theories of anti-Semitism, the remarkable survival of the Jews, would be rendered moot.

***Jay Geller, PhD**, Associate Professor of Modern Jewish Culture in the Jewish Studies Program at the Divinity School of Vanderbilt University, has also taught at Bryn Mawr and Swarthmore colleges and at Princeton, Rutgers, and Wesleyan universities. In 2001 he was the Fulbright/ Sigmund Freud Society Visiting Scholar in Psychoanalysis at the Sigmund Freud Museum (Vienna). He co-edited Reading Freud's Reading (1994) and published On Freud's Jewish Body: Mitigating Circumcisions (2007). His The Other Jewish Question: Identifying the Jew and Making Sense of Modernity will appear Spring 2011 from Fordham University Press. Dr. Geller may be contacted at jay.geller@vanderbilt.edu.*

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Judeophilia and Ambivalence

The Appeal of Orthodox Judaism

Sharon Pace—Marquette University

The Talmud teaches that when God gave the torah at Mt. Sinai, a covenant was made with all Jews—those standing there and those yet to come, because all Jewish souls were present at this moment of revelation (*Shavuot*, 39a). Included among those gathered were the souls of people who would be born in a convert's body. Thus, when converts turn to Judaism, they are only becoming who they truly are—children of Abraham and Sarah, coming home after Sinai. The Sinai covenant, to guard the torah, was the agreement between God and Israel, and remains the key for conversion in the orthodox world today. Those who become Jews agree

to live by the torah's commandments. The ancient teaching of the sages—that converts become who they already were—provides a profound insight into the motivations of Jews who join their new family. But what sustains this motivation in the orthodox Jewish world? Here I offer my observations, as a professor of Hebrew Bible/Judaica, as a convert, as a decades-long member of an orthodox synagogue, and as the mother of two adult daughters who became citizens of Israel, concerning the attractions of Judaism as a meaningful way to understand and live in a purposeful world.

In antiquity, the religious conundrum faced by most was whether to believe in one God or in many gods—one author of a universal morality, or many deities of competing realities—each offering a way to look at the world, for good or evil. In today's age of deep skepticism, the question is, instead, whether to believe in God at all. What, then, is the attraction of this ancient faith in such an age? The initial appeal comes from diverse experiences (Simon Schoon, "Noachides and Converts to Judaism," in J. Bremmer et al., eds., *Cultures of Conversions, Roningen Studies in Cultural Change*, 2006, 124). Spouses may be interested because of their partners, spiritual seekers—dissatisfied with the teachings of their own faith—may find Judaism at the end of an investigative road an attractive, vibrant faith (Stephen C. Lerner, "Choosing Judaism: Issues Relating to Conversion," in Rela M. Geffen, ed., *Celebration and Renewal: Rites of Passage in Judaism*, 1993, 71-89). But what keeps people interested, or why did their initial encounters touch something that took root?

For converts to orthodox Judaism, three pillars undergird prospects for a meaningful life of faith, provide a context to live ethically and morally, and open a warm and welcoming community who mark time with joy and celebration. To summarize: converts are attracted by the Jewish understandings of God, Torah, and Israel. These mainstays be-

come a foundation to mapping one's life experiences of reality, to construct meaning and purpose, and to connect with God.

One, a Transcendent Reality

Despite the presence of a world infused with suffering, Judaism believes that God created it as an ordered, meaningful place. The shattered condition of the world calls out for humanity to work as partners with the Almighty to infuse the world with godliness. Defying the philosophies of modernity which hold that existence precedes essence or that suffering is beyond the purview of God, Judaism boldly declares that everything has a purpose—even those things we cannot possibly fathom. It proclaims that God guides and judges the world with justice and mercy and includes in its teachings infinite narratives of Jews (native-born and converts) who nullified their own will for a greater good (Lerner, 74). With such ideals and models, Jews are given guideposts to navigate experiences and choices in everyday life. The Jewish conception of God allows its people to see the everyday acts of waking, seeing, eating, and loving as expressions of blessing. It allows one to have hope that even the brokenness of the world can be used by God, who has a plan that lies beyond human capacity for discernment.

How does one know about this God? Judaism accepts that not all reality is empirically verifiable. Revelation exists—the quintessential event being the revelation at Sinai that occurred upon the Redemption from Egypt. This first redemption becomes paradigmatic not only for the history of the Jewish experience but also touches each individual personally. In every generation there are tyrants, crushers of human freedom, threats to existence itself. Yet, Judaism's narrative asserts that God has structured a universe so that, ultimately, evil will not prevail. And even in times of prosperity and freedom, there can be a myriad of experiences that keep an individual from God—loss, suffering, sadness, angst.

