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THE NEW ORTHODOX

A JEWISH REVIVAL ON THE UPPER WEST SIDE • BY CATHRYN JAKOBSON



**Investment Banker
David Eisner
And Wife Karen,
A Filmmaker**



A JEWISH REVIVAL ON THE UPPER WEST SIDE

The New ORTHODOX

BY CATHRYN JAKOBSON

THREE YEARS AGO, ELLEN AND MARK GOLDSTEIN (as we'll call them) were no different from a lot of other people on the West Side. He was a Wall Street lawyer. She was a writer. They had each other and a \$250,000 co-op on West End Avenue. They figured they should be satisfied.

They weren't. Somehow, the prospect of a summer house or a new car seemed hollow. "We'd grown up believing that we could have anything, do anything, be anything," says Ellen Goldstein. "We were overwhelmed by the constant pressure to buy things, to go places, to know everything that was new. It didn't make us feel good. To us, it felt empty."

Neither of the Goldsteins had grown up in a highly religious environment. Their families' identification with Judaism was purely cultural. Like many American Jews, they went to synagogue three times a year, on the High Holidays. Their relation to their religion, though, was ambivalent. Ellen's mother kept a kosher home, but when the family went out to dinner, they ate shrimp. Mark's family made sure that he had a bar mitzvah. After that, they let him play ball or go hiking on Saturdays.

From their front window on Saturday mornings, the couple saw a stream of well-dressed people, the men in yarmulkes, on the sidewalks of West End Avenue. One day, the Goldsteins followed them to Lincoln Square Synagogue; they were astonished to find that it was an Orthodox *shul*. When they'd think of Orthodoxy, they'd think of the diamond district, of 47th Street Photo. Where were the long black coats and black hats? The crowd that gathered in front of the synagogue on Saturday morning was affluent and attractive. These people seemed to be having a wonderful time. The Goldsteins signed up for a course called Basic Judaism.

During the next two years, they took the road to becoming observant Orthodox Jews. It was a slow process. "We stepped into the waters very gingerly, evaluating every move," says El-





THE EHRLICHS LIGHT THE SABBATH CANDLES ON FRIDAY EVENING.

PHOTOGRAPHED BY ALON REININGER

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IN TWO YEARS, 90 MARRIAGES HAVE COME OUT OF BUCHWALD'S BEGINNERS' GROUP, A RECORD HE'S PROUD OF.

sive," he says to a young lawyer. "When are you going to give up the law and join the rabbinate?"

Beginners are always testing. Buchwald takes on all comers, and although he's answered these questions a hundred times before, there is nothing pat about his answers. "Why can't a woman be a rabbi?" "Why can't a woman wear pants?" "Why can't you play tennis on Shabbes if you find it relaxing?" "How

sound, by the ritual," he says. "It felt very good to me." He wanted Nan to join him, but she wasn't interested. "I'd never had a good experience in a synagogue," she says. "I went in kicking and fighting."

But she went—and she liked it well enough to go back. "I still didn't think it was for me," she says. "I'd spent a lot of time before Robert and I got married living the life of a contempo-

rary single person, and I couldn't imagine how I could change." Slowly, she did. "You don't just become Orthodox," she says. "On Friday night, you say, 'Okay, I'll light some candles and say the kiddush and then I'll go out with my friends, like I always have.' But you like lighting the candles, and you keep doing it, and eventually it takes on meaning." What you get, says Nan, is "a strong sense of family values. A sense of security. A sense of purpose. You no longer feel like you're just going through the motions. Life starts to have spiritual meaning."

For the Ehrlichs, having eight people for lunch on Shabbat, several of them total strangers, is their pleasure, as well as their *mitzvah*—their way of serving God. It is something of a miracle that, with three children under the age of ten and two difficult jobs, they find the time. "Shabbat gives you a new perspective," says Nan. "First you think, This is impossible; how will I get everything done? Then you find you

don't have less time—you have more. Shabbat gives you peace and space, which I didn't have. You get rid of a lot of anxiety."

When the guests are assembled, Robert pronounces the kiddush holding a full cup of wine—at least 3.2 ounces, by Jewish law—ending with the words *borai pri hagafen*. During this prayer, the challah (braided egg bread) is kept covered. Then everyone lines up at the kitchen sink and pours water from a cup with two handles, first over the right hand, then over the left hand; before drying his or her hands, each person recites a benediction that is posted over the sink.

