service. I am listening to Eric and the guitar, and I am moved by the music. That's as much as it goes. When I look at you and Eric and you put your tallit over your heads, I am desperate to get under there. What is going on for you? You are so involved, so focused, feeling something. I am wondering, what is going through your

head? And, I love when Eric says introduce yourself to someone new. And, people are so warm. They are welcoming. I feel something there!

J: There is an openness.

L: There is, and in every one of us. And I never had that before. Maybe that is something. And then when I leave, I feel good. I savor what I feel.

J: What is the goodness that lingers?

L: I don't know. I guess there is a connection. The music relaxes me. It makes me feel I can find my way inside.

J: There are some people who find their way in over a challenging text. For other people it is in silence. And for still others, it is the music.

L: For me, it is the music.

J: It opens you up in a different way than anything else.

L: Yes. When I am in front of the piano, I just love it. When I am done I feel exhausted. It is a lot of concentration. Fulfillment.

J: It sounds spiritual.

L: Yes, it does. If that is how you define it…

J: I want to put out there for you the possibility of defining God in your own terms. That is why we have literally 100s of images for God from a woman's breast, to a rock, to a mother…

L: Really? I guess I am stuck with a 6 year-old image.

J: And not one of them would work for any one person or for a whole lifetime. It is absolutely appropriate for a child to imagine God as a partent—their primary caregivers. But as you know, your relationship with your parents changes over time… you have told me that you have a sense of a nurturer and boundary-setter within yourself. So, I am going to challenge you to resist saying that there is one definition that must be articulation. Who says we have to be able to talk about God in the most concrete terms…. What if you gave yourself permission to let it be "beyond" and the same thing for a prayer experience. Who knows what's going on for me or Eric under our tallit? Sometimes it's amazing stuff and sometimes I am worried about how Adi is doing in childcare. What if you took some of the pressure off what's happening out there and tuning in a bit more to what is going on inside.

L: You know what I am doing is looking out there, just like Dorothy, and what I a coming to see, is that what I might do instead, is to look inside of me, in my own backyard.

J: And you know whatever feelings or insights you have, are yours. You can honor them because they are yours. You don't have to measure them against some expectation of what you think you ought to feel, or what others might or might not being feeling. What is happening for you? Just notice that. And honor it.

L: Cause I am looking around to find out what this is supposed to look like.

J: You can't. You can't know my language. I am still working to figure out my own language. Like marriage, right? We never fully know the other person. We are always taking off another veil, and another. It never ends. And, people change. But, we help each other. Other people's processes of discovery can be in conversation with our own.

L: Yes; and… I get teary, my children are starting to leave. This is tough. It forces you, again, to look back at yourself again because you are in a different place than you were before you had them, but you are also a different person because they are there. And one by one, they are going off. And that I think that is part of that something that led me here. Things are changing.

J: they are changing around you, but they are changing inside of you too.

L: I am looking for that spiritual something.

J: Have you considered the possibility that change itself is spiritual? That just the experience of transforming oneself from being in a place of fear to a position of competence, from being a mother of babies to a mother of young women. That ability to even change through that is spiritual. There is something holy about that.

L: On the very concrete level, I say that is the natural order. That is just what you do. That is just the way it is. That is my parents' voices. But I hear what you are saying.

J: Good, so notice whose voices you are hearing. We all have these inner conversations going on. And notice that that may be your mother's voice or your father's voice…

L: But I could have my own voice?

J: You could.

L: I hear what you are describing and I can also see that if you can relax, you can see what happens. If I constantly feel like it is a task and I am running around to find something, and it isn't happening.
J: Right, so what happens if you give yourself permission to come here on a Friday night and to just see what happens. To notice without judgment?
L: How did you get so wise?
J: We are companions on this journey.
L: You know that I am thinking that part of my anticipation of this journey, as you say, is also an indication of a breaking away from the parental figures, because this is something my mom can't relate to at all. I suppose I am giving birth to myself in a new way.

Session 3 (4/6/09)

Section A:

L: The class has just been phenomenal for me.
J: What has been positive for you?
L: Well, I am learning that I didn't know… like I remember last fall when someone mentioned a *mikveh* (ritual bath), and I just didn't know what that is. So when we talked about it last week… I had never heard about it before, just how I was raised, so learning these things, that has been very positive for me, even though I feel like I am not at the head of the class.
J: It is just a beginning.
L: Well I have to remember that.
J: I have to remember that too.
L: Yes, and there are going to be people who know more and feel more, but that is why I'm here. I feel like there is still an infancy in my feeling of coming home. This was a big step…. Just walking back in..
J: Isn't so much of life about showing up? It is a process, a growing into. Most of us fight showing up with our bodies, with a full sense of spirit. And that is a Jewish thing.

A spiritual discipline. To come to whatever our task is, aware and present. Whether we are about to do *Kiddush* or to begin class… that is why I begin every class with a moment of silence. So rarely to we take that time in life to prepare ourselves to show up.

