The Social Integration of *Baalei Teshuvah*

ROBERTA G. SANDS  
School of Social Policy and Practice  
University of Pennsylvania

This article focuses on the perceptions of baalei teshuvah, Jews who were raised with little identification with Judaism as a religious system and subsequently became Orthodox, as an example of the social integration of a group that migrates from one community to another. The baalei teshuvah participants perceived themselves as unique and distinct from those who were raised Orthodox and preferred to associate with others like themselves. They experienced a mixture of pride in their own religious fervor and embarrassment over their lack of knowledge compared with those who grew up Orthodox. At the same time they expressed ambivalent feelings toward Jews who were raised Orthodox. Immigration theory and the concepts of human, social, religious, and spiritual capital are used to discuss the baalei teshuvah’s marginal status and preference to associate with other baalei teshuvah.

Although social scientists have given substantial attention to religious conversion, denominational switching, and spiritual transformation (e.g., Hadaway and Marler 1993; Koss-Chioino and Heffner 2006; Rambo 1993; Ullman 1989), their interest wanes when it comes to the later process of social integration. Considering the commonness of switching between denominations and conversion in the United States (Hoge, Johnson, and Luidens 1995; Newport 1979; Roof 1989; Roof and Hadaway 1979; Stark and Glock 1968) and the increasing presence of immigrants who wish to practice a religion in American communities (Cadge and Ecklund 2007), the problem of integrating newcomers into preexisting religious communities is significant.

This article takes as an example of social integration, the case of *baalei teshuvah* (Hebrew, m. pl., “masters of return”), men and women who are raised as secular or liberal Jews and later “return” to the tradition of their forbears and become Orthodox. The journeys taken by these Jewish adults from assimilation into secular society to participation in particularistic religious communities challenges the assumption taken by scholars of religion and immigration that Jews and other former immigrants would become increasingly assimilated to the dominant culture beginning with the second generation, allowing for the maintenance or reassertion of ethnic identification in the third generation (e.g., Hansen 1952; Herberg 1960), but is consistent with more recent thinking that immigrant acculturation is nonlinear, reactive, and complex (e.g., Portes 1997; Rumbaut 1997). Study of a case such as this one can increase understanding of the social integration of new members of other religious groups, such as evangelical Christians and immigrants from Asia and Latin America.

Based on a qualitative study of baalei teshuvah from three urban areas in the United States, this article examines the social integration of baalei teshuvah into their respective Orthodox communities. Social integration is defined as inclusion into the fabric of community life, and is the outcome of leaving one’s former social group, learning the norms of the new group, and becoming a part of the new community by conforming to its standards and achieving acceptance (Danzger 1989).

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Correspondence should be addressed to Roberta G. Sands, School of Social Policy and Practice, University of Pennsylvania, PA 19104-6214. E-mail: rgsands@sp2.upenn.edu

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Contextualizing the Case Example

The Jewish religious community in the United States is divided into branches or movements, which can be considered the equivalent of denominations. Orthodox Judaism, the most traditional branch, maintains that the Torah was divinely revealed at Mount Sinai and that Jews are obligated to strictly observe commandments (mitzvot) as described in the Torah and elaborated upon in rabbinic law (halakhah) (Raphael 1984). Reform Judaism, the most liberal branch, views the Torah as a “living document” (Central Conference of American Rabbis 1999) enabling the movement to preserve some traditional practices, such as weekly worship services and observance of the festivals, while allowing innovations that, in some cases, are inconsistent with halakhah. The Conservative Movement lies in between the other two with its acceptance of halakhah in principle but toleration of divergence among members (Raphael 1984; Sklare 1993). Orthodox religious services tend to be entirely in Hebrew, with Conservative preferring a mixture of the two languages, and Reform using mainly English but some Hebrew. Besides these three major movements, there are smaller movements such as Reconstructionism and Jewish Renewal.

An analysis of the 1990 National Jewish Population Survey (NJPS) found that the proportion of respondents with a college education among synagogue members and nonmembers who identified as Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, or no preference was comparable (Lazerwitz et al. 1998). Orthodox synagogue members, as well as Conservative and no preference nonmembers, had the lowest proportion with family incomes of $80,000 or more, whereas Reform and Conservative members had the highest (Lazerwitz et al. 1998). Another analysis of the 1990 NJPS data found that being Orthodox had a negative effect on household income (Wildler and Walters 1998). Among baby boomers in the 1990 survey, the Orthodox affiliated had the highest proportion earning less than $30,000 and were not represented among those with incomes of $125,000 and above (Waxman 2001). The NJPS of 2000–2001 showed that the Orthodox continued to have a lower income than Conservative and Reform Jews (Waxman 2005). Thus, it is expected that baalei teshuvah, who come from all of the non-Orthodox groups, would resemble the communities they join with respect to education but would have higher earnings.

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

Since the early 1990s, several researchers have broached the topic of social integration. Two authors found that despite the privileging of men in Orthodox Judaism, newly Orthodox women (baalot teshuvah) found the women’s communities warm and accepting (Davidman 1991; Kaufman 1991) whereas another observed that baalot teshuvah associated with a Lubavitch community in California were not fully accepted and were sometimes treated with suspicion (Tallen 2002). Tallen described the newly observant women as living “in a borderland, caught between secular and religious worlds, unable to fully enter the religious world and still feeling the pull of the secular world” (2002:244). An analysis of written material on the repentance movement in Israel showed that the Haredi (“ultra-Orthodox”) persisted in viewing those who became Haredi as penitents (Caplan 2001).

