



Journal of Religion & Society

The Kripke Center

Volume 13 (2011)

Congregational Culture and Identity Politics in a Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Synagogue

Making Inclusiveness and Religious Practice One and the Same

Jon R. Norman, Loyola University Chicago

Abstract

This article uses ethnographic fieldwork to investigate the intersection of American liberal values with traditional religious ideals. Members of a gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender synagogue develop a local congregational culture that integrates identity politics into Judaism as a way of counteracting their exclusion from both religious and secular institutions in American society. Congregants reformulate their practice of Judaism to accommodate liberal ideals in ways sometimes contradictory to both sets of beliefs; these contradictions, although perhaps detrimental to the maintenance of traditional forms of Judaism, are a reasonable and necessary congregational response to contemporary attitudes among Jews in the United States in the early 21st century that emphasize disaffiliation with organized religion.

Introduction

[1] On a blustery Friday night in northern California, a Jewish congregation gathers to celebrate the beginning of *Shabbat* (Sabbath) as they do every week. What makes tonight special is that two women, a lesbian couple, are celebrating the naming of their newborn son with their parents and the congregation as a whole. The services proceed as usual, opening with communal singing. The women then light the Sabbath candles as they hold their child. The congregation joins in with the prayers as the grandparents beam from the front row of the pews. After the *Shema*, the *Amidah*, and chanting of the Torah portion, the rabbi, a

woman in her mid-thirties, begins her *drash* (commentary or sermon).¹ At this point, she calls up Susan and Rebecca with their two-week old son Yitzak.² Susan and Rebecca explain why they have chosen to name their son Yitzak, whom they named him after, and what his Hebrew name means.

[2] After explaining the names, the rabbi calls the couple's parents to the bima (dais), located in the center of the well-filled sanctuary. She invites them to hold a *tallis* (ritual prayer shawl) over the heads of the family, forming a "human chuppah," like the canopy (*chuppah* in Hebrew) used in the Jewish marriage ceremony. Rabbi Grossman explains that indeed they are making a chuppah. However, instead of it being held by branches of the trees that were planted at the birth of their children as is traditional, the family holds the chuppah to show that Yitzak has a wonderful family to grow into and with. The rabbi then invites the entire congregation to come up to the bima and surround the family. Everyone – all 80 people or so – eagerly gets up from their seats and crowds to the center of the room, each person touching another so that all are connected to the family in the center. At this point the rabbi invokes several traditional benedictions, including the *Shebechannu*, the traditional prayer for new beginnings or first times, and also delivers her own personal words of inspiration and hope for a good future for Yitzak and his family. The crowd joins in to sing a traditional song with people linking arms and swaying. Eventually, after several rounds, the song finally dies away, and people once again reclaim their seats.

[3] The service continues as usual, moving on to prayers for those ill, and remembering those who have passed away recently or whose *yartzeit* it is this Shabbat.³ Once the service ends, most people file downstairs to the *oneg* room to enjoy a small nosh and a little wine.⁴ Part of the naming scene is repeated over: for the blessing over the challah (the braided bread), everyone in the room makes a human chain so that all are "touching" the challah as it is blessed and then divided among the congregants. People mill around eating cookies for about twenty minutes and then say their farewells and head on their way.

[4] The Friday evening service I describe is both like and unlike many other Shabbat services that might happen on any particular Friday night at a Reform synagogue. Although this congregation engages in many of the same activities as other Reform congregations, congregants at this synagogue redefine conventional American understandings of what Judaism is and how Judaism is practiced by drawing on their experiences as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender (LGBT) identified individuals. The congregation reformulates Judaism to stress inclusiveness above all else; they emphasize inclusiveness and diversity in ways that challenge accepted liturgical and social practices of Jews, and they create new

¹The *Shema* and the *Amidah* are traditional prayers recited on Friday evenings and Saturday mornings in Jewish congregations.

²All the names used in this study are pseudonyms, including the name of the congregation.

³*Yartzeit* is the Jewish observance of remembering the anniversary of those who have died on the Shabbat nearest the day of their death.

⁴*Oneg* refers to the ritual of blessing of wine and bread (and often sweets as well) after services on Shabbat (common among many Conservative and Reform congregations) as well as the festive enjoyment of these items.

rituals, liturgy, and practices to supplement or supplant ones that they consider inadequate or wrong because they are not inclusive.⁵

[5] I encountered this continued sense of inclusiveness as a defining characteristic that separates this congregation – which I am calling Bet Keshet – from other American congregations, even liberal, Reform synagogues that strive to be accepting of difference (e.g., for comparison, see Furman; Liebman; Zuckerman; Becker 1999). While recent scholarship in Jewish studies has identified a shift towards inclusivity among contemporary American Jews (Cohen and Eisen), little empirical research has been done to examine how Jewish practice and liturgy simultaneously reflect and (re)produce the ideological stance of inclusiveness in congregational life and culture.

[6] In studying Bet Keshet, I examine how local congregational culture is shaped by both tradition and contemporary American life. Studies of congregational culture tend to focus on the construction and maintenance of the identity of the congregation (Ammerman; Becker 1999; Eiesland), although people's identities are also influenced by local cultures. In this paper, I show how congregational culture serves as a means for members of Bet Keshet to integrate their political beliefs with their religious ones. More importantly, Bet Keshet illustrates how people resolve some of the main contradictions scholars see in religious life in the United States: on the one hand, Americans emphasize individualism in faith (Bellah et al.; Cohen and Eisen), while at the same time demonstrate an intense religiosity and involvement in congregational life (Finke and Stark; Ammerman). Scholars usually assume that people in the first group are distinct from those in the second; in this study I show how people hold both of these sets of beliefs and work them out through development of congregational culture. For members of this congregation, developing a framework for being inclusive – as they define it – is key to being both Jewish and liberal.