At the table, Robert uncovers the challah and, lifting the two loaves, recites the blessing of the bread. Slices are passed around the table, and Nan brings out platters of food: chicken glazed in a honey sauce, salad, vegetables, and an enormous crock of cholent, a meat-bean-and-potato stew. Nan prepared all the dishes before she lit the Sabbath candles on Friday night.

Between courses, guests sing *zmirot*—song poems from the Middle Ages. There is enthusiasm for "*Yom zeh m'hubod*," because of its chorus—"Toot-Toot"—which sounds, when done correctly, like the horn on a Volkswagen Bug.

Because some of his visitors cannot read Hebrew, Robert Ehrlich provides books with the songs written out phonetically. Over lunch, people talk about the Torah and about Israel, where the Ehrlichs are building a home and intend to move in a few years. Everyone pays a great deal of attention to the children, who leap, shout, reach, sit on laps, and leave the ta-

RABBI DAVID KAMINETSKY AT THE MANHATTAN DAY SCHOOL.



"Our Torah emphasis is traditional," says Kaminsky. Accordingly, in the fifth grade, boys' and girls' classes are separated.

do you reconcile the story of creation with the theory of evolution?" "How could God, who cares, allow 6 million Jews to perish?" "What's the matter with a cheeseburger?" "My goal," says Buchwald, "is to give every adult Jew an opportunity to choose. If they opt out of Judaism, I don't want it to be because they are ignorant of it."

At the end of the service, Rabbi Buchwald says the kiddush (a Sabbath prayer) over wine or grape juice and cookies. That's the start of a very sociable half-hour—an opportunity to talk with people you haven't seen all week and perhaps be introduced to some new members. (In the past two years, 90 marriages have come out of Rabbi Buchwald's beginners' service, a record he's proud of.) Then, for the beginner, it's off to lunch at the home of a family with more experience. Buchwald makes sure that no one goes home alone. Often, the hosts are Nan and Robert Ehrlich.

ON AN AVERAGE SATURDAY, EIGHT PEOPLE WILL troop up twelve flights of stairs to the Ehrlichs' apartment near the synagogue. The Ehrlichs, investment bankers in their mid-forties, became observant about eight years ago. Both were born Jewish, but had limited religious education. Robert first went to Lincoln Square to say Kaddish, the prayer for the dead, when his mother died. He went directly to the main service, where the prayers are said in Hebrew. "I was moved by the

ble without asking permission. In Orthodox Judaism, the joyful noise of children is not suppressed.

What is noticeably absent is the kind of discussion one would expect to hear at any other gathering on the Upper West Side. Nobody speaks of work; that is not an acceptable subject for the Sabbath. Nor is money: Nobody says anything about the price of a co-op or the cost of sending four kids to school. Also missing is vicious gossip. That is "*lashon hara*"—bad-mouthing—and is forbidden by the commandments. When the meal is finished, there is a Sabbath birthday cake (with no candles) for Nan.

MOST PEOPLE, LIKE ROBERT AND NAN EHRLICH, BECOME religious gradually. Others jump in and embrace Orthodoxy wholeheartedly. Those people make Rabbi Buchwald nervous. "It's a sign of trouble," he says, "when a real yuppie type—someone who has been spending his evenings in fancy restaurants—suddenly gets very involved in Orthodoxy without first having a good understanding of the learning behind the practice. A quick conversion goes out as fast as he goes in."

Buchwald worries about the strain that newcomers experience. He thinks that in a conflict between secular desire and a desire to serve God, God should win hands down. And he knows it doesn't always work that way with his *baalei teshuva*. Sometimes, Buchwald fears that there's no way his *baalei teshuva* can survive in a modern environment. If he had the chance, he'd take all his beginners and isolate them for a couple of years. He's seen the problems, the conflicts that inevitably arise. He's sent some of his *baalei teshuva* off to Israel for a year of study at a yeshiva, and others to Orthodox therapists. "Without the background," he says, "trying to be observant and live in the modern world can make you schizophrenic. It can eat you up alive."

There are exceptions. Sometimes, beginners manage to adopt the rituals and immerse themselves in learning without apparent adverse effect, although in David and Vivian Relkin's case, it may be too early to tell.