Research on baalei and baalot teshuvah has concentrated primarily on the early induction period, giving little of attention to social integration. One is left with the impression that the prospects of social integration were good once newly Orthodox individuals gain basic skills and marry (e.g., Danzger 1989). Danzger observed, however, that some baalei teshuvah “choose this status as an identity rather than a transitional status,” joining synagogues that are comprised largely of others like them and thus “remain outside of the Orthodox mainstream” (1989:337).
This article fills a gap in the literature by describing qualitative research on men and women who have been living in Orthodox communities on the East Coast of the United States.

Social Integration of Other Religious Groups

Research on the social integration of other religious groups looks principally at the groups’ integration into the larger society. A study of Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists in the United States found that those who practice these religions are relatively well positioned in terms of their income, education, interpersonal networks, and religious connections but are less integrated in their political participation (Wuthnow and Hackett 2003). Research conducted in other countries highlights the import of language competence (Remennick 2004) and marriage to a native (Jääskeläinen 2003) in promoting social integration.

Christian evangelical Protestant communities in the United States have been integrating Asian Americans and other immigrant groups. Evangelicals are Christian conservatives who are oriented toward a personal relationship with Jesus Christ and the active spreading of their faith to others while they maintain symbolic boundaries between themselves and nonevangelicals (Smith 1998). Among evangelicals in the United States are Korean Americans who immigrated in large numbers after the Immigration Act of 1965 (Dhingra 2004). For the immigrant generation Korean-American churches served as cultural as well as religious centers (Min 1992). Second-generation religious institutions and campus organizations run by evangelical churches and ministries enable participants to sustain social networks with other Korean Americans, preserve their cultural values, and receive support against marginalization based on racial or ethnic differences (Chong 1998; Kim 2004). Such churches also reinforce boundaries between Korean-American Christians and other Christians (Chong 1998). With pressures to increase membership, however, Korean-American evangelical churches are beginning to de-emphasize race and ethnicity and highlight multiculturalism (Dhingra 2004). At the same time the younger generation is becoming part of the subculture of white American evangelicals (Min and Kim 2005). Thus, integration is ethnic-group specific at first, with integration into the American evangelical community a later development. The study presented here will consider whether subgroup affiliation is part of the trajectory of baalei teshuvah.

Theoretical Issues

Because the religious change of baalei teshuvah involves migration from one group (secular Jewish) to another (Orthodox), immigration theory as it pertains to social integration is relevant. Although theories and empirical work on émigrés to the United States focus largely on the absorption of newcomers into the larger society, both immigrants and baalei teshuvah find themselves located within a larger culture that has preestablished norms, values, attitudes, and expectations that differ in some ways from those of their culture of origin. In order to navigate the new society, accommodations must be made. The terms acculturation and assimilation are used to explain this process.

Berry (2005:698) defines acculturation as “the dual process of cultural and psychological change that takes place as a result of contact between two or more cultural groups and their individual members.” Changes occur on both the psychological/individual and cultural/collective levels, with those on the psychological level demonstrated in preferences and behavior and those on the cultural level involving social structures, institutions, and cultural practices (Berry 2003, 2005) The process of acculturation is protracted, “sometimes taking years, sometimes generations, sometimes centuries” (Berry 2005:699). Berry assumes accommodation by both the inflowing and receiving groups.

Assimilation refers to one group becoming absorbed into another. Gordon (1964) describes seven types or stages, among which are cultural (changing cultural patterns so that they are
consistent with the host society), structural assimilation (large-scale entrance into clubs and institutions on the primary group level), identificational (developing a sense of peoplehood similar to that of the host society), and attitudinal receptional (absence of prejudice). Gordon sees the first type, also called acculturation, as the initial step in the process and structural assimilation as the “keystone of the arch of assimilation” (Gordon 1964:81). The direction of assimilation in the United States is toward the dominant middle-class white Anglo Saxon Protestant group or what Gordon called “Anglo-conformity.”

The last few decades have witnessed a reappraisal of the concept of assimilation. Gordon has been criticized for being ahistorical and static and for ignoring the reciprocal influences between groups (Alba and Nee 1997). With increasing awareness that the term was used in the past to refer to white European immigrants who arrived at the shores of the United States prior to World War II and achieved this goal, the term now draws attention to the failure of American society to assimilate African Americans, Native Americans, and other minorities (Glazer 1993). Some writers nonetheless have tried to revitalize the concept by describing additional subprocesses (Morawska 1994) or developing new concepts such as segmented assimilation, which accounts for the assimilation of the post-1965 second generation into diverse sectors, including the white middle class, the underclass, and the ethnic community (Portes and Zhou 1993). The path taken is related to the resources and vulnerability of the ethnic family.

Another concept deployed in recent years to account for the segmented assimilation of immigrants is social capital (e.g., Nee and Sanders 2001). Although the term has been defined in a variety of ways (Adler and Kwon 2002; Bourdieu 2001; Coleman 1988), a consensus seems to be growing over viewing it as “the ability of actors to secure benefits by virtue of membership in social networks or other social structures” (Portes 1998:6). In addition to social capital, the related concept of “religious capital” has been used in the field of religion. Both a precondition for and consequence of religious activity, religious capital refers to “familiarity with a religion’s doctrines, rituals, traditions, and members” (Iannaccone 1990:299). A term that is less widely used, “spiritual capital,” refers to “resources that are created or people have access to when people invest in religion as religion” such as their relationship with God (Woodberry 2003:1). All these terms are derivatives of the concept of human capital, attributes that enable people to be productive, such as education and skills (Becker [1964] 1993). This study will explore whether or how various forms of capital play a part in the social integration of baalei teshuvah.

