

Sanctifying Difference
*The Power of Story in Coming Out, Conversion,
and other Challenges of a Young Adult Faith*

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Abstract

Reflecting on the story of one openly gay young adult who chose to convert to Orthodox Judaism, this paper explores the theme of difference in individuals and faith traditions, particularly in the struggle to integrate high religious commitment with an acceptance of homosexual orientation. Choosing to convert to a historically marginalized religious tradition serves to transform the experience of difference from one only of isolation and exclusion, to include a sanctified role and purpose in intense relationship with God. Multiple conversations over the course of the conversion process reveal the complex and changing character this transition.

It was about a year ago when I met Lukas, a 23 year-old, openly gay graduate student who was converting to Orthodox Judaism.¹ As one who studies the spiritual lives of young adults, particularly why some make significant religious commitments at a moment when many of their peers are retreating from organized faith communities, I was eager to learn from Lukas, especially since he was entering a religious tradition not especially welcoming of his sexuality.

Over the course of the coming months, Lukas and I discussed the steps of his journey, before, during, and after his conversion to Judaism. The research included informal conversations, three hour-long semi-structured interviews (conducted as part of Mary Elizabeth Moore's *Wisdom of Youth Project*), and electronic communication, via the web blog he set up to document his conversion. What emerged was an incredibly complex and powerful story of one young man's search for God and his longstanding struggle to reconcile his equally important identities as a gay man and a spiritual person, within a community that would support and sustain his growth.

Telling the story

Lukas was born in Germany, the son of an American serviceman and a native German mother, whose work in the technology industry brought their family to America when Lukas was three. He lived in an upper-class suburban neighborhood and valued the good schools he attended, but his early home and school life were marked by tension and rejection. Lukas describes a rift between his driven, though distant, professional mother, on one hand, and his father, a construction worker, who was an alcoholic and physically abusive to Lukas and his brother, on the other.

At school, Lukas found himself an "outsider," alienated from the popular crowd without whose approval "you might as well have not existed." He knew early on that he was "different" and came out as gay to his family and friends at age 12, even while feeling estranged from the images of homosexuality he saw on television. Describing middle school as "hell," high school was no easier, and he attempted suicide for the first time in the summer after his freshman year, feeling "really depressed" with "no one to talk to." Afterward, he found a local community center

¹ Names and identifying information changed to protect privacy.

for queer youth, and he started a Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA) at his school during junior year, an act that got him involved in a lawsuit against the school board, which initially refused to approve what they called a “gay sex club.” His case was taken up by a prominent LGBT legal organization, and Lukas was featured in the media and received scholarships for his ultimately successful campaign for the GSA. Confident in this success and the support received, Lukas took his boyfriend to the senior prom and looked forward to getting outside the “bubble” of his hometown.

But his arrival at college brought new challenges, revealing himself to be “naïve and sheltered.” He realized that the “survival techniques” he used to manage in his family were causing problems in his romantic relationships, making him codependent and reluctant to stand up for himself. Lukas was in relationships all through college, and only in the last year has he been single for any extended period of time. Rejected by his most recent boyfriend, Lukas was scared by the realization that he did now know who he was as an individual, “I only know who Lukas-and-so-and-so is.” In response, he entered a 12-step recovery program (Codependents Anonymous) and began to study for conversion to Judaism.

A Burning Desire for God

In our conversations, Lukas first told this story of his family, school and coming-out, and then told the second story of his spiritual life and his present struggle to integrate the two. Raised marginally Lutheran, his family stopped going to church early on, and his attempt to read the Bible from cover to cover ended in Genesis, when the *Goosebumps* books seemed more appealing. In high school, Lukas dabbled in Wicca and Buddhism, mostly through reading, looking for a religion that he could identify with. But most of his religious interest “died out” because he was “dealing with sexuality.”

Lukas points to one night during his senior year, when he “felt this burning fire, this bonfire within...to seek out God, that higher power.” It was an open-ended desire, “to find God, wherever that may be.” Though his school was full of Christians who wore shirts like “Body Piercing Saved My Life” (referring to the crucifixion of Jesus), Lukas was drawn to the Greek Orthodox Church through a high school friend. The music, icons and ritual overwhelmed him, and he took the emotional intensity to be a sign that his search for God had been successful.

This time in the Orthodox Church, during college, turned out to be a very “dark period.” His identity as a gay person made him again an outsider, and his unsuccessful struggle to reconcile his search for God with his sexuality was “destructive,” plunging him into a deep depression once again. His priest told him that the only way to be faithful was to be celibate, and that fantasies and masturbation were demonic acts, for which he was given scores of prostrations and psalms as penance, obediently completed. Not only did this bring the end of his relationship at the time, but it filled him with feelings of shame. One of the priests, during confession, called him a “perversion of nature,” and during his junior year of college, Lukas attempted suicide for a second time. He felt that there was “nothing for me here in this world” and even considered monasticism as a chance to live a separate, consecrated life, but his priests discouraged him from that path. Ultimately, he felt that God didn’t love him, and there “was no option in this world,” so he “might as well be dead.”