[7] But the case of Bet Keshet not only illustrates how people form inclusive, sustaining congregations in the United States. Bet Keshet also presents, in microcosm, how the foundational American ideals of individualism (Bellah et al.) and the pull towards communal life and group membership (Putnam; Kniss) exist in tension that can only be partially resolved. The conflict between local culture and identity politics that gets played out in Bet Keshet mirrors this tension, and the local mechanisms illustrate how American society deals with this push and pull in ways that allow people to be both individualistic – through identity politics – and communal – through congregational life. And while Kniss shows how denominations embody this tension, little research has shown how individual congregations negotiate the opposition. Researchers such as Penny Becker reveal how congregations deal with conflict concerning *congregational* identity (1999), but what this article illustrates is how *personal* identity, through identity politics, translates to congregational culture.

⁵ The emphasis on inclusion works strongly against historic trends among Jews to remain exclusive. Prior to the twentieth century, Jews maintained exclusive communities, often due to a combination of coercion by the dominant Christian society they lived in, but also because they chose to remain apart through ritual and lifestyle (Karp). However, both the Reform and Reconstructionist movements have worked to be more inclusive over the last 30 to 40 years – as seen in Bet Keshet's membership in the national Reform congregational association.

Context for Understanding Bet Keshet

[8] Bet Keshet congregants define inclusiveness primarily as multiculturalism, the accepting of people from different backgrounds as equal and as valuable contributors to a community. Not only are all types of people accepted, but members celebrate differences as well. Members welcome all who come to *shul* (synagogue), and they transform liturgy, ritual, and practice to be as inclusive as they can imagine. In this, they are like other religious congregations in the United States in the late part of the twentieth century (Furman; Ammerman; Becker 1998; Zuckerman; Dillon). But what makes Bet Keshet an important case study for understanding religious life is not only the degree to which the congregation has changed how they do things, but the ways in which these changes illustrate a central quandary for religion in the United States: how do institutions integrate the prevalent American societal ideals of individualism, represented here by identity politics, and a strong sense of community, represented here by the maintenance of congregational culture and identity?

[9] Over the last several years, sociologists have become more interested in local congregational culture as a way of understanding religious organizations as an institutional form (DiMaggio and Powell; Ammerman; Wuthnow 1997; Becker 1999; Eiesland). The local culture of a congregation – the established but changeable system of symbols and practices that constitute local understandings of how to do things – draws on both denominational tradition and the congregants as individuals (Becker 1999). While denominational tradition is comprehensive in scope and rhetorically impervious to change, people often interpret it and reformulate it based on local needs and desires (Feher; Dillon; Moon). But in congregations such as Bet Keshet, individuals' interest in identity politics – a belief in the reinforcing of identities (often marginalized) as a means of situating the self in the world – shapes local congregational culture strongly.

[10] In this synagogue, congregants reinterpret Judaism to stress inclusiveness in order to deal with a continued sense of exclusion from society at large. While scholars have studied other congregations that have worked to restructure Jewish practice in ways similar to Bet Keshet (e.g., Furman; Liebman), Bet Keshet congregants alter traditions for a different (although somewhat homologous) reason. Rather than combating the traditional dissatisfaction with religious communal life that has been well documented since the 1960s (cf. Wuthnow 1988), Bet Keshet congregants were often quite *literally* excluded from Jewish communal life because of their LGBT identities.

[11] As individuals who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender, they were excluded (or felt they were excluded) from many other Jewish communities and congregations. As Jews, they felt alienated by either blatant anti-religiosity among LGBT communities or the overt (or covert) Christian orientation of other LGBT spiritual groups (although that has changed in recent years through the work of LGBT activism [Armstrong]). Other researchers have documented how LGBT congregations (or other religious spaces) serve as sites of identity integration (Cooper; Warner; Shokeid; Gray and Thumma; Rodriguez and Ouellette 1999, 2000). In a similar way, people come to Bet Keshet to find a place to settle the upheavals in their identity; they come to Bet Keshet to integrate identities they thought previously irreconcilable. But congregants of Bet Keshet exemplify the integration of

disparate, marginalized identities into an institutionalized congregational culture, which in turn creates a new, institutionalized form of Judaism, a cultural schema that allows the congregants to formulate an alternative to the traditional integration of individualism and communal life in the United States, namely, Protestantism.

[12] As with other scholars, I too focus on the influence of secular values and ideals on religious communities (Bellah et al.; Dillon; Liebman and Cohen; Manning; Cohen and Eisen; Moon). In particular I examine American political liberalism as it intersects Reform Judaism in Bet Keshet. By American political liberalism, I refer to a basket of ideals that congregants embraced, primarily including (but not exclusively or exhaustively) a belief in gender equality and feminism, racial equality and affirmative action, a positive view of gays and lesbians, and belief in the need for some sort of welfare state. As Leibman and Cohen note, Americans believe Jews are more liberal than others, and indeed surveys confirm this. But they also find that more observant Jews are less liberal than less observant ones. Bet Keshet illustrates the opposite: a local congregational culture that promotes liberalism among congregants. Specifically, Bet Keshet congregants promote the inclusion of formally marginalized or excluded individuals based on their manifest identities – thus dealing with this problem of integrating individualism into communal life without the loss of late 20th century political liberalism.

[13] Because there are two sets of ideals to draw upon – traditional Judaism interpreted through a Reform lens and an Americanized liberal multiculturalism – the congregation faces conflicts that resolve in ways contradictory to both sets of ideals. Here I document and analyze the conflicts of a functioning institution; while sociologists often are drawn to the dramatic events in social life, everyday phenomena can be just as revealing of how people navigate competing social forces (Moon). The congregation does not face such deep conflicts that they find them irreconcilable, as did the congregation Phil Zuckerman studied in Oregon, which split into two *shuls*. In part this is because Bet Keshet represents only the liberal side of the “deep division in American religion” between “religious liberals” and “religious conservatives” (Wuthnow 1988: 133).