Considering these theories and concepts as well as research on baalei teshuvah and other religious groups, this study will examine the social integration of baalei teshuvah into preexisting Orthodox Jewish communities. The following research questions are explored: (1) How do baalei teshuvah perceive themselves in relation to preexisting Orthodox communities? (2) How do baalei teshuvah perceive their acceptance by these communities? (3) What kinds of human, social, religious, and spiritual capital do baalei teshuvah possess and offer?

**METHODS**

This was a qualitative study that examined data from individual interviews, focus groups, and interviews with key informants, with no interviewee participating in more than one activity. The primary method, indepth personal interviews, enabled the research staff to obtain information about individuals’ experiences. Other methods provided supplementary and complementary information; the triangulation of findings across methods creates a comprehensive picture (Denzin 1989).

**Individual Interviews**

The study used an interview sample that was stratified by gender and years Orthodox. Anticipating that men and women would have different perspectives based on the discrete gender roles in traditional Judaism, we sought a sample that was half men and half women. The sample
Table 1: Description of sample ($N = 48$)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Number of years observant</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Range</td>
<td>31–58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>45.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$SD$</td>
<td>7.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marital status</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Separated</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parental status</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Has child(ren)</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Does not</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Highest level of education</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High school</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some college</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College graduate</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Master’s degree</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Law degree</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ph.D.</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M.D.</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious movement</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>identified with growing up</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reform</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conservative</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traditional/non-Orthodox</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reconstructionist</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jewish parents</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Both parents</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father only</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

was stratified by years of observance to ensure that some people who were recent entrants and others were more integrated. We required a minimum of two years of observance in order to ascertain that all participants were sufficiently committed in their decision to become Orthodox, and considered 13 or more years long enough for social integration to have ensued. In addition, we used a criterion method of sampling (Patton 2002). Potential interviewees were screened to ensure that they (a) self-identified as baalei or baalot teshuvah, (b) lived in the United States most of their lives, and (c) had at least one Jewish parent. In addition, efforts were made to identify participants who were diverse with respect to the stream of Orthodox Judaism with which they identified (e.g., Modern Orthodox, yeshivish, Hasidic) and were living in one of three East Coast target cities or the surrounding metropolitan areas. The latter two criteria were established in order to minimize regional variability that would occur if the sample was from the entire country and to maximize variability within the sample.

The interview sample consisted of 48 baalei teshuvah. As planned, half were men and half were women, and half observant 2 to 12 years and half 13 or more years. The age range was from 31 to 58 years. As Table 1 shows, the interviewees were well educated, with more than half
having a master’s degree or more. They were predominantly married with children. Most were raised Conservative or Reform. They identified with diverse streams of Orthodox Judaism with Modern Orthodox the most common. Their diverse occupations included lawyers, teachers (all levels), health and mental health professionals, business people, and administrators. Forty of the 48 participants worked, two were retired, and the others were students or homemakers.

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

**Interview Protocol**

Interviewees were asked to draw a spiritual timeline in which they divided their spiritual-religious lives into chapters and gave each chapter a title (cf. McAdams 1993). They were then asked to describe what their life was like during each time period, focusing on important relationships, their religious life, and community involvement. They were also asked about their earliest memories of God, religion, and spirituality; spiritual struggles; identity changes; and integration into the Orthodox community. The questions that probed for social integration were, “How do you connect with people who are baalei teshuvah in your life today?” and “How do you connect with people who have always been Orthodox?” Social integration was also evident in their spontaneous talk about their competence with Hebrew, enrollment of their children in religious schools, volunteer activities, and their participation in religious services.

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

Interviewers, located in the three target areas, were trained either in person or by telephone by the author. They interviewed participants in their homes or places of work. Interviews took, on average, between one and two hours. Participants were given gift cards to either a bookstore or Jewish gift shop as a token of appreciation.

**Focus Group Interviews**

Two focus group meetings were held with Jewish professionals who were also baalei teshuvah. The first was with eight participants, six men and two women, who were work in the fields of health, mental health, and education. They were from 31 to 61 years of age and had been observant 11 to 35 years. The second was with 10 mental health professionals, eight women and two men who were 28 to 57 years and had been Orthodox from 10 to 38 years. Both focus group meetings were conducted at professional conferences by the same husband-wife team of mental health professionals. The interview questions had to do with the decision to become observant, spiritual development over time, and social integration. The focus group interviews were tape recorded with informed consent and transcribed.

**Key Informant Interviews**

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

Data Analysis

Transcriptions of the 48 individual interviews and focus groups and the summary narratives of the key informant interviews were read several times and discussed by the three-person research team. The team also developed codes that were used with the software package NVivo. Passages coded “social integration” were retrieved, reviewed, and turned into tables organized by comments on closeness and comfort with other baalei teshuvah and with those who were raised Orthodox. The tables suggested other patterns that were explored within the data. For the analysis of the focus groups and key informant interviews, the author reviewed the transcriptions and narratives, identifying segments denoting social integration. After these processes, the author reread all the interview transcripts taking additional notes on each individual with respect to his or her social integration. Comparisons were made between findings from interviews, focus groups, and key informants.