Shortly after his suicide attempt, Lukas entered psychotherapy with an Orthodox Jewish counselor, the first person to accept him both as spiritual and as gay. He began to rethink and re-imagine his life story, seeing the gifts and flaws of both his parents, in his mother’s motivation and his father’s flexibility. Looking back, he sees few other positive role models or mentors. Though he tried to “be cool” and fit in, Lukas was more at home in the science club than he was in soccer or football. He would throw parties and DJ, but he was always searching for depth in life, “trying to sort something out; I couldn’t just exist.” His decision to start the Gay Straight Alliance was a

“big 180” from his suicide attempt, and it reflected a new confidence and commitment to reach out to other youth in similar situations. But it also turned him into the “token gay person,” an identity he tried to shed in college through his religious search, almost to the point of wanting to “excise the homosexuality” from himself through a life of celibacy.

Becoming Jewish

His conversion to Judaism represents an attempt to “find a middle way through a lot of heartache and pain.” After he left the Orthodox church, Lukas spent time in an affirming Buddhist community, but found his belief in a personal God to be too strong for him to stay there. And so he turned to Judaism, to which had been introduced by another friend years earlier, with the belief that Judaism was life-affirming where Christianity had been dark and penitential. In Judaism, Lukas was searching for a place where he could be “a spiritual/religious gay person” and find a “balance between both worlds,” each of which (religious and gay) seemed to exclude the other. This remains a deep struggle, since he refuses to compartmentalize either aspect of his identity: they are “not things I can necessarily package up and put on my shelf.”

The path Lukas took led him back and forth between Conservative and Orthodox rabbis and synagogues, as he searched for a community observant enough to sustain his spiritual practice, but open enough to accept him as a gay person. He experienced “too much freedom” in less traditional communities and needed higher levels of observance to make him “fulfilled.” He wished there was some middle ground, like “Conservadox.” In traditional, Orthodox synagogues, he discovered a community “committed to what it believes in” and willing to grow; people of faith “not just in name.” There he found peers, young people his age, who are “constantly wanting to learn and to struggle,” who observe the laws of *Shabbat* and *kashrut*, who come to *shul* to hear Torah read and to learn rabbinic teachings, and who are faithful in their daily prayers. Their observance empowered and sustained his.

At the same time, he felt like he would always be an outsider in this community, not only as a convert, many of whom feel they are “never Jewish enough,” but also as a gay person. He ultimately decided to convert in a Conservative synagogue, where he was among the most observant and by far the youngest. He remains frustrated with their lack of interest in learning and their low level of commitment, doing “the bare minimum, just enough to feel Jewish.” But he believed this challenge to be “much better than trying to maintain my self-respect and identity and sanity in the Orthodox community, where an aspect of my identity is completely *verboten*.”

Metamorphosis: A New Life and Destiny

In the months leading up to his conversion, Lukas documented much of this struggle in his web blog, “Crossing the Jordan.” Knowing that his decision to become Jewish would be difficult for his secular family and friends to understand, he wrote entries to “document my metamorphosis from a liberal non-jew to a modern orthodox Jew.” This metamorphosis included a series of enthusiastic commitments, followed by doubts and disappointments (each a kind of mini-conversion). He talked about becoming Jewish in terms of “cleaving to a new destiny,” like Ruth in the biblical story leaving behind all she knew to join a new people. Or like Abraham “following an inner voice wherever it may lead.” “I’m scared,” he wrote, two months before his conversion, “What if the fire in me that thirsts for Hashem dies out? What will I do?”

The fire didn’t die, but it led him onto a winding path of change and difference, now not only because of his sexuality, but different by the choice to observe a traditional way of life. Both on the blog and in our conversations, he talked about the big changes, like the fact that he would be buried separately from his parents, and that he was uniting himself with a people who have a long history of persecution. The Jewish fate and destiny, for good or ill, would be his. There were also practical changes he made, like wearing a *kippah*, eating kosher food, moving into a new apartment

within walking distance of synagogue, learning to speak Hebrew, adopting more modest dress, and different cycles and rhythms of life, including daily prayer.

Prayer was one of the practices Lukas most valued, as the eighteen blessings of the *Shemoneh Esrei* became his personal “conference all with God.” For through all of the struggles about which community to join, Lukas was also pursuing a deep, personal connection with God, by reading, study, and home spiritual practice. His connection with God helps him in the daily struggles with self-confidence and relationships. “Working the 12-steps” of his recovery program, and “turning over” his problems and struggles to his Higher Power, Lukas is reassured that he is not relating to “some far-off, distant, cosmic concept” but to “my God.”

By the time of his conversion, Lukas was confident about taking this step as a reflection of what he truly believed and as a way of practice that would shape a meaningful life. Despite resistance from his family and friends, he had a sense of “pride in sticking to my own values.” He expressed knowing and liking himself for the first time in a long time, and appreciated the change from “being told you’re a perversion of nature, to thinking now that you’re a creature of God, that you have this great potential” to be “a light to the nations. To really show people what a well-balanced spiritual person is.” He knows that he has a lifetime of growth and learning ahead, something valued in his religious community, and he sees his conversion as an awe-inspiring dividing line, marking a new beginning and fundamental change in life, where that “burning fire within” can finally find expression.