L: Especially when there are so many things going on in life. This year has meant so many changes in my life from my new business, to turning 50, which I can't see to let go of. So, you know, that was a bigee for me.—bigger than 30 and 40. It is a turning point in life. You see your children getting older, moving out. That's a tough pill to swallow.

J: What do you think you are losing and what are you gaining.

L: Okay, now I am going to start crying…

J: That's okay to do here.

L: No, no, okay, let me answer this question. I feel I am losing this time of raising my children. Also my change of life—my menopausal moment. And it is all happening at the same time. And that's a lot. My body is just doing things I have no control over. And there is an emotional part of it. A couple of weeks ago, I just couldn't stop crying. What is this all about? And my daughter who is a rising Junior in college stops coming home any more. She is not home anymore. And that's hard. So it is good that I have channeled a lot of my energy into starting my own business and taking this class. And you know, I have started to see my friends getting ill. A dear friend with breast cancer. So it's a challenging time of life. A real transition.

J: It is. I really believe that dying and being born go hand in hand. And there is that overlap.

L: That's the circle of life. I'll never forget when my youngest daughter was born days after my father died. One door closed and another door opened.

Section B:

J: … Spirituality is a response to living in the face of mystery. One of the ways in which I have been so pleased to see you move through this course is to ask questions. To not take pat answers. You are struggling. You are really struggling. What does this all mean as you move into this period of your life? With your husband? As a parent? And you are willing to ask those questions.

L: Yes. And to bring it way down, my husband and I got into an argument yesterday because I kept asking questions. I can't just accept someone's answer. I'll get there, but I need to get there in my own way. In a way that makes sense tome. Help me get there first. And that is what I am doing. I have to understand.

J: And I think that is one of the most glorious aspects of the spirituality we see in children and then sometimes gets lost.

L: And I think that is what got lost for me as a child growing up. There was no room for questions and discussion.

J: About Judaism or all things?

L: About all thing and especially Judaism. My father, if I tried to muddy the waters, he just squelched the conversation immediately.

J: So to ask questions and to seek to understand is a huge flowering of this moment in your life.

L: Yes. It's like all this social networking I am doing on line for my new business now. Twitter. Facebook. Linkedin. Merchant's Circle. You know I have this consultant who is working with me on the marketing and I just don't get it. So I send her emails with all my questions and she keeps saying, "Just trust me." But no, I cannot just trust you. That is not how I operate. She keeps telling me to go back to her "webinar" and watch it again to answer my question. But I can't. I need her to answer me in the moment.

J: You know, it's so interesting. There is a whole volume of *halakha*, Jewish law, on the relationship between teachers and students, which is, of course, a primary relationship. And one of the things we learn is that a good teacher is required to answer the student as many times as is necessary, and in as many ways possible, for her to grasp the concept.

L: That is the fundamental of being a parent!

J: Right. And we live in a culture where there is an expectation that we are just supposed to get it. But we know from brain science, that it takes about 2000 times of doing something to really learn something. And yet, we have an expectation of our children and ourselves that we are supposed to understand immediately. It's unfair.

L: It's true. When we are rushed, it's harder to learn. Sometimes it takes a while to get it.

J: And so too with our Jewish journeys.

L: Yes! I still don't get it yet…

J: That's okay…

L: Some of those women in there, they just get it.

J: Or they get it for now. Right? Our understanding of things at one point is not what it will be five years from now. I think about that with marriage. Now I can look eleven years in and chuckle at some of my expectations and understandings of what I thought marriage was ten years ago. And I can only imagine what more I will understand at our twentieth anniversary, God willing. So, do I get it now? I do get it… for now.

L: Let me tell you. I have been married for 27 years and it is always changing. It is constantly evolving. It is always changing.

J: And to me, that is the Torah. That is what it means to be on a Jewish journey. You have that with your husband. And I have that with Eric. And I also have that with my Jewish journey. A relationship that is always growing, evolving, changing.

L: You know, sometimes I look at my husband and I think are we are on the same page. And then think of how much we have grown together.

J: Moments of dissonance and deep connection. That makes it so interesting.

L: It ebbs and flows. You know, I think marriage has become so disposable. People don't understand that it ebbs and flows. When it ebbs, they forget the importance of sticking it out. They just say, "I'm done. I'm finished."

J: Well, I am so pleased that you have chosen to stick it out and that you are still here asking questions and willing to sit through some dissonance.

L: It's true. Some Monday nights, I say, "I'm not going to go." But I go, and I always get something out of it. And once I am in that door, I feel I'm here and this is a good place for me to be.

5) Reflection Piece #2:

One reflection. One thought. One road on the journey. One feeling. One experience. One epiphany. A reflective moment from a class of 22 unbelievably intelligent women with one common goal. To be a Bat Mitzvah. To have an experience that every Jew, be it boy or girl, man or woman, is entitled. By choice. By birth. Without force. Without

coercion. By desire. A learning experience like no other which is appreciated in adulthood and is approached with commitment. With dedication. With need. With a need to find one's spirituality. My spirituality. My belief. My questions. My answers. My journey.

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