Jewish teaching insists that this person, too, can be brought out of a personal state of slavery.

Judaism does not keep these paradigms of hope and meaning in the abstract. Rather, Sinai is not only about leaving slavery behind, it gives a specific path to Jews that continues even now. How deeply one becomes immersed in the tradition becomes both choice and devotion. The offerings of the Jewish community reflect this commitment to lifetime learning. From the nursery school to the yeshiva, from synagogue classes to sessions held in congregants' homes, from individual instruction by the rabbis to out-of-town retreats, there are dozens of choices to give structure to the Jewish journey.

Two, Torah: Instruction, Teaching, Commandments

With the teachings and commandments given at Sinai, former slaves entered a new land with a new purpose: to have every aspect of life infused with ethics and righteousness—in short, with holiness. To be holy means to be set aside, designated for a special purpose. Every aspect of life—eating and drinking, relationships with family and institutions, business, agriculture, government and education, treatment of the poor and the stranger—were governed by the teachings at Sinai. All were from Moses and ultimately from God. Thus nothing could be subsumed; nothing outside its pale justified. For Jews today, this same way of looking at life is infused in everyday experience. A day opens with prayers to remind one of what is good, to see with what one is blessed. Helping the poor is not optional—giving charity every day is required. Daily life has opportunities that one can be a blessing for others in one's work and relationships. Such acts of kindness are not arbitrary or capricious, for they are part of God's own plan.

Three, the Community of Israel

All of these ideals do not merely live in books or in

teachings. They are manifested, daily and concretely, in the warm, vibrant communities of Jews who mark time by the Jewish calendar. Every Shabbat, the community comes together to read the torah, to pray, to eat a meal together, to enjoy each other's company, and to see their children play together. Sacred times and seasons, in addition, infuse a consciousness of God and love for the community. Everyone has a chance for a new start at Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. The holiday of Sukkot marks the Almighty's protective care, where everyone, no matter wealthy or poor, eats, prays, and celebrates in a simple structure—a *sukkah* (an unadorned hut). People with the means and wherewithal for preparing meals and entertaining seek out those with nowhere to go. Hanukkah lights up the winter doldrums with sparks of spiritual insight and with happy children. Purim sends a reminder that miracles can occur in any age, and Passover brings back the community's roots to Sinai, back to the defining moment of being a Jew. Besides the religious calendar, all of life's joys and sorrows are guided by Jewish instruction and customs. Every baby is welcomed by the community, as is every child's Bar and Bat Mitzvah and wedding. Those gathered say "*mazel tov*" to one another—not only to the one feted—because each milestone is for all Israel. And at the times of sorrow, a *minyan* will be gathered to pray, and congregants will be present for *shiva*.

My observations paint an ideal. But for all their idealism, they are also real. As I look around my congregation every week, I find the enthusiastic students who hear the torah portion, the mothers of disabled children who believe that God has a role for their precious ones, the failed business owners and unemployed who find courage not to give up, and the Russian immigrants who are grateful for every success. I see the healthy and accomplished, as well as the chronically ill or beleaguered, thank God, do a *mitzvah*, support their schools and camps, sign up for a class. I know per-

son after person who will offer a meal; watch a child; reach out in friendship, counsel, and support; extend a handkerchief; write a check. I share the enthusiasm of the young adults, adventurous and committed, who prepare to make *aliyah*, becoming citizens of Israel under the Law of Return. At the *sukkah* party, born-Jews and converts all lift their glasses and say, "*l'chaim,*"—to life! The ideals of Sinai continue in that humble room called my *shul*, in the warmth of congregants' homes, in the offices and classrooms of my rabbis, in my daughters' vibrant Israeli apartment, and in the very way Jews see the world. For the convert whose soul was at Sinai, home can be a precious place indeed.

Sharon Pace, PhD*, earned her doctoral degree at the University of Notre Dame in 1985 and specializes in the study of the Hebrew Bible. She is the author of various articles and books including* The Old Greek Translation of Daniel 7-12 *(1988) and* The Women of Genesis: From Sarah to Potiphar's Wife *(1990). She wrote the Biblical commentary for* Women's Stories *(1993) and a recent commentary on Daniel (2008). Dr. Pace is associate professor in the Department of Theology at Marquette University in Milwaukee and may be contacted at sharon.pace@marquette.edu.*

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Until the Last Anti-Semite Dies: Dilemmas of an Agnostic, Ethnic Jew

Paul H. Elovitz—Clio's Psyche

At ages 12 and 13, when most Jewish boys are preparing to and becoming a Bar Mitzvah as a step toward manhood, my resolution to the issue of my Jewish identity was to determine that I would be a Jew until the last anti-Semite died. Below I will describe this identity struggle, my subse-