Converting Again

But in the days following his conversion, Lukas entered another period of deep frustration at the lack of commitment in his Conservative synagogue, finding it harder than he had imagined to remain faithful to a traditional Jewish life. Attracted back to the Orthodox community, though now as a Jew, he found again that community of intellectual struggle, regular prayer, and social support from peers his age for which he most longed. Yet he cringed at the thought of living a divided life again, and replayed much of the questioning he had undertaken prior to his conversion. He feared that in Orthodox Judaism, he would have “no future” as a gay man, unless he moved to New York or Israel, where there are other out, gay Orthodox Jews. Eventually he decided to come out to his friends in the modern Orthodox community, and he was surprised at their acceptance of him. The rabbis, too, were willing to work with him to sort out what it would mean for him to be an observant, gay Jew in their community, and so their shared struggle to balance and integrate his life as a religious person and his life as a gay person, continues.

More to the Story

It is worth dwelling, for a while, on this story in all its complexity. A single story, told and heard at length, brings a power that short quotes or vignettes cannot carry. Beyond the intellectual content, the story carries the emotional and spiritual energy of human interactions, and the sacredness of sharing one’s life with another. The importance of hearing the fullness of another’s story has reinforced, for me, the value of longitudinal research, especially with young adults, whose lives are changing at a breathtaking pace. Here the whole range of experiences of faith and doubt, commitment and confidence, resolution and regret are all present in a single person, over a few short months. Were I to have interviewed Lukas only once, I would have had a very skewed sense of even this small part of his journey.

Also critical to this research was meeting Lukas at his home, where nonverbal parts of his story communicated volumes. An Easter card, signed “Love, Dad” hung on his refrigerator full of kosher food. Texts about Biblical interpretation and laws of *Shabbat* shared space on his bookshelf with the *Chronicles of Narnia*, and classic works about homosexuality and codependency, each category with its own shelf. He had read several texts about conversion, too, including *Embracing*

the Covenant and Tradition in a Rootless World, each exploring why others had become Jews by choice. His conversion to Judaism, as opposed to some other tradition, was a very intentional one, connected with the shape of his life story.

Sanctifying Difference

When Lukas reflects on becoming Jewish, he always emphasizes joining the “destiny of the Jews” as a persecuted people. Beyond the preference for a religion with simple beliefs in one God and a way of life whose practices nourish that commitment, the particularity of *Judaism* as a religion *at once chosen and rejected* was a point of identification between Lukas’ story and the tradition he joined. As someone who had felt “different” and excluded since very early in life because of his sexuality, the choice to join an observant religious community, whose dress, food, prayers, schedule, neighborhoods, and beliefs all are intentionally different from the surrounding world offers a *new and sacred way and reason to be different*, and included.

Lukas turned to Judaism in the hope that it would be literally life-giving. His experience of coming out and his rejection in the Orthodox church each brought him near to death, because he believed he had no future, no story. He hoped that Judaism would offer a *story with a future*, where leaving behind an old life can be the beginning of a new one. His transition was costly, not only financially in things like moving and spending a month’s rent to buy his *teffilin*, but also in renegotiating his relationships with family and friends. As is custom, he changed his name, from Lukas to Mikael, and he even took on a new email address “mikaelbenavraham,” Michael, son of Abraham – heir both to that burning desire to find God and to a people whose covenant has endured despite exile and attempts at eradication.

Mikael’s struggle to integrate his life continues, so that his Jewish difference and his gay difference (until now incompatible stories) can *both* be sanctified, for the service of bringing life and healing to himself and to the world. Mikael points to the way in which uniting one’s own story to the story of a tradition can empower and support a religious life, deep and committed enough to sustain an unfolding and unknown journey. It also reveals the way religious communities can literally harbor death to individuals by refusing to offer them the possibility of a future, bringing their story to an end.

For religious educators, this case study points to the crucial role of a faithfully observant community in sustaining religious practices as a holistic way of life. Mikael continues to search for a community that is truly open to him as a gay person and also committed to its religious tradition with enough energy and seriousness to support his desire for communion with God and growth in faith as the core of his life, not merely an insignificant addendum to conventional existence. His most recent experience with the modern Orthodox community represents a possibility for openness to coexist with traditional commitment, and lessons about how to negotiate these tensions will likely emerge as Mikael’s story unfolds.

Mikael’s story is a reminder that difference can be a source of stress and isolation, as well as a reflection of sacred uniqueness, called and consecrated to lead a way of life in intense communion with God, despite the pressures of the surrounding world. Mikael speaks of his peers as a “generation in search of meaning,” and by attending deeply to the life stories of young people in all their complexity and to the life-giving practices of a religious tradition, educators can help young people to take on, and sustain, practices that will aid in what Judaism calls *Tikkun Olam*, the repair of the world.

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