The Relkins, whose traditional wedding was shown recently on the TV program *1986*, became observant less than two years ago. David, 26, is from an affluent Reform family in Great Neck, the town he calls "the rest home for assimilated Jews." He works at his father's Manhattan law firm, Kreindler & Relkin, and is the only one of seventeen lawyers who wears a yarmulke, the only one who keeps kosher, the only one who sometimes rushes over to the afternoon service held at Republic National Bank, around the corner from his office.

Vivian, 25, was raised as a Conservative Jew in Asheville, North Carolina, where her parents, immigrants from Hungary, owned a chain of clothing stores. Her father came from a Hasidic family, but when he arrived in the United States, he gave up much of his religious practice.

After attending York University in Toronto, she came to New York to be an actress. She studied with William Hickey and Herbert Berghof and hung around with a theater crowd. Her parents were not pleased. They insisted she get a job with one of their friends in the garment district, and they installed her in a nice apartment

a block from Lincoln Square. "They thought that if I had to stare at the synagogue every time I walked out the door, I might go," she says. They were right.

Vivian had attended the beginners' service for just a few months when she spotted David Relkin. He'd grown up, he says, in a family in which "religion was made into a dumb show, where everything possible was done to overlook the substance." After his second year at the Cardozo School of Law, David took a December trip to the Soviet Union with two good friends. They planned to spend some time with the "refuseniks," people who continue to practice Orthodox Judaism despite the Soviet government's opposition.

"I thought people were born with a stamp on their heads," says David. "Reform, Conservative, Orthodox. But when I got there, I realized that some people made the choice to be religious in the face of adversity—that these people were willing to fight for the right to pray, to have a kosher chicken, even if it meant losing all their privileges." For the first time in his life, he started to feel Jewish.

He was in Russia for two and a half weeks. When he returned, he joined the beginners' service and a Bible class at Lincoln Square, where he met Vivian in October 1985. Eight months later, they were married. They are expecting their first child at the end of February.

During their engagement, they observed the code of Jewish law that prohibits premarital sex, and like many Orthodox couples, they limited their physical expression of affection to holding hands. To the Relkins, it was a sign of their commitment to the faith and to each other. "It was extremely difficult," says Vivian, "but it was worth it. It gave us an opportunity to exercise restraint."

After the wedding, the Relkins began to live an extremely observant life. Vivian is one of the few women at Lincoln Square to wear a *sheitel* (wig) when she leaves her apartment or is in the presence of anyone other than her husband. She dresses stylishly but with the utmost modesty: The short skirts

Many in the congregation are "*baalei teshuva*," who grew up with little religious training. The term means "those who have returned."



LINCOLN SQUARE SYNAGOGUE.

THE NEW ORTHODOX MAKE SOME OLDER MEMBERS UNCOMFORTABLE. "THEY'RE ZEALOTS," SAYS ONE WOMAN

and bright makeup of her acting days are no more. "I like it. It means I belong to my husband," she says, voicing a point of view that would make the more "modern" women at Lincoln Square shake their heads in dismay. "Covering my body means I'm not open to viewing. I love coming home and taking off my wig. It makes our relationship very private. It sanctifies it. I feel safe dressing modestly. I feel higher."

David prays three times a day, and three evenings a week he studies the Torah with other men at the West Side Kollel (an adult yeshiva), on West End near 91st Street. Vivian is surprised at how fast their commitment grew. She says she's happier—that she no longer wants, for experience's sake, to check out every possible situation. "I don't have to live through it to know it's not right for me," she says. "I don't have to talk to strangers on the subway anymore. It's amazing. Two years ago, you couldn't have paid me to go out with an Orthodox guy."

THE RELKINS—AND OTHER PEOPLE WHO HAVE BECOME highly observant—occupy an awkward place at Lincoln Square Synagogue. Modern Orthodox don't feel comfortable with them. "They're zealots. They're not in the spirit of modern Orthodoxy," says one woman.

People who become more religious than Lincoln Square's general population often decide to go on to a synagogue where there are fewer beginners. They start to feel that Lincoln Square, with all its young, single, well-to-do people, is a very abnormal place. "It's too rushed, too modern, and much too crowded," says one young woman. "And because it's on the West Side, it's too profession-oriented. Status is too important." She and her husband are considering a move to Brooklyn so they can attend a more traditional *shul*.

