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Adults seek religious paths

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Michael is now Moshe.

"It felt like an awakening," says 25-year-old Moshe Novakoff, of the decision to use his Hebrew name as a sign of his newfound identity as an Orthodox Jew.

"It's full of spiritual possibilities."

A growing number of Jews are sensing those possibilities, seeking them out, and in some cases, animating them as they are drawn to more observant Jewish life. They are as diverse as the questions they ask and the rituals and practices they choose to follow. Some are looking for knowledge and understanding; some are looking for God; some are seeking self-discovery; others are seeking purpose and meaning; still others are striving to reconnect with their past and to reconfigure their future.



Yaakov Welner and his wife, Rachel, met in Israel. Rabbi Zalman Levertov, right, officiated at their wedding along with rabbis Yossi Levertov and Shmuel Tiechtel.

Photo courtesy of Candy Welner

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FAMILIES

For most, there is a sense that something is missing.

"This is the first generation that has seen it all, has it all and then looks at themselves and says, 'For what?'" observes Yaakov Solomon, a New York psychologist who is involved in outreach with Aish HaTorah. Solomon produced the award-winning documentary "Inspired," which tells the stories of six secular Jews who have chosen more religious paths.

"I think people are beginning to see what is missing."

A recent study by the American Jewish Committee (see sidebar) bears out the appeal of Orthodox Judaism, particularly among 18- to 39-year-old American Jews. The study detected what researchers call "an ascendant Orthodoxy."

Evidence of the national trend can be found closer to home.

In the Valley, some 2,500 respondents (approximately 3 percent of the Jewish population) identified as Orthodox in a 2002 Greater Phoenix Jewish Community Study sponsored by the Jewish Federation of Greater Phoenix. Yet a growing Orthodox presence has been discerned in the last several years leading Rabbi David Rebibo, who arrived in the Valley 40 years ago, to quip in a recent Jewish News story that "the

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unfashionableness of Orthodoxy has now become fashionable."

Rabbi Zalman Levertov, director of Chabad of Arizona, came to the Valley as its first Chabad rabbi 29 years ago; today, he has 16 colleagues throughout the state.

Rabbi Zvi Holland, dean of the Phoenix Community Kollel, started the educational outreach organization six years ago with four rabbis, including himself. Today, the kollel employs 11 rabbis and has a paid staff of 14. "Just look at the number of classes listed in Jewish News today compared with March of 2000," he says.

Chabad sends out 4,000 e-mails and 500 faxes a week, each with a tidbit of Jewish knowledge. Rebibo, at Beth Joseph Congregation, points to more than a dozen classes offered by the Greater Phoenix Israel Kollel during a given week.

Classes, lectures or other events and programs abound and are key points of contact, say local rabbis.

First encounters

Candy Welner says in an e-mail that her first encounter with Orthodox Judaism was through a class taught by Levertov.

"He patiently answered all my questions," says Welner, who was raised in a Jewish neighborhood in Toronto.

Holland says that Jews today, free to choose to be Jewish or not, are filled with questions.

"Jews want to know," he says noting the appeal of the kollel's array of classes and one-on-one learning opportunities. "They're asking, 'Why should I be Jewish?' and 'What does it mean?'"

Rebibo, too, emphasizes education as key in inspiring the move to more traditional Judaism. He credits the day school and kollel movements with bringing more Jewish knowledge to a generation of Jews thirsty for information.

Others, once interest is piqued, turn to books and texts on their own to further their knowledge.

Novakoff, who describes his background as "mainstream Conservative," had little interest in Jewish study as a teenager. He became a bar mitzvah at Beth El Congregation and went to the Phoenix High School of Jewish Studies program for one year. But a bout with cancer while in high school propelled him into a period of self-reflection.

He studied Eastern religion, later traveling to Japan to visit Shinto and Buddhist monasteries. But his "aha moment" came, he says, when he began reading Rabbi Gershon Winkler.