FINDINGS

Perceptions of Themselves

The baalei teshuvah (BTs) perceived themselves as a collectivity that is unique and distinct from those who were raised Orthodox. They differentiated themselves from the “frum [religious] from birth” (FFBs). (The author prefers the term “raised Orthodox” [RO] as it more accurately conveys religious socialization.) As the following statements show, baalei teshuvah identify with each other because of their similar backgrounds and journeys:

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

Baalei teshuvah definitely have a special bond. Probably the way like born-again Christians, you know, have these conventions, I’m sure it’s the same way. It’s this life-changing event that you, when you meet others who’ve done it, it kind of like, you know, confirms that you, not a question of that you doubted that you made the right decision, but you’re very proud that there’s a club. You’re a member of a club. (Robert, observant 22 years)

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

The baalei teshuvah reported feeling better understood by other baalei teshuvah than those who grew up Orthodox, whose lives appeared to be circumscribed. With their advanced degrees from secular universities and exposure to a wide range of behavior in the larger culture, their frames of reference were different. For example, Dov, a focus group member, asserted that there was no way that those who were raised Orthodox can begin to comprehend having a childhood best friend, as he did, who was thrown in jail for attempted murder.
Most of the *baalei teshuvah* in our interview sample were married to other *baalei teshuvah*. A comment by a single woman who has dated men who were raised Orthodox provides insight into this trend:

> I’ve dated FFB boys and they just come from a totally different world and a totally different mindset. I just feel like by coming from such a secular background, by really valuing a lot of things in the secular world like art and theater, and a lot of different things, and choosing to give up so many things puts me in just a completely different place intellectually and developmentally than other FFBs who are either my age or (older). (Rachel, observant 4 years)

One of the key informants we interviewed said that he thought that *baalei teshuvah* should marry other *baalei teshuvah* for some of the same reasons that Rachel suggested.

A number of *baalei teshuvah* expressed group pride that bordered on superiority. Among them, Reuven (observant 28 years) said, “I can almost spot a BT... there’s something about the person on their face, there’s a spark that they might have.” A focus group member, Miriam, conjectured that in comparison with “many people who are frum from birth... there is a quality that we have that they wish that they also had. And it’s expressed in such a real authentic way.” Similarly, Caren told others in her focus group: “The *baal teshuvahs* I know are really reaching incredible plateaus and maintaining a passion and exuberance that sometimes I think almost really lights up the community.” In regard to her friendships, she added:

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

A quantitative analysis of interview responses to questions about their relationships with other *baalei teshuvah* and those who were raised Orthodox shows that over half of the interviewees who answered these questions (57 percent, \( n = 24 \)) said that they preferred to associate with or were more comfortable with other *baalei teshuvah* (see Table 2). About 12 percent (\( n = 5 \)) preferred those who were raised Orthodox whereas less than a third (\( n = 13 \)) stated that they had no preference. The table shows that there was little difference among participants in the various categories with respect to gender and age. Those who preferred or were closer with other *baalei teshuvah*, however, were, on average, observant a shorter time span than the other two groups that addressed social integration.

Table 2: Perceptions of social integration by *baalei teshuvah* (\( N = 48 \))

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age (mean) (range)</th>
<th>Years Observant (mean) (range)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Prefers or is closer with other <em>baalei teshuvah</em></td>
<td>24</td>
<td>11 female 13 male</td>
<td>45.5 (31 to 58)</td>
<td>12.9 (3 to 38 years)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prefers those who were raised Orthodox</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3 female 2 male</td>
<td>47.6 (36 to 56)</td>
<td>17.6 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No preference, socializes with both, depends on the person</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>7 female 6 male</td>
<td>46.3 (33 to 55)</td>
<td>17.5 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not applicable, no response</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3 female 3 male</td>
<td>41.5 (36 to 47)</td>
<td>12.0 years</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Despite the direction of their preferences and group pride, a number of study participants were critical of *baalei teshuvah*. This was especially true of those who said that they preferred to associate with those who were raised Orthodox. Edward (observant 15 years) described two categories of *baalei teshuvah*—“There’s the people who are sort of somewhat normal... who just sort of live their Judaism and don’t wear it on their sleeve. And then there are people who wear it on their sleeve and... seem to go overboard... almost as a reactionary,” suggesting that he preferred the former. Others, like Deborah (observant 15 years), thought they were too “fervent” and “gung ho.” Amy (observant 22 years) said, “I feel like they should relax a little and not be so intense.” Joyce (observant 13 years) said that some “have not integrated Orthodoxy with who they were, and... become kind of very black and white in their thinking.” Michael (observant 15 years) found those *baalei teshuvah* who are spiritual seekers “more than I can stomach.”

These reactions toward others in their own group may explain why some participants in this study reported that they hid their *baal teshuvah* status. Esther told others in her focus group about her initial determination “not to be identified as a *baal teshuvah*.” Avi expressed both pride and shame:

although on one hand, I feel like, yeah, I’m a *baal teshuvah*, and I’m sort of proud of it. There’s also part of me that thinks, uh oh, I hope people don’t know that I am. And there’s a sense that I get, I could be wrong, my own projection, is that there’s something wrong with us, and that’s why we’ve glommed onto Yiddishkeit [Jewishness], and, I would really hate for any of this study to focus on anything, well, the reason these people became this was because, well, they came from these homes, or these situations....