Most *baalei teshuva* who leave Lincoln Square, however, choose another of the neighborhood synagogues. Brad Scher,

26, a commercial-mortgage broker who's working on an M.B.A., stayed at Lincoln Square for three years before moving to West Side Institutional last spring. "I got tired of Lincoln Square," he says. "I wasn't thrilled by what I considered the meat market. There was so much pressure to meet people, and that's not why I go to *shul*." "It got so we felt lost at the Lincoln Square," says Irene Gottesman, who with her husband and young son recently joined West Side Institutional. "It was anonymous. It was tough for the rabbis to know you, and lots of times, it was too crowded to find seats." Gottesman is getting to know some older members of the WSI congregation. "People aren't just trying to make impressions."

Rabbis at the other synagogues are delighted with the migration. Last February, West Side Institutional had 50 people on a good Sabbath; now there are 200. At the Jewish Center, Rabbi Jacob Schacter welcomed seven new families this summer. Rabbi Avrohom Marmorstein at Ohab Zedek sees a lot of young "*shul* shoppers" in his synagogue on Shabbat. Perhaps 100 people who are not members wander in and out. Shlomo Carlebach's *shul*, Kehilath Jacob, has never been silent. In the sixties, Carlebach's "learnings" and guitar playing drew a young, hip crowd. Though today he and his twin brother, Elchaim, maintain that relaxed atmosphere—including a vegetarian kiddush following services—young people in suits and ties are showing up as well.

AS ORTHODOX JEWS SETTLE UP AND DOWN THE streets of the West Side, local Orthodox merchants and restaurateurs have started to prosper. Fischer Brothers & Leslie, the kosher butcher on West 72nd Street, sells almost \$2 million worth of meat a year. Miller's Cheese—all kosher—at 78th and Broadway, does a huge business, as does Meal Mart, a kosher delicatessen at 77th and Broadway. "There's no deprivation to

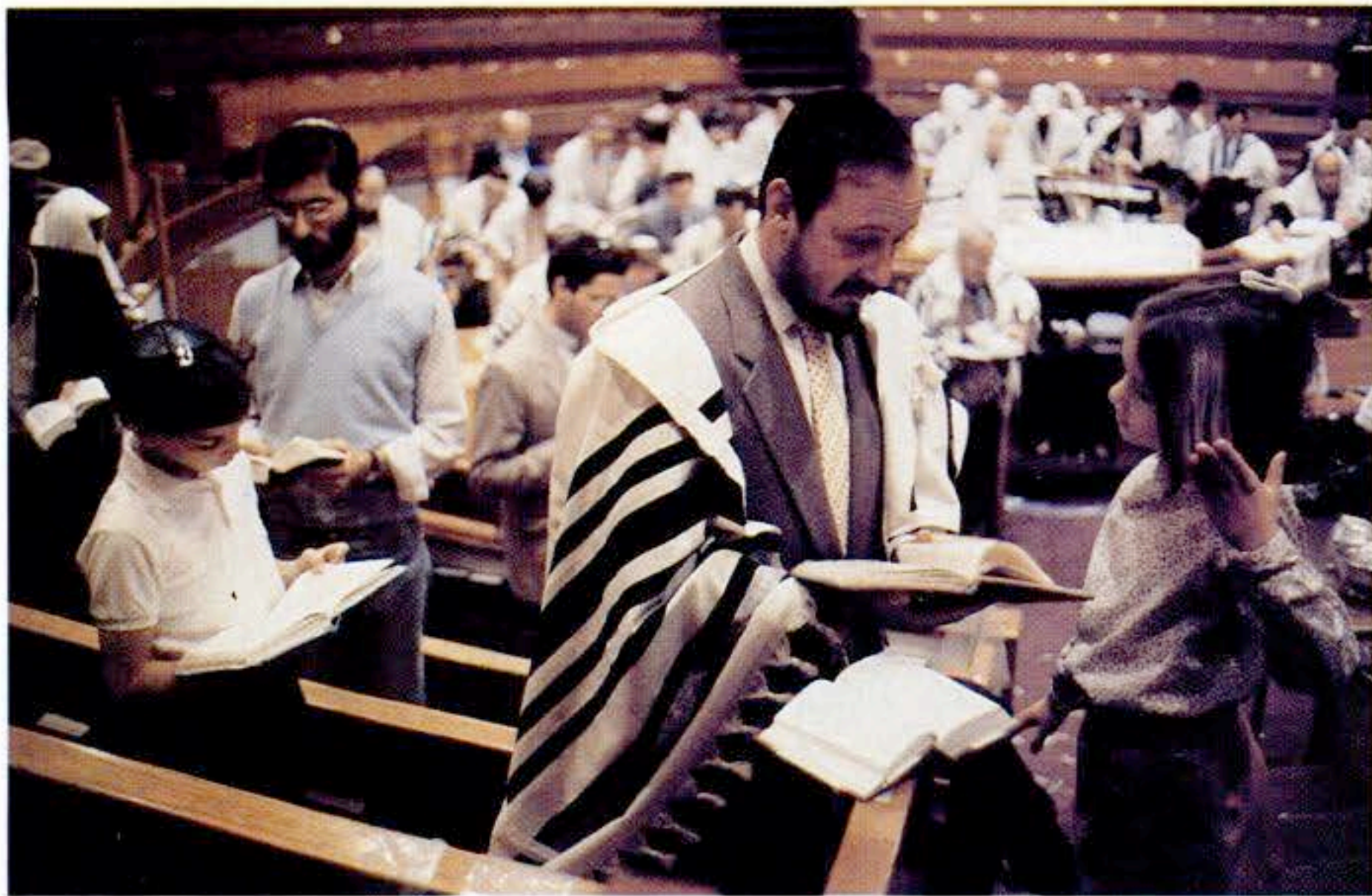
being kosher now," says Hillel Gross, who grew up Orthodox on the West Side. "Now you can get hot dogs at Meal Mart and take them to the baseball game. You don't have to sit there and salivate." Neighborhood liquor stores stock kosher wines that do not resemble the sweet, syrupy stuff of the Passover table. The Famous dairy restaurant, on 72nd Street, is doing better than ever.