[14] Instead, the congregation privileges a sense of community even in the face of potentially divisive identity politics that have proven beneficial to members in other venues. In doing so, the congregation illustrates how Americans differentially privilege individualism at some points, through the acceptance of diverse identities, and community at others, when they resist the atomizing force of individualization. In the sections below, I demonstrate through ethnographic narrative how the congregants, and the congregation as a whole, manages the balancing act common in the United States between the pull towards individualism and the push towards community. I analyze the ways in which this congregation illustrates the complexity of American culture while also showing how it engenders compromises that may work against the ideals of both the individuals and the group.

The Setting: Congregation Bet Keshet

[15] A small group of gay and lesbian Jews in San Francisco founded Bet Keshet in 1977. This group of people came together to form a LGBT *shul* because they felt ostracized by mainstream Jewish congregations. At the time of the fieldwork, the congregation had a membership of over 500 adult members and over 100 children in its *kadima* (religious school

program), and welcomed all people, regardless of sexual orientation. Congregation Bet Keshet is affiliated officially with the Reform movement (as a member of the Union of Reform Judaism) in the United States. While the Reform movement has accepted LGBT individuals both in the rabbinate and the laity for some time, only a few LGBT-focused congregations exist in the United States, although many progressively minded Reform congregations are welcoming of LGBT individuals.⁶ The materials that the congregation provides to promote itself describe the synagogue as “a vibrant *kehila* (Jewish community) in [northern California] for people of all sexual identities.” It goes on to state:

We are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered [sic] and heterosexual Jews, together with lovers, family and friends, both Jewish and non-Jewish. We come from a wide range of religious, ethnic, class and cultural backgrounds to worship God with egalitarian, feminist, and gay-positive Jewish liturgy. Together we celebrate Shabbat, festivals and life cycle events with *simcha* (joy), song, laughter and compassion.

At [Bet Keshet], we are committed to sustaining a safe environment to nurture and express our diverse spiritual, sexual, educational, and ethical values. Our Rabbi, lay-leaders and members join together to bring meaning to Torah and Jewish observance. We are committed to creative prayer, study, mitzvot and tikkun olam (repairing the world) (congregation’s website).

[16] Celebration of the festivals and Friday evening Shabbat services are the main forms of communal worship for Bet Keshet. While the synagogue has employed a rabbi since the 1990s, it still maintains a strong lay-leader orientation. Many of the services I attended were either co-led by the rabbi and a lay person or by two lay people. Services are well attended on Shabbat; on most Friday nights I counted approximately one hundred people in attendance. During the High Holy Days (*Rosh Hashanah* and *Yom Kippur*), the number of congregants and visitors exceeds the capacity of the sanctuary, and services are held in a rented theater. Other holidays, such as *Simchat Torah* and *Tish B’Av*, which are not observed by most Reform Jews in the United States, draw fewer people.

[17] I began my participant-observation in January 2001, although I had attended services at Bet Keshet sporadically during the previous year. I originally became interested in this congregation in the fall of 2000 because I was researching how congregations design synagogue buildings and invest them with meaning. I chose Bet Keshet because the congregation had recently designed and built a new building. As I finished up that project, however, I became ever more intrigued by how Bet Keshet members navigated the intersection of inclusiveness and Judaism. I decided to further my study of this congregation through extended fieldwork. Over a five-month period, I went to Friday evening Shabbat

⁶ The World Congress of Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender Jews lists 27 affiliated organizations as of 2008. Of the 23 congregations (the other four are organizations that work on Jewish LGBT issues), seven list official affiliation with the Union of Reform Judaism, two indicate affiliation with the Reconstructionist movement and one is affiliated with the Conservative movement. The remaining 13 congregations and havurah are unaffiliated. There are of course many synagogues of varied affiliations that are welcoming of LGBT individuals that are not a part of this umbrella, advocacy organization.

services on a weekly basis, attended one Saturday morning Shabbat service, and attended the Purim celebration.

[18] Drawing on an anthropologic understanding of ethnography (cf. Atkinson et al.), I mostly acted as a “participant-observer.” I also completed a dozen interviews during the fieldwork period, which were primarily unstructured conversations with congregants.⁷ I spoke with general members rather than focusing on congregational leaders, as I was most interested in how average congregants worked to integrate Judaism into their lives. Much of my evidence comes from my time at the synagogue, taking part in congregational life. I did not take notes while at the synagogue, in keeping with Jewish observance, but I did write down all observations and recollections concerning the conversations immediately upon departing services. As someone who had grown up in an observant Jewish household, I was generally at ease at the synagogue, and able to interact easily with congregants.

[19] I decided to focus my fieldwork on Friday evenings since that seemed to be when the largest number of members showed up (Saturday morning services are not well attended). During my fieldwork, I noted that about half of the people on Friday nights attended regularly – people who were at services nearly every time I was at services; about a quarter attended semi-regularly – people who appeared to come twice or more; and about a quarter were there only once during my observations. The regularly active number of congregants appeared to be about one-tenth (fifty to seventy-five congregants) of the overall adult membership during my fieldwork. This type of ebb and flow in attendance is common among American religious communities, and particularly among Reform Jewish congregations (Fishman).

[20] Bet Keshet emphasizes a Reform tradition blended with many other interpretations of Judaism. A lay leader and the rabbi, or often two lay leaders, lead services on Shabbat and the holidays. The liturgy is drawn from a variety of sources, both traditional and innovative; the congregation uses a *minhag* (generally, liturgical tradition) they created themselves. The liturgy exemplifies the way in which the congregants have used inclusiveness to alter Jewish traditions. The traditional prayers, such as the *Amidah* and Mourner’s *Kaddish*, are in Hebrew, English, and transliteration for those who cannot read Hebrew. In addition, alternative prayers abound. Bet Keshet’s prayer book (*sedur*) has five different versions of the *Amidah*: traditional, spiritual nontraditional, women’s, mystical, and reflections for individuals unsure of God’s existence. Even though other congregations, such as the Reconstructionist synagogue Zuckerman studied or the independent *havurah* Liebman studied, change the wording of the *Amidah* to be more inclusive and gender-neutral, Bet Keshet takes a radical step in reconstructing a central prayer to make it amenable for those who question the very existence of God.