Cara said that she wondered how visible she is as a *baalat teshuvah*. She said, “I’m very proud I’m *baal teshuvah*, yet in certain circles I’m kind of, well, ‘Does it show?’ Of course it shows, I mean I don’t talk yeshivish that well.”

Feelings About Those Raised Orthodox

Feelings about the host community to which they had migrated were also mixed. Many expressed great admiration, awe, and respect for those who were raised Orthodox. These were the people who invited them for Sabbath meals, explained religious traditions and customs to them, and, in some cases, introduced them to their spouses. *Baalei teshuvah* who were close with ROs especially admired their being comfortable with themselves, their authenticity, and their willingness to share their knowledge.

Most of the interviewees regarded those who were raised Orthodox as role models. As the following individuals explained, they idealize their models:

The people that were frum from birth, I think, they were always people who I learned from, and respected and wanted to be like, and... whose lives I wanted my life to be like. (Amy, observant 22 years)

There’s a sense of goodness that, um, I can emulate. And a sense of sincerity. And probably also a sense of purpose. (Toby, observant 19 years)

[When I look in people’s eyes at our shul, I see the striving, I see the striving for people trying to connect, and more than just spiritually, religiously, with God. To bring meaning to their lives, to their families’ lives, to connect to all Jews. (Dovid, observant 15 years)]

One of the key informants, a marriage counselor, observed that the decision to become a *baal teshuvah* is largely connected with one’s developing a relationship with a person within the Orthodox community with whom one can identify. He also thought that *baalei teshuvah* are attracted to the warmth of the families that invite them for Sabbath meals.

A few *baalei teshuvah* boasted about their connections with people of high status in the Orthodox community. Jerry (observant 25 years) said that even though he and his wife are “not
totally comfortable in the frum world,” they are “on very good terms with some of the top frum families in town.” He spoke of increased closeness and acceptance by the frum community as a consequence of his son’s attendance at a local yeshiva. Shira talked about feeling blessed that her daughter is married to the child of the head of a yeshiva:

I feel such an honor to that, and that, um, and my one daughter married a son of, uh, of a Rosh Yeshiva.... And, that that could happen to one of my kids, it’s just amazing. And that, I’m invited to his home, I’ve been there for Shabbos, come to all his smachot [celebrations] it’s, um, it’s wonderful. It’s really wonderful. I feel that, uh, Hashem is smiling down and saying, “You’re doing good.”

Several baalei teshuvah in this study called attention to their ability to pass as someone who has always been Orthodox. A focus group member, Aaron, conveyed that he is no longer perceived as a baal teshuvah:

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

Reuven (observant 28 years) explained in his interview that he joined a synagogue that was primarily baalei teshuvah because it provided the community and family support that he wanted. This was despite his belief that he could pass as a regular member of the Orthodox community:

although I could pass. In other words, I could fit into a regular like ... kind of shul [synagogue], and people don’t even know that I’m a BT, because I’m a seasoned BT for 28 years. So I can manage, you know? But the relationships just didn’t seem (right) for me. I couldn’t connect with people on a level of depth and understanding as I could with a baal teshuvah.

As suggested by Reuven’s comment, even though interviewees admired those who were raised Orthodox and were flattered by their acceptance, they experienced a disconnection from them. As two baalei teshuvah who had regular formal and informal contact with ROs said:

We all daven [pray] in either the same shul or nearby shuls .... But, I don’t necessarily have any social contact with them. I mean, there’s a, sort of a barrier between ... myself and sort of the, grew up frum, went to yeshiva, you know, they all know each other from having ... learned at yeshivas and ... I have no, I have very few points in social common. (Michael, observant 15 years)

with time I’ve gotten so immersed in being with so many people that um, that are frum from birth, that I am comfortable being with them, I’m comfortable speaking with them ....I know, again, there’s gvul [gulf] between us, but ... it’s not an intimidating experience for me. (Deborah, observant 15 years)

Other baalei teshuvah were critical of the raised Orthodox people that they met. For one, they thought that they were “complacent” and “flat about their observance,” lacking spiritual fervor and inspiration. Steven referred to some such people as “FFH—frum from habit.” Furthermore, they observed behaviors that were inconsistent with ideal Orthodox practices such as gossiping, talking about secular matters on the Sabbath, and materialism. This was particularly disturbing to baalei teshuvah who were early in their trajectories and exuded a great deal of excitement about their new learning. Providing a window into how their enthusiasm is received by the Orthodox community, one of the key informants said: “Baalei teshuvah are extremely passionate and this is very threatening to Orthodox people who have been doing this all their lives and may not feel that level of passion.” Another key informant surmised that the growth-orientation and enthusiasm of baalei teshuvah triggers the reaction: “They are growing and I am not.”

In one of the focus groups, participants compared their initial feelings of idealization of the Orthodox community with later feelings of “deidealization.” As Caren explained:
I sadly found myself having to de-idealize the Jewish community. Because whereas initially I first saw all the chesed [lovingkindness] and the warmth, which is still there, but once joining the community, seeing a lot of the lashon hara [gossip], the cruelty, the myopic, provincial thinking, the misogyny, . . . , seeing really a judgmentalism that I think is very . . . unhealthy and dysfunctional.