There is a growing recognition in the neighborhood that these modern Orthodox have money and want to spend it. David Eisner, 28, who does health-care finance at Bear, Stearns, and his wife, Karen, who makes industrial films, live in a spacious, elegant apartment a block from their synagogue. Their walls are hung with modern art. Their shelves and tables hold a collection of ceramics from the thirties and forties.

They take advantage of living on the West Side—they eat out often, and not just in kosher restaurants. They eat fish—but not shellfish—anywhere they like. "The West Side is just right for us," says David. "It allows us to be uncompromising in our religious life without seriously compromising our secular life."

In the last two years, three upscale kosher restaurants have opened, within six blocks

"I've got a terrific product," says Buchwald, a man of great zeal. "The Torah sells itself. I just market it and package it in a very palatable way."



RABBI EPHRAIM BUCHWALD.

of one another—Benjamin of Tudela, on Amsterdam near 74th Street; Levana, on 69th Street east of Broadway; and La Kasbah, on 71st Street east of Columbus. Six nights a week (they are closed on Friday), these places are hopping.

At La Kasbah, the diners are expensively but conservatively dressed. There are numbers of attractive courting couples, but there is no flirtatious behavior. They seem to be trying very intensely to get to know each other. There isn't much time. People don't date forever. It's not a sport that the Orthodox are willing to play for years. There's tremendous emphasis on marriage and family. For Orthodox Jews, being fruitful is serious business. Having four children under the age of ten in a West End apartment isn't unusual. It is regarded merely as doing your duty—making sure that Orthodoxy will continue to flourish.