⁷ I used a convenience sample for the interviews, talking with some congregants with strong, long established ties to the congregation and some newer members. The interviews were in general carried out after services, and lasted between 30 and 60 minutes each. Two interviews were done as lunch meetings, lasting approximately 60 minutes each; these two interviewees were long standing member of the congregation who had been heavily involved in the process of building a new *shul*. The respondents ranged in age from their mid-20s to early 50s, and were evenly split by gender.

[21] For Bet Keshet the multiple versions of the *Amidah* are a way to integrate inclusiveness into the ritual and worship of the congregation on a weekly basis. Bet Keshet engages in inclusiveness in part through representation; the liturgy (such as the five versions of the *Amidah*) validates through the inclusion of disparate identities. These identities are radically disparate in some ways, ranging from gays and lesbians to those who do not believe in God, pushing the envelope of even liberal, Jewish congregational standards. And while Zuckerman's and Liebman's congregations changed the prayers, these congregants did so to deal with the sense of exclusion common in American religion: the sense of disconnect and alienation that many young people experience in relation to mainstream Jewish communal life. Bet Keshet, in contrast, changes the *Amidah* to be fully inclusive of LGBT people excluded in both the present and the past; the congregation works to include based on identity, not on a generalized sense of cultural detachment.

[22] Bet Keshet has also modified or amended other traditional prayers, either with inclusive (non-gender specific – common among Reform congregations) language or by making the prayer representative of the special circumstances of the congregation. For example, the Mourner's *Kaddish* has a supplemental benediction that prays for the unmourned gays and lesbians who perished throughout history. Supplemental readings such as inspirational poems and stories (of both Jewish and non-Jewish origins) also fill the *sedur*, and drashes on traditional prayers are commonplace. The congregation's use of non-Jewish texts is another instance of altering Jewish tradition to make it more inclusive. Although Judaism has a long history of reading and rereading texts for further clarification and interpretation (e.g., the Talmud), Jews traditionally have drawn much less frequently on texts from outside of the traditional canon of biblical or rabbinic authors.

[23] Drawing on non-Jewish texts and changing traditional prayers are at first glance logical outcomes of following the Reform tradition (not uncommon among Reformed and Reconstructionist congregations). But at Bet Keshet, congregants have done so in specific ways to cement inclusiveness in their congregation. The transformation of liturgy in both moderate and radical ways represents how things are done at Bet Keshet; they are the symbolic forms that affirm and substantiate the local culture. As argued above, the congregation alters tradition to insert the right of individuality – as expressed through identity – into congregational life, thus moving beyond what other congregations have done in the name of reaching out to disaffected Jews or others. While other congregations have taken similar steps to create a new sense of communal life found missing in traditional Judaism (or in other faiths, for “Jews by choice” and converts), Bet Keshet reweaves communal life to integrate identity, to bring in modern American liberal ideals while maintaining communal, congregational life. Yet the congregation uses more than liturgical changes to be inclusive; as shown below, they work steadily to be inclusive in their practices as well.

“Jews by Choice”: Changing Tradition to Accommodate Identity

[24] Inclusiveness for congregants also means accepting and validating a variety of traditions in how the congregation does things. Bet Keshet, like many other Reform congregations, changes liturgy and ritual to accommodate its commitments, but the institutional reach extends farther. Promoting diversity enables Bet Keshet to expand inclusiveness to racial and

ethnic diversity, language diversity, and diversity of religious backgrounds. In particular, accepting diversity in religious background expands the concept of who is included as a Jew. The congregation achieves inclusion of divergent backgrounds by diminishing the importance of the historically Jewish belief that the Jews are “the chosen people” and are therefore superior in some way or another to all other peoples. Bet Keshet echoes the recent trend among American Jews in the late twentieth century in that they espouse the belief that Jews are not special or chosen in God’s eyes – a break from previous generations’ beliefs (Cohen and Eisen). But what is different about Bet Keshet is that the congregation is composed of people who reject chosenness and are actively involved in a Reform Jewish congregation. That Jewish people who are unaffiliated, or who are affiliated with Reconstructionism, reject the concept of the “chosen people” is not so surprising, but that a group of Jews, committed to Jewish communal life as a Reform congregation, rejects it is more unusual.⁸

[25] One of the foremost signs of rejecting the concept of chosenness is that Bet Keshet welcomes non-Jewish people previously unaffiliated with Judaism with open arms. Congregants refer to these people – who are unconverted, and may never formally convert – as “Jews by choice.” Acceptance of “Jews by choice” denotes a radical shift from traditional Judaism. Taking in these individuals unconditionally (or comparatively so in relation to most other denominations of Judaism) represents a new way of conceiving who is a Jew.⁹ For even though Cohen and Eisen show that contemporary Jews maintain a flexible idea of what Jewishness is, Reform Judaism still relies on lineage or formal conversion for verified authenticity of Jewish identity. A key example of how the congregation’s reworking of this tradition is found in how they deal with newcomers interested in becoming part of their community.

[26] In my fieldwork I identified three types of visitors: Jews who were either interested in joining or came with a friend or relative, non-Jews seeking a new community of faith or spiritual path, and homeless people seeking refuge. The first two groups were larger than the last, but surprisingly the first two groups (Jews and non-Jews) appeared to be roughly of equal size. Although I did not collect standardized data on attendance, through my interviews, casual interactions before or after services, and by listening in on others’ conversations, I gained a good idea of who was a first time visitor or a repeat visitor, and who was seriously interested in joining versus just “seeing what Bet Keshet is all about.” Several of the first time visitors were people of color – something that might be unusual in

⁸ While adherents of both Orthodox and Conservative Judaism believe that Jews are God’s “chosen people,” Reform Jews offer a slightly different interpretation. The Reform Central Conference of American Rabbis state: “We affirm that the Jewish people are bound to God by an eternal covenant, as reflected in our varied understandings of Creation, Revelation and Redemption....We are Israel, a people aspiring to holiness, singled out through our ancient covenant and our unique history among the nations to be witnesses to God’s presence. We are linked by that covenant and that history to all Jews in every age and place.” In contrast, the Reconstructionist branch of American Judaism rejects “chosen-ness” and sees it as akin to a racial ideology.