She explained further that she had been looking for “a rabbi, a rebbe, a rebbetzin, people from the community, just that the love and warmth would just sweep me along in greater and greater observance” and feels sad that she has not been able to find that. Two key informants commented about baalei teshuvah’s wanting to be embraced by the Orthodox community.

Some baalei teshuvah regarded those who were raised Orthodox as parochial and uninteresting. Yonatan (observant 10 years) said: “You know, grew up in (city in New Jersey), went to this yeshiva, played basketball, go to, you know, go to (particular university), you know, did Sha’alvim (yeshiva in Israel).” This criticism, like a similar comment by Michael mentioned earlier, shows that those who were raised Orthodox and baalei teshuvah have been traveling in different social circles since childhood. Children who are raised Orthodox generally go to particular religious day schools, camps, and yeshivas (religious academies) that prepare them academically, socially, and attitudinally to live as Orthodox Jews. For that reason it is difficult for baalei teshuvah to feel completely comfortable with those whose lives have run on a different track.

Hovering In-Between

Because the baalei teshuvah migrated to Orthodoxy lacking in Jewish education and socialization, they found themselves in between a newcomer status and full acceptance into the Orthodox community. On the one hand, they were integrated into the formal structures of local religious communities. With a few exceptions, mostly women, the baalei teshuvah attended religious services, sometimes at more than one synagogue or prayer group, on a regular basis. A few men assumed leadership roles in the prayer service. Those with school-age children sent their children to Orthodox day schools. All but one interviewee lived in an Orthodox neighborhood; the family of the one who lived at a distance walked several miles to synagogue every Sabbath. Men and women took classes with local rabbis, rebbetzins (wives of rabbis), or other learned individuals or at settings established by Orthodox outreach organizations. Informally, there was a great deal of sharing of Sabbath and holiday meals among baalei teshuvah and between baalei teshuvah and other families in the community. They were also engaged in a great deal of volunteer activities—visiting the sick, helping older adults, and participating in community projects or committees of their synagogues.

Those who appeared to be most integrated identified as Modern Orthodox, had spouses who were raised Orthodox, were competent in Hebrew, and/or had become Orthodox as adolescents. Aaron (observant 26 years), who had all these characteristics, had a strong Jewish education through high school and attended Yeshiva University, where he learned to incorporate religion into his daily life. Sheila (observant 24 years), whose husband was raised Orthodox, became president of an Orthodox women’s service organization soon after she married and moved to her husband’s community. Others, who made special contributions to the community, achieved integration. Miriam (observant 24 years) integrated into the community by contributing her knowledge of music and organizing performances for women.

On the other hand, the baalei teshuvah had emotional, intellectual, and professional ties to the secular community. They had parents and siblings who remained secular and, at first, could not grasp the new way of life their family member had embraced. Furthermore, some of their parents and siblings had married individuals of another faith, which created distance between them and the baal teshuvah. For the most part, the baalei teshuvah worked in the secular community and continued to be attracted to secular literature and media. Those who worked in the religious community (e.g., as teachers and therapists) were better integrated.
Initially the *baalei teshuvah* did not fully understand the outlook and norms of the communities they had joined. They learned from awkward cross-cultural encounters. A focus group member, Batya, described her uneasiness in a situation in which she was uncertain whether an event called for separate or mixed gender seating:

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

Similarly, *baalei teshuvah* with limited Hebrew language skills felt anxious in the synagogue. About two-thirds of the men we interviewed spoke of feeling insecure reading or understanding Hebrew and/or about their inability to decipher sacred texts. Several described challenges keeping up with the rapid pace of the prayer service. Although the women were less vocal about their deficits, they were more likely than the men to stay home rather than go to synagogue. Cynthia (observant 25 years), who did attend, said, “If I don’t know the page (in the prayer book), I’m in a panic. I don’t really want to ask what page we’re up to, or where it is, or if I’m not keeping up. I always feel like that child that’s lost in a classroom.”

Nevertheless, several participants noted that their children are “frum from birth.” Enrolled in religious day schools and yeshivas, the children developed textual skills and knowledge that surpassed those of their parents. This propelled some fathers to learn with their sons, creating an intergenerational bond and mutual learning. Other parents, however, have become concerned about their children’s moving too far to the “right.” For example, Steven, who was a grandfather, was troubled by the closed community in which his daughter and her husband live and the restricted ways in which they are raising their children—without questioning and without reading *The New York Times*. Also upset but more accommodating, Chaya has stopped singing at the Sabbath table because her teenage son was uncomfortable hearing women’s voices, which is proscribed in particularly strict sectors of the Orthodox community.

The in-between status of *baalei teshuvah* was also evident in interviews with the key informants. Just about everyone said that *baalei teshuvah* are attracted to Orthodoxy because they want community, want to belong, and like the community’s orientation toward families. Yet their lack of knowledge and Hebrew competence stigmatizes them and interferes with their acceptability. The informants thought that overcoming the knowledge gap is also distressing to *baalei teshuvah* who tend to be accomplished in their secular lives. A couple of key informants talked about *baalei teshuvah*’s desire to blend in at the same time their status becomes visible when they try to pronounce Hebrew yeshiva-style or when they wear sneakers.

