

Jewish Countercultures: Remaking American Judaism, 1967-1990

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Course description:

In the late 1960s, many young American Jews decried what they perceived as a stagnant, suburban American Judaism that was out of touch with their generation's culture and politics – identifying with a broader American thirst for community, meaning, and political engagement. Seeking to revive and re-spiritualize American Judaism, these young activists, writers, rabbis, and students created Jewish communities and organizations that reflected their new, radical worldviews. Emerging out of the New Left, second wave feminism, and the Gay Liberation Movement, among other American progressive social and cultural movements, the Jewish “counterculture” reinvigorated American Judaism.. Once defined as outsiders storming the gates of the Jewish establishment, these “New Jews” went on to redefine many of the central tenets and practices of American Jewish life. In this course, we will examine several examples of this American Jewish creativity: The Havurah Movement and Jewish Renewal; the Jewish identity politics of the 1960s and 1970s, the Free Soviet Jewry Movement, and Jewish feminism; and the founding and growth of gay and lesbian synagogues, a particularly American form of LGBTQ Jewish community building.

Session One, March 2: Paradigm Shift: Jewish Renewal, the Havurah Movement, and Judaism as a Revolutionary Force

Suggested readings (recommended to do in advance of our meeting):

- 1) Watch an 8-minute video on the early years of Havurat Shalom, a founding institution of the Havurah Movement. Use this link:
https://repository.upenn.edu/jcchp_oralhistories/30/
- 2) Browse these three links about Jewish Renewal (these are very short):
 - <https://aleph.org/what-is-jewish-renewal>
 - <https://aleph.org/four-worlds-judaism>
 - <https://aleph.org/eighteen-principles>
- 3) If you're able, listen to part of an oral history interview Dr. Drinkwater conducted in 2014 with Rabbi Marcia Prager, dean of the ordination program for ALEPH: Alliance for Jewish Renewal. Feel free to listen to the entire interview, but for the March 2 session, please listen from minute 30 to minute 1:05 (so 35 minutes total). The perfect length to accompany a meal! To move ahead to minute 30, slide the white bar just above the “play” arrow on the bottom. You can access the interview by clicking here:
<https://www.dropbox.com/s/3tnu19ev8ikuxvq/Marcia%20Prager%20July%202014%202016.m4a?dl=0>

To give you context, in the first half hour, Rabbi Prager reflects on her childhood in Brooklyn and Queens, growing up in a family anchored by the traditional Eastern-European Jewish world of her grandparents. Born in 1951, she describes the overlay between the Jewishness of her parents' generation, and that of her grandparents, which in her earliest years was still saturated with Yiddish. In this world, which moved to the rhythms of a more insular Jewish community, Jewishness was simply an organic reality. Her father, who went on to become an architect, fought as a young man in WWII in Europe and was part of the liberation of a concentration camp, losing his faith in God. After the war, he became active in secular Jewish organizations and agreed with her mother to keep a kosher kitchen, but not to be Shabbat observant. Her family joined an Orthodox synagogue her father helped build (in his role as an architect), but they didn't attend as a family. Rabbi Prager also didn't attend Hebrew school as a child. But she recalls being drawn as a teen to the Orthodox synagogue her family belonged to, even though she didn't know Hebrew or fully understood the prayer services. She would attend services there from time to time solo or with friends. In the congregation, she remembers feeling an un-nameable sense of something real, something potent. As a contemporary leader in the Jewish Renewal community, she then reflects on when she first encountered Jewish Renewal, and realizes it was long before there was any such word or movement. In her public high school, she finally managed to learn some Hebrew, and so in her senior year, she and her circle of friends decided to apply to be counselors at Jewish summer camps, where she first discovered the energy that has become a guiding focus of her life ever since.