⁹ Accepting Jews-by-choice is different than accepting people who identify as Jewish culturally – another strong current in American Jewish communities – but who were born of Jewish parents or at least one parent.

many Jewish congregations, although Bet Keshet has people of color who are members.¹⁰ How the congregation integrates these members is illustrated by the experiences of two gay men who recently joined the synagogue.

[27] In an interview (by a congregational staff writer) published in the monthly congregational newsletter, two “Jews by Choice” who had recently joined the synagogue spoke about becoming members of the congregation. Michael is white and came to Judaism from Catholicism, while David is South East Asian and was also raised Catholic. David stated that he had a difficult time mingling when he first came to Bet Keshet, admitting, “I thought all of the Jews were white.” One of the membership committee members talked with him about diversity in the synagogue, and “he became more aware of the diversity within the congregation and began to feel more a part of the congregation.” In response to the question of “What is the one thing that Bet Keshet can do to make the community more accepting of people of diverse backgrounds?” the interview reported:

Both Michael and David noted that there are many things that Bet Keshet does to make people feel welcome. David particularly likes when visitors from out of town are identified during services. Michael likes the visitor corner in the oneg room. They both feel that those minhags (traditions) allow us to better reach out to new people. Michael notes the delicate balance that needs to be struck between programs for people with special needs (e.g., interfaith couples, Jews by choice) and the issue of being stuck with a label or only getting to know people of the same background. David notes, “We want diversity and variety, not labels” (Bet Keshet’s Newsletter, April 2001).

[28] In stating that there is a tension between identifying people of different backgrounds and segregating them, this interview touches on the critical point of how inclusiveness is handled by Bet Keshet. Bet Keshet conceptualizes accepting diversity as a way of dealing with “otherness” (Said). In accepting diversity, congregants attempt to transform individuals who are “other” – i.e., not Jewish, not white, not religious – into “self” in a communal sense (Durkheim). Jewish, as a category, expands to include identities traditionally not seen as Jewish: gay, lesbian, black, agnostic, or others. But identities such as race remain salient even as the congregation attempts to subsume them under the larger vision of an inclusive-Jewish identity. David needed to know that there are indeed Jews who are people of color in order to feel part of the congregation. Accepting diversity is not a fact, but rather a practice that continually needs to be actively engaged in and achieved by the congregation.

[29] But David and Michael also express ambivalence over identity. They value diversity, and David needed to know that Bet Keshet included “people of color” as part of their diverse congregation. They also liked how the congregation recognizes newcomers. At the same time, both men stated that they did not want to be known only by their “labels;” they did not

¹⁰ Although Jews have not always been considered “white” by mainstream Protestant society (Brodkin), contemporary Americans generally classify them as white. The 1998 General Social Survey stated that ninety-eight percent of American Jews identified as white, one percent identified as black/African American, and less than one percent identified as some other race. In addition, Jews and people of color have occasionally had hostile relations in the United States (e.g., disputes between Orthodox Jews and African Americans in New York City).

want only to be known as part of specific identity groups. The contradiction that the men articulated illustrates the problem of integrating identity politics into the congregation, or can be seen as a case of how people in general deal with the unease between individualism and the necessity of communal life. If people want to recognize diversity through identities, the community as a whole ends up often seeing people only as that identity: person of color or Jew by choice, for example. Michael and David do not want to be only known by these labels, and want the congregation to strike a balance between recognizing diversity through identities and valuing individuals for all their attributes.

[30] As mentioned above concerning the inclusion of “mixed gender families,” Bet Keshet institutionalizes inclusiveness through liturgy and practice, but also by maintaining venues and practices that validate particular identities. The congregants, through inclusiveness, attempt to disrupt the ways in which American society marginalizes minority groups – the darker side of the separation of people by identity in America. But only by actively looking for specific identities – leaders showing David that there are non-white people at Bet Keshet, for example – can the congregation actually be inclusive. At the same time, members are uncomfortable being known primarily through one particular identity attribute. Thus Bet Keshet both embodies inclusiveness while at the same time it validates the exclusionary cordoning off of identities that can be the cause of exclusion in the larger society (cf. Berlant). Members are both invested in the process of identity production and recognition while at the same time ambivalent about the consequences of being so. This ambivalence echoes the ambivalence of American society, as seen through debates inside religion and out: when is the pull towards individualism acceptable, and when does it create an atomistic society incapable of maintaining valuable social bonds (Putnam)?

[31] The interview above is but one example of how Bet Keshet attracts many individuals who were not born or raised Jewish but who are interested in converting to Judaism. Another example of how Bet Keshet handles “Jews by choice” during my fieldwork occurred one Saturday morning when a man in his early twenties came to the services. James was very excited about learning more about becoming Jewish. After the service, he spoke at length with several membership committee members. They talked not only about Bet Keshet, but also about what becoming a Jew meant in terms of rights and responsibilities. James returned the next several Fridays, donning a *kippah* (skull cap) and *tallis* for services.

[32] Most other Reform congregations (but not all – see Liebman for a documented exception) would not permit an unconverted person (and in more traditional congregations, anyone who has not had a bar mitzvah) to wear a tallis since such a practice would be against the usual ways of doing things in Judaism. At Bet Keshet, anyone who desires to wear a tallis as part of his or her ritual and as a sign of closeness to the divine and connection with the Torah may do so. In the acceptance of strangers, which is partially accomplished by expanding a formally exclusive ritual – the donning of a *tallis* – to be an inclusive one, the congregation lives its expressed desire to be open and accepting of diversity.