**Discussion**

This study examined the perceptions of *baalei teshuvah* of themselves in relation to those who were raised Orthodox, the extent to which the *baalei teshuvah* felt accepted by and part of the preexisting Orthodox communities they joined, and the kinds of capital that they possessed and offered. The principal finding is that the *baalei teshuvah* feel separate from and marginal to the communities they join. They do not feel fully accepted; nor do the communities seem to accept them. Lacking in religious capital, they have a great deal of human, social, and spiritual capital.
Marginalization and Separation

Like first-generation immigrants, the *baalei teshuvah* socialize largely with each other (cf. Hansen 1952; Herberg 1960; Min 1992). No longer identified religiously with the secular communities from which they derived, but not fully incorporated into the communities they join, they feel most connected to others whose background and experiences are similar to their own. They express pride in themselves as a group and superiority over those who were raised Orthodox, whom they describe as uninspired and uninteresting.

According to Berry’s (2003, 2005) acculturation theory, the *baalei teshuvah* who maintain close social relationships with others like themselves are using two adaptation strategies, separation and marginalization. *Separation* entails adhering to their original culture while avoiding interactions with the host culture. By forming primary social relationships with other *baalei teshuvah*, they create an alternative community that has a common history and connection with secular culture and a shared commitment to living as Orthodox Jews. Their separation from their host culture, however, is partial because they do integrate into synagogues, engage in volunteer activities, and have some informal interactions with those who were raised Orthodox. *Marginalization* refers to individuals being unable or unwilling to maintain their original culture at the same time they do not interact with others in the host culture, which may be the consequence of discrimination (Berry 2003). This applies partially as well because the *baalei teshuvah* study participants do not want to be secular, have some interactions with the host culture, but experience a gulf between them.

Tallen (2002) depicted *baalei teshuvah* as occupying “a borderland” in between the secular and religious worlds. In this study, the *baalei teshuvah* occupy a borderland between being newly Orthodox and a full-fledged member of the Orthodox community. They participate in the community on the formal level by attending services in Orthodox synagogues, sending their children to Orthodox day schools, and taking classes. Considering the gap they experience with those who were raised Orthodox and their preference for other *baalei teshuvah* in close relationships, they are less integrated on the informal, social level.

Difficulties on the informal level may be related to the absence of conditions that are conducive to successful social integration. Among conditions proposed by Morawska (1994) in relation to immigrants to the United States that are relevant to the current study are: (1) minimal or no ethnic networks and institutions; (2) minimal or no cultural barriers to social interactions between the ethnic group and the dominant group; (3) nonexistence of a relationship of economic dominance or subordination; and (4) minimal or no prejudice by members of the dominant group. With regard to (1), the community of *baalei teshuvah* can be considered equivalent to ethnic networks. By interacting primarily with each other, they have less need to seek social ties with those who were raised Orthodox, impeding their social integration. With regard to the second condition, cultural barriers between *baalei teshuvah* and those who were raised Orthodox are present. Those who were brought up in Orthodox homes and attended the same Orthodox day schools and yeshivas had a different cultural experience from those who were raised secular. *Baaalei teshuvah* were previously part of a culture in which they ate nonkosher food, socialized freely with persons of the other gender, dressed immodestly, and disregarded the sanctity of the Sabbath. As “exes,” *baalei teshuvah* retain residuals from their past affiliation (Ebaugh 1988), which results in their being viewed in terms of their previous status (Caplan 2001; Ebaugh 1988). With respect to Morawska’s third condition, although there is no relationship of economic dominance or subordination, the relationship is not equal. Except for those *baalei teshuvah* who went to Jewish day schools, studied for an extended period of time in a yeshiva or seminary in Israel, or worked assiduously at advancing their knowledge and skills, it was very difficult for them to reach a level of mastery of Hebrew and Aramaic texts that is on a par with those who were brought up Orthodox. As a consequence, relationships between *baalei teshuvah* and those
who were raised Orthodox appeared to be asymmetrical, with the baal teshuvah positioned as apprentice.

Morawska’s fourth condition, that there be minimal or no prejudice by the receiving group, was also unmet. The Orthodox community seemed sensitive to deviations in language use and dress. This was evident in the interviews with key informants, who depicted baalei teshuvah as “outsiders” who want to be embraced by insiders. They attributed the social distance in part to insiders feeling threatened by the fervor and orientation toward growth, but also to the lack of knowledge on the part of baalei teshuvah. Some Orthodox individuals may be troubled by the past experiences that they imagine baalei teshuvah have had (e.g., nonmarital sex or drugs). Consistent with Berry (2003), the Orthodox community was probably contributing to their marginalization by not tolerating their level of knowledge, their pronunciation of Hebrew, their intensity, and their sneakers.

A number of interviewees criticized other baalei teshuvah for being too “intense” or going “overboard.” Their disparagement of members of their own group suggests that they have internalized attitudes of those who were raised Orthodox and want to distance themselves socially from individuals of this type. These baalei teshuvah may be rejecting others who have had a similar path out of fear of stigma by association (Goffman [1963] 1974). Another indication of baalei teshuvah’s concern about acceptance by longtime members of the Orthodox community is the uneasiness expressed by some about disclosing their baal teshuvah status.

Observations on the level of acceptance by the Orthodox community are tentative because they are based on comments from a limited sample of key informants and the perceptions of baalei teshuvah on how they are received. For a more comprehensive picture of social integration, future research should incorporate participant observation at critical sites over an extended period of time and indepth interviews with members of the community who were raised Orthodox.