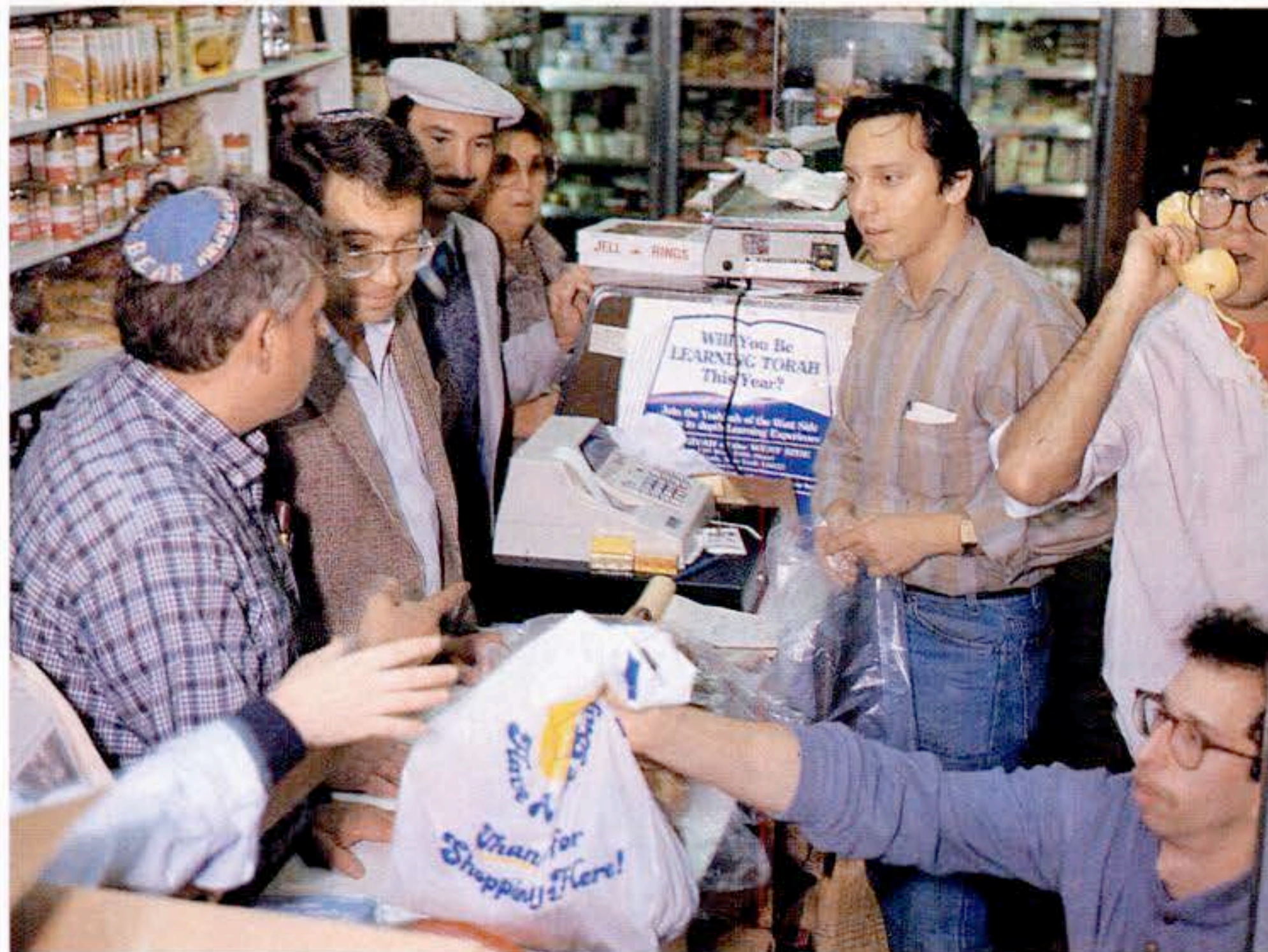
Even among the newly observant, there's pressure to marry as soon as possible. "Many *baalei teshuva* have sown their wild oats," says Rabbi Buchwald. "They've done their drugs. Now they've come to an oasis of stability. They want to lock it in. And locking it in is marriage." Marriage is often what most disturbs the parents of *baalei teshuva*. They can cope with their children's aberrant behavior as long as they believe it's a passing fancy. When they see them making plans for a traditional wedding and a life that will preclude Saturday visits to aging parents in New Jersey, they flip. "I do what I can with them," says Buchwald, who, with his wife, Aidel, invites dozens of sets of nervous parents to Shabbat lunch. "I promise them that if the guests aren't having fun at the wedding because men are dancing with men and women with women, they should tell me, and I'll tell the band to strike up a samba."

MOST OF THE CHILDREN OF THESE ORTHODOX marriages start their educations in yeshiva, or Hebrew day school. Jewish education starts early. There's an Orthodox play group for two- and three-year-olds in a West End apartment in the Nineties. For this, children are signed up at birth. When they reach three, there are several options. On the West Side, children can attend the Manhattan Day School, on 75th Street; Chofetz Chaim—for boys only—on 88th Street; or the more liberal Abraham Joshua Heschel School, on 89th Street. All three schools go through the eighth grade.