[33] This transformation of ritual symbolizes the institutional power of Bet Keshet; old conceptions of who is Jewish are replaced by new ones that fit the Bet Keshet definition. Although individuals could and do, on their own, redefine their personal status as Jew or non-Jew (cf. Bellah et al.), it is only within an institutional framework that these decisions

gain strong meaning. In addition, without the institutional apparatus, an individual assertion of Jewish identity would be hard to delineate and maintain. Bet Keshet validates a new understanding of Jewish identity as inclusive of everyone, even those usually categorized as non-Jews. Through ritual and liturgy – from who may don a *tallis* to who is included in prayers – the congregation creates a new way of practicing Judaism and of being Jewish that is heavily influenced by liberal political ideals. These new ways are integral to the congregants' understanding of how they do things and of who they are as a congregation. This new form of Judaism integrates identity politics into members' understandings of what it means to be Jewish. Yet doing so limits how people conceive of Judaism even as they strive to transcend any such boundaries.

Limits on Who We Include in “Us”: Boundaries on Acceptance

[34] The congregation uses a variety of mechanisms to make people feel included. But the congregation's ability to be inclusive has limits; some people are not included either through formal decree or de facto practice. These boundaries are akin to those found in the wider, less inclusive society to which Bet Keshet constructs itself in opposition. Bet Keshet, as a congregation, cannot transcend these boundaries through inclusion. While the previous sections show how the congregation uses multicultural ideals and inclusiveness to expand what Judaism is, in this section I show how inclusiveness can limit the types of solutions the congregation can employ. I examine the boundaries of inclusion by focusing on the congregation's reaction to a new neighborhood after the synagogue moved from its old location to its new one in 1998, which required the congregation to deal with homelessness on its doorsteps – literally.

[35] In the mid-1990s, the congregation realized that it had outgrown its present space. Members began to look for a new facility that would meet their needs. They eventually found a facility in an ethnically and economically diverse neighborhood. Bet Keshet's move from a hidden, insulated, and LGBT-friendly neighborhood to one where the congregation would be more visible and in a busier area, and the issues that were brought up by the move, illustrate the boundaries of inclusion for Bet Keshet. In dealing with a new neighborhood and a larger number of homeless people, the congregation took an interesting path of trying to maintain their ideals of inclusiveness, but was unable to deal with homelessness as anything other than an identity.

[36] When the congregation first moved, congregants debated what to do about homeless people sleeping in the synagogue's doorway. Several people whom I interviewed remarked on the debates that emerged at that time. The congregation actively questioned how they could consider themselves inclusive and yet not want homeless people to sleep in the doorway or to come inside the building. The congregation agreed upon a compromise. The doors are locked at all times, but homeless people are welcome to join the congregation for services. (Indeed, many of the times I attended services homeless people were present.) Inclusiveness means accepting people who are different but on certain terms and with certain limits to acceptable differences. It also seems to apply most readily when the question is about worship or other such inward focused activities.

[37] In deciding how to handle having homeless people in and around their new building, the congregation looked to both their Jewish values and their ideals of inclusiveness.

Although members debated how best to deal with this situation, few argued for a solution of completely excluding homeless people. Members noted that Jewish tradition, such as that invoked during Passover, emphasizes helping the less fortunate. Congregants' conceptions of inclusiveness directed their decision, as excluding a group would have gone against their ideals. Yet members did not see the problem of homelessness as one that they might take on as part of *tikkun olam*; the congregation did not do anything about homelessness as a social problem, but instead included homeless people in their services. Other Jewish congregations, in contrast, have worked to deal with homelessness as a social problem by drawing on their belief that as a marginalized people, Jews are obligated to help other marginalized individuals (Becker 1997).

[38] While, like many Americans, congregants struggled to discuss class and effectively deal with the detrimental effects of class stratification, Bet Keshet's response is emblematic of more than Americans' general inability to discuss class. The congregants saw being inclusive as *the* way to deal with the problem of the homeless on the doorstep; they fulfilled their mission by being inclusive. In talking with them, congregants discussed homelessness as an identity that caused people pain; they did not discuss it as a social problem to be dealt with outside the walls of the synagogue. The congregation did not just turn away from the economic inequalities that result in homelessness; instead, they reframed the problem as being about inclusion and exclusion. The congregants felt that their prescription for dealing with homeless people on their doorstep, including them in services, was appropriate since it fulfilled the congregation's desire to be inclusive. As noted before, the congregation attempts to deal with the tension of individualism and the search for community endemic to American life; in dealing with homelessness, however, they reverse the equation. While in re-making Judaism as inclusive, congregants strive to integrate identity politics into local culture. With the homeless, they ascribe an excluded identity on them, but in doing so, justify the traditional American response to homeless people by not engaging in social practices that could deal with the problem of homelessness. Instead, they deal with the pain of exclusion that (they presume) the homeless feel by inviting them in, but stop short of taking further steps.

[39] Inclusiveness is a limiting practice; it creates ways of dealing with "others" that are acceptable and makes other types of solutions less likely to be considered. For Bet Keshet congregants, inclusiveness is about making religious practice, and the congregation, inclusive for formerly marginalized people. Inclusiveness is about changing Judaism to fit the needs of this community, and congregants employ new forms of ritual and liturgy to accomplish that goal. People who have identities that cause them to suffer the pain of exclusion are valued, but this valuation is limited. The local congregational culture of Bet Keshet provides members with ideas of how to deal with homelessness (and other problems) that focus on identity over other possible concerns. Dealing with the causes of homelessness and working to eliminate it require different types of actions that do not seem to be part of the congregation's toolkit of ways to deal with social justice issues (Swidler).

[40] As with the situation of homeless people, in renovating a building to serve as a new synagogue, the congregation struggled with other, class-based boundaries of inclusiveness. In constructing the new synagogue building, the project grew quickly beyond the original budget that the congregation had set. To pay for the renovations, the leadership of the

congregation sought donations from members. In many congregations, a donation to the synagogue would be publicly acknowledged through a plaque, by the naming of a room after the donor, or through some other formal, public display of the donor's identity. As with other liberal Reform synagogues (Furman), Bet Keshet struggled with recognition of donors because recognizing wealthy congregants could stigmatize less well off ones, and this would go against the principle of inclusiveness.