Structural Assimilation

Despite barriers, all the baalei teshuvah were integrating in certain respects and some were integrating on the primary level. Everyone interviewed for this study had extensive contacts with individuals who were raised Orthodox during their years of exploration and entrance into traditional Judaism. Those who were raised Orthodox were valuable role models, who explained and showed them how to incorporate Judaism into their everyday lives. The knowledge obtained from those who have lived this way their entire lives is more accurate and authentic than what they learn from other baalei teshuvah.

Consistent with Remennick (2004) and Jääskeläinen (2003), respectively, those with language competence and those who were married to someone who was raised Orthodox were better able to integrate. Assimilation was segmented (Portes and Zhou 1993), with marriage facilitating assimilation into the partner’s sector of the Orthodox community. Baalei teshuvah whose children were attending yeshivas or had married into high status rabbinic families demonstrated how social integration on the primary level may be achieved through their children. Those who socialized primarily with other baalei teshuvah displayed segmented assimilation to that sector (Portes and Zhou 1993). Baalei teshuvah who were attracted to the spirituality of the rabbi of particular Hasidic synagogues identified with that stream.

Consistent with the literature on baalei teshuvah (Aviad 1983; Davidman 1991; Kaufman 1991), key informants asserted that baalei teshuvah become Orthodox in order to gain community. Yet, instead of becoming a part of the community that they aspired to join, a large proportion of the baalei teshuvah interviewees reported feeling more connected to others on the same path. Like Danzger (1989), we learned in the process of recruiting our sample that many baalei teshuvah flock to certain synagogues. (For that reason, we tried to limit recruitment of prospective interviewees from these synagogues.) Such synagogues and their members seem to have formed “subsocieties” (Berger and Luckmann 1966) of baalei teshuvah who have a similar meaning.
system and past experiences and offer each other acceptance. Their rabbis are *baalei teshuvah* who have a special understanding of their spiritual needs or religious leaders who are committed to bringing *baalei teshuvah* into the fold and are willing to nurture them. As the data reveal, however, *baalei teshuvah* subsocieties are disposed to separatism, which may create group cohesion but does not help them integrate into larger Orthodox communities.

A high proportion of participants seemed to take on their *baal teshuvah* status as an identity rather than a transitional status (Danzger 1989). Those who preferred to associate with other *baalei teshuvah* had been observant, on average, fewer years than those who preferred those who were raised Orthodox or had no preference (see Table 2). Thus, it is possible that bonding with other “exes” (Ebaugh 1988) is an interim step and that, over time, they will integrate. On the other hand, associating primarily with other *baalei teshuvah* may impede or slow down their process of social integration. Viewing raised-Orthodox acquaintances as role models who can help them navigate the Orthodox community is also a transitional position.

**Human, Social, Religious, and Spiritual Capital**

*Baalei teshuvah* enter preexisting Orthodox community with various forms and amounts of capital. With regard to human capital, the *baalei teshuvah* in this study are well educated and are largely professionals and business people. They bring with them an intellectual orientation that they apply to advancing their knowledge of Judaism. It is difficult to determine how their educational, professional, and financial resources compare with others in their respective Orthodox communities without conducting a parallel study of the demographics of these communities. Based on an analysis of income data from the NJPS of 1990 (Waxman 2001; Wilder and Walters 1998) and 2000 (Waxman 2005), the *baalei teshuvah* in this study who were raised in other Jewish movements are probably more affluent than Orthodox people throughout the country. The human capital of *baalei teshuvah* can benefit their adopted religious communities through charitable donations and skills that they can offer to these communities. Miriam, the musician, is one of many such examples. *Baalei teshuvah* also contribute numbers to the Orthodox community. They may account for the increase in the proportion of individuals who identify as Orthodox from the NJPS of 1990 to that of 2000 (Sands, Marcus, and Danzig 2006).

*Baalei teshuvah* have social capital that can benefit themselves and their adopted religious communities. Many of them continue to have professions and work lives that are embedded in the external community. Although their ties to family and friends may be looser than they were in the past, loose ties can be used to link people in the religious community with resources that are needed in the wider community (Granovetter 1973). For example, *baalei teshuvah* who are health professionals can help others in their religious communities identify and obtain expert care for particular medical problems. *Baalei teshuvah* have also developed social capital by forming their own subsocieties.

Because of deficits in their religious knowledge and education, many *baalei teshuvah* enter Orthodox communities lacking religious capital. They do try to remedy their deficits by taking classes, but concentrated study is a challenge for adults with many other responsibilities. They attempt to compensate for the lack of early socialization by observing role models. On the other hand, *baalei teshuvah* have abundant spiritual capital, evident in their passion, desire to learn, and their active participation in volunteer activity. It is unfortunate that they are criticized for having excessive spiritual fervor. *Baalei teshuvah* have the kind of energy and commitment that can enrich and revitalize a community.

Like immigrants from another society, *baalei teshuvah* in this study are engaged in a process of social integration that can take generations to accomplish (Berry 2005; Hansen 1952). Despite efforts to participate in community life, they experience a cultural gap. Aware of a barrier and desirous of holding onto their common history, *baalei teshuvah* have created their own subsocieties. Like first-generation immigrants, they cluster in their own groups (Hansen 1952;
Herberg 1960). Like later generations of Korean immigrants who are integrating into the American evangelical mainstream (Min and Kim 2005), the children and grandchildren of baalei teshuvah may integrate more fully into the Orthodox Jewish mainstream. Longitudinal research on baalei teshuvah and their children can further illuminate the social integration process over time.

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