"There was something about his books that grabbed me," says Novakoff, who majored in religious studies at Arizona State University. "He began to tear out the walls that I thought Judaism had."

Reading Winkler, with his reference to traditional sources, led Novakoff to search out primary Jewish texts. "Who are these people," he says he wanted to know, "and why is everybody always quoting them?"

Novakoff's boyhood friend and ASU roommate, Eric - now Yaakov - Welner, had a similar experience.

He says in an e-mail that he also began reading widely in Jewish observance and philosophy and was particularly influenced by "The Tanya," a famous Chasidic work.

"It completely changed my outlook on Judaism," he writes. Study at Bar-Ilan University and later at Mayanot Yeshiva in Jerusalem fueled his personal growth.

Robin Meyerson, a former marketing professional and now stay-at-home mom of four, also immersed herself in study.

"I must have read 1,000 books," says Meyerson, 38, who now maintains a traditional Jewish household. She was raised with little Jewish background.

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Others say the exposure to the Orthodox lifestyle resonated and propelled their own spiritual search.

Novakoff began attending services and programs at ASU Chabad with Welner. Welner, one of Candy and Alan Welner's three children, says Chabad was instrumental in his religious transformation.

"The atmosphere (at the ASU Chabad House) was wonderful, and Rabbi Schmuel Tiechtel and (his wife) Chana made a big impression on my life."

The missing connection

Meyerson, who realizes now that she was searching for roots, calls the Orthodox Jewish community "amazing."

Sean Lille, 40, a Scottsdale plastic surgeon, who has adopted a more observant lifestyle along with his wife, Diane, and their three young children, expresses a similar appeal.

"There is a solemnity, a peace about observant Jews," he says. "And I just had to have it."

Lille was raised without any Jewish background - "We had a Christmas tree," he says - and trained to be achievement-oriented.

"My whole life was geared to achieving goals," says the University of California at Berkeley alumnus, who graduated from the University of Arizona School of Medicine.

"The pinnacle was to be a plastic surgeon, and I had achieved this. I thought I would be happy as a lark. I had a great family, a beautiful wife ... all that and something was missing."

Lille felt disconnected, without purpose and meaning, he says.

Meantime, his wife, a Jew by choice who had undergone a Reform conversion, felt that she needed more Jewish knowledge now that she was a mother.

She began studying with Rebibo and Rabbi Michael Dubitsky of Beth Joseph Congregation. Two years ago, she converted to Judaism a second time, before the Orthodox Beit Din in Los Angeles.

"I knew I needed to do more," says the young wife and mother. "I wanted to do it for my children - and for myself."

The family is now Sabbath observant and keeps a kosher home.

Lille notes he and Diane are the first members of the Lille family to return to ritual observance in more than 100 years.

One mitzvah at a time

For many newly observant Jews, the changes are gradual.

"One step at a time," says Rabbi Mendy Deitsch of Chabad of the East Valley.

Candy Welner recalls beginning with turning off the TV on Saturdays. "But it was our children who wanted to accelerate the pace," she writes. Immediately after her bat mitzvah, daughter Kylie "announced that she would no longer drive to synagogue." The family relocated to a home within walking distance of Chabad of Scottsdale.

Son Yaakov, after spending a year in Israel, inspired the family to a higher level of kosher observance, writes his mother, and youngest son Brandon requested that they refrain from eating in restaurants without kosher supervision.

Meyerson began one mitzvah at a time, following the lead of her husband, who was ready to do more than she. They began with putting up mezuzot on all the doorways in their Scottsdale home, then progressed to koshering their kitchen, then Shabbat and holiday observance. Now, Meyerson goes to the mikvah each month, dresses modestly and covers her head.

"I wanted to start over again," she says of the path she and her husband have taken.

Diane Lille says her only regret is that the family did not start sooner.

Still, she says, she is not ready to adhere to some mitzvot.

"Not yet," she says.

But says her husband, marveling at the satisfying new direction of their lives: "We continue to grow."



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