[41] The question of how to recognize donors, or to recognize donors at all, caused considerable "sturm und drang" according to one member with whom I spoke. Paul, a gay man in his mid-thirties who had been a member of Bet Keshet for several years, said that the congregation did not want people to think that Bet Keshet valued people who have a lot of money more than they valued people who did not have very much money. He noted that recognizing large donations in ostentatious ways would have been against Bet Keshet's values. However, there were donors who felt that they should be acknowledged for their contributions, so the congregation compromised by placing a plaque in the entryway with identically sized, engraved plates listing each donor. The plaques recognize all donors, regardless of contribution size.

[42] The desire both to recognize difference (through commitment to the synagogue as evidenced by donation) and to de-emphasize difference for reasons of inclusiveness raised conflict among congregants. In the case of recognizing donors, compromise was achieved, but in favor of distinguishing individual members over the stated goal of non-differentiation of members by class. If the congregation had decided not to place the plaques on the wall, they would have been actively affirming equality among members regardless of class – a practice that has little tradition among American Jews, who tend to be very class conscious (Sklare), but one that might have been in concert with the congregation's belief in social justice (and akin to what the congregation Furman studied did). This compromise partially stemmed from the centrality of inclusiveness in the congregational culture; if the congregation had excluded those who wanted plaques, it would have been inflicting pain upon them. But as with the homelessness issue, not only did the congregation not speak about it as a class issue, they actively thought of it in terms of inclusion and exclusion. While congregants were pained by the discussion of class, the resolution of the problem was not simply to ignore it (either by having no plaques, or by following more customary practices of having varied plaques), but rather to address it through inclusiveness. Congregants created a solution to the problem of class by being inclusive, even as they reproduced the hierarchies that can cause exclusion in the first place (for an example of a synagogue that dealt with the problem of donor plaques differently, see Furman).

[43] And while the practice of putting plaques on the wall was an attempt to mitigate the pain of exclusion, the end result was the continued valuation of individualism in the face of communal ideals of equality. As in the wider culture, Bet Keshet congregants faced the dilemma of how to integrate community norms with the desire of individuals to be known as individuals. As with the problem of dealing with the homeless, this example illustrates how the dominant American norms of individualism and communal life remain at odds; in this case, again, communal norms are transformed by identity politics to relieve the tension between the desire to acknowledge identities (and the pain that comes from excluding them) and the desire to have communal norms that dictate local congregational life.

Conclusion

[44] Bet Keshet is an example of how Americans integrate liberal ideals into a religious congregation, and the ways in which this process echoes the resolution of the tension between individualism and the desire for community in American society in general. The congregants, through inclusiveness, attempt to disrupt the ways in which American society marginalizes minority groups. At the same time, congregants use identities as markers of distinction, as ways of signaling that they have been excluded and as positive affirmations of new selves. Together congregants construct a local culture that brings together this sense of individualism through a reinterpretation of Judaism, much as other new congregations have in the past. But what separates Bet Keshet (and potentially other similar LGBT congregations) is that Bet Keshet represents the uniting of individuating and unifying elements based on marginalized identities that were both symbolically and literally excluded.

[45] The congregational culture of inclusiveness works to illuminate how individuals are unjustly persecuted or excluded by society. But although congregants see their actions as inclusive, most of them neither note the fracturing of inclusiveness along identity lines nor the limits of inclusiveness. Congregants may not see these limitations in part because inclusiveness has become so central to the congregation's existence. In fact, the congregation's focus on inclusiveness explains Bet Keshet's particular way of reconstructing Judaism in ways that simply noting that Bet Keshet is a Reform congregation does not. For example, while Reform Judaism alters the interpretation of "chosen-ness," Bet Keshet congregants eschew the concept completely. And although Reconstructionism, as a denomination, has rejected the concept of "chosenness" because of its racist overtones, Bet Keshet rejects it for a different reason. The congregation forsakes its status as the chosen people not because being chosen singles out Jews as special, but rather because being chosen would *exclude* people from being part of the Jewish community. Congregants continually engage in practices and rhetoric that privileges inclusion, particularly around identities, in their interpretation of Judaism; it is through these processes that the congregation unites individual identity with community

[46] I believe the congregation's actions must be viewed in light of Cohen and Eisen's findings that Jews in America no longer see themselves necessarily as a separate, chosen people. If, according to their research (and others, such as Bellah et al.), Jews in late twentieth century America actively choose to be Jewish, and construct that identity from both traditionally Jewish ideas and from ideas borrowed from other sources, then perhaps Bet Keshet as a congregation is the logical outcome. Bet Keshet is a place where individual choices are validated, at least those choices that are about (certain types of) identity and that can be dealt with through liturgy and ritual. But an alternative viewing might posit that Bet Keshet works to counteract this atomization within contemporary Jewish communities.

[47] Because local congregational culture can work as a vehicle to integrate identity politics into Jewish practice, congregants are better able to reconcile their competing desires to be both Jewish (a formerly exclusive category) and inclusive of all types of identities. Bet Keshet attempts to give members everything, in a sense; the congregation validates individual identities *and* the constructed Jewish identity that is configured out of the constellations of those individual identities. Thus the contradiction inherent to the congregational culture may

represent both a challenge to the coherence of the culture and a necessary part of the culture itself. The contradiction may in fact be what enables Bet Keshet to survive in a world where Jews are constantly redefining themselves in new ways and which requires new forms of validation, but validation using the traditional symbolic forms of ritual and liturgy. It is this symbolic action that enables Bet Keshet congregants to integrate identity politics with a religious local culture that grew from antagonistic roots into a welcoming congregation that provides the sense of Jewish (LGBT) community they had been seeking.

Bibliography

Ammerman, Nancy Tatom

1997 *Congregation and Community*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.

Armstrong, Elizabeth A.

2002 *Forging Gay Identities*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Atkinson, Paul, Amanda Jane Coffey, Sara Delamont, John Lofland, and Lyn H. Lofland, editors

2001 *The Handbook of Ethnography*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.

Becker, Penny Edgell

1997 "What is Right? What is Caring? Moral Logics in Local Religious Life." Pp. 121-46 in *Contemporary American Religion: An Ethnographic Reader*. Edited by Penny Edgell Becker and Nancy Eiesland. Walnut Creek: Altamira.

1998 "Making Inclusive Communities: Congregations and the 'Problem' of Race." *Social Problems*. 45, 4: 451-72.

1999 *Congregations in Conflict: Cultural Models of Local Religious Life*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Bellah, Robert N., Richard Madsen, William M. Sullivan, Ann Swidler, and Steven M. Tipton

1985 *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Berlant, Lauren

1999 "The Subject of True Feelings: Pain, Privacy, and Politics." Pp. 49-84 in *Cultural Pluralism, Identity Politics, and the Law*. Edited by Austin Sarat and Thomas R. Kearns. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

Brodkin, Karen

1998 *How Jews Became White Folks & What That Says about Race in America*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.

Central Conference of American Rabbis

1999 Website at <http://ccarnet.org>.

Cohen, Steven, and Arnold Eisen

- 2000 *The Jew Within: Self, Family, and Community in America*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Cooper, Aaron

- 1989 "No Longer Invisible: Gay and Lesbian Jews Build a Movement." *Journal of Homosexuality* 18 (Fall-Winter): 83-94.

Dillon, Michele

- 1999 *Catholic Identity: Balancing Reason, Faith and Power*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

DiMaggio, Paul J., and Walter W. Powell

- 1991 "Introduction." Pp. 1-40 in *The New Institutionalism in Organizational Analysis*. Edited by Walther W. Powell and Paul J. DiMaggio. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Durkheim, Emile

- 1995 *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* [1912]. Translated by Karen A. Fields. New York: The Free Press.

Eiesland, Nancy

- 2000 *A Particular Place: Urban Restructuring and Religious Ecology in a Southern Exurb*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.

Feher, Shoshanah

- 1997 "Managing Strain, Contradictions, and Fluidity: Messianic Judaism and the Negotiation of a Religio-Ethnic Identity." Pp. 25-50 in *Contemporary American Religion: An Ethnographic Reader*. Edited by Penny Edgell Becker and Nancy Eiesland. Walnut Creek: Altamira.

Finke, Roger, and Rodney Stark

- 1992 *The Churching of America*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.

Fishman, Sylvia Barak

- 2000 *Jewish Life and American Culture*. Albany: State University Press of New York.

Furman, Frida Kerner

- 1987 *Beyond Yiddishkeit: The Struggle for Jewish Identity in a Reform Synagogue*. Albany: State University Press of New York.

Gray, Edward, and Thumma, Scott

- 1997 "The Gospel Hour: Liminality, Identity, and Religion in a Gay Bar." Pp. 79-89 in *Contemporary American Religion: An Ethnographic Reader*. Edited by Penny Edgell Becker and Nancy Eiesland. Walnut Creek: Altamira.

Karp, Abraham

- 1998 *Jewish Continuity in America: Creative Struggle in a Free Society*. Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press.

Kniss, Fred

- 2003 "Mapping the Moral Order: Depicting the Terrain of Religious Conflict." Pp. 331-47 in *The Handbook of the Sociology of Religion*. Edited by Michelle Dillon. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Liebman, Robert

- 1994 "Finding a Place: The Vision of Havurah." Pp. 300-21 in *I Come Away Stronger: How Small Groups are Shaping American Religion*. Edited by Robert Wuthnow. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.

Liebman, Charles, and Steven Cohen

- 1999 "Jewish Liberalism Revisited." Pp. 197-200 in *Jews in America: A Contemporary Reader*. Edited by Roberta Rosenberg Farber and Chaim Waxman. Hanover: University Press of New England.

Manning, Christel

- 1999 *God Gave Us the Right: Conservative Catholic, Evangelical Protestant and Orthodox Jewish Women Grapple with Feminism*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.

Moon, Dawne

- 2004 *God, Sex and Politics: Homosexuality and Everyday Theologies*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Putnam, Robert D.

- 2000 *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Rodriguez, Eric, and Suzanne Ouellette

- 1999 "The Metropolitan Community Church of New York: A Gay and Lesbian Community." *The Community Psychologist* 32 (Fall): 24-29.
- 2000 "Gay and Lesbian Christians: Homosexual and Religious Identity Integration in the Members and Participants of a Gay-Positive Church." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 39: 333-47.

Said, Edward

- 1979 *Orientalism*. New York: Vintage Books.

Shokeid, Moshe

- 1995 *A Gay Synagogue in New York*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Sklare, Marshall

1993 *Observing America's Jews*. Hanover: Brandeis University Press.

Swidler, Ann

1986 "Culture in Action: Symbols and Strategies." *American Sociological Review* 51: 273-386.

United Jewish Communities (in cooperation with the Mandell L. Berman Institute-North America Jewish Data Bank)

2004 *The National Jewish Population Survey 2000-01: Strength, Challenge and Diversity in the American Jewish Population*. Available online at <http://www.ujc.org>.

Warner, R. Stephan

1995 "The Metropolitan Community Churches and the Gay Agenda: The Power of Pentecostalism and Essentialism." *Religion and Social Order* 5: 81-108.

Wertheimer, Jack

1993 *A People Divided: Judaism in Contemporary America*. New York: Basic Books.

World Congress of Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender Jews

n.d. "GLBT Jewish Organizations." Available online at http://www.glbtejews.org/rubrique.php3?id_rubrique=5.

Wuthnow, Robert

1988 *The Restructuring American Religion*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

1997 "The Cultural Turn: Stories, Logics, and the Quest for Identity in American Religion." Pp. 245-66 in *Contemporary American Religion: An Ethnographic Reader*. Edited by Penny Edgell Becker and Nancy Eiesland. Walnut Creek: Altamira.

Zuckerman, Phil

1999 *Strife in the Sanctuary: Religious Schism in a Jewish Community*. Walnut Creek: Altamira.