Whether *baalei teshuva*, most of whom went to public school or good secular private schools and colleges, will keep their children in yeshivas is yet to be seen. These days, Orthodox parents seem to want their children steeped in the Torah from the instant they can comprehend it. They roll their eyes at the popular secular concept of letting a child make his own choice about religion. "It's nonsense to say, 'I'm going to let my child make his own decision when he's seven,'" says one mother. "Tell me, how is a seven-year-old going to choose? By whether they give out good cookies?"

Jewish learning is a critical part of what goes on at Manhattan Day School. "Our Torah emphasis is traditional," says Rabbi David Kaminetsky. "It's about as right-wing as you can

As Orthodox Jews settle up and down the streets of the Upper West Side, local Orthodox merchants and restaurateurs have started to prosper.



AT MILLER'S CHEESE.

get." Accordingly, in fifth grade, boys' and girls' classes are separated, although their academic program is the same. "We find," says Kaminetsky, "that a high level of sanctity is present when the sexes are separated."

At Manhattan Day School, even the fun is religious. On the third floor, Ari and Shlomo are playing computer games during recess. The computer asks a question. Then a baseball diamond, bat, and ball appear on the screen, and the boys get a chance to hit a home run by answering the question. That's the hard part. The question is not "How many homers did Babe Ruth hit?" but "Who said, 'Am I my brother's keeper?'"

On a lower floor, in kindergarten, boys are playing with chess pieces. The girls are busy rolling and braiding challah, which will be sent down to the school kitchen to be baked. Boys also braid challah.

After the eighth grade, most of these children will continue with religious education. The boys will go off to the Marsha Stern high school for boys, on the campus of Yeshiva University (known as YU) in Washington Heights. Most girls will attend the Tonya Soloveitchik high school, known as Central, on 38th Street, also part of YU. Many students will go off to Ramaz, on the East Side, where the tenor of the education, while still Orthodox, is somewhat more liberal.

Elizabeth Wurtzel, now a sophomore at Harvard, started at Manhattan Day School in kindergarten. She stayed there through eighth grade and then went to Ramaz. She has nothing positive to say about yeshiva education. "Children aren't encouraged to develop their potential," she says. "There's nobody who says to them, 'Hey, you should be great, you should contribute to this world.'" She finds people her age who went through the yeshiva system startlingly unintellectual.

Irving Howe, the social historian and critic, though, doesn't believe that young modern Orthodox Jews suffer from restricted intellectual exploration—or that their children will. "As far as I can tell," he says, "a good number of these people are liberal-

WOMEN ARE ENCOURAGED TO PRAY ALONE IN THE HOME, BUT MANY MISS THE CAMARADERIE OF A PRAYER GROUP.

mind. They have the luxury of time to think. They read Kafka and Kundera. Then they perform a synthesis between what they know of their religion and what they see in the world." Most modern Orthodox parents—at least at Lincoln Square—seem not in the least interested in circumscribing their children's intellectual development. "The people I know," says Ellen Goldstein, "want their kids to go to Harvard, Princeton, and Yale. I can't say that they particularly want them to be rabbis."

THERE ARE PROBLEMS WITH MODERN ORTHODOXY, some of them endemic to the West Side, others to the foundations of Judaism. They are most keenly felt at Lincoln Square. Members of the congregation are young, and as their many children crowd their West Side apartments, they tend to move to Monsey or Teaneck or Kew Gardens Hills. There will always be more single young people to replace them, but singles are transient, and a synagogue needs an older, established contingent to make it solid and to supply it with funds.

There is other distress, felt acutely in the past few months. The discord at Lincoln Square stems from what has been labeled "the women's issue."

At best, Orthodoxy and feminism are incompatible. In the morning prayer, men thank God "who has not made me a non-Jew, who has not made me an ignorant person, and who has not made me a woman." The last of the three is explained and re-explained as thanking God for permitting the man the obligation to observe all religious rites, while women are exempt from religious duties that must be observed at fixed times, when they might be occupied with children or meals. Observant women of a feminist bent find this blessing more of an irritation. They do not wish to be excused from any of their religious duties.

Besides sitting apart from men in the synagogue (and farther away from the rabbi), women must cover their bodies and their heads. A woman must not have sexual relations with her husband while she is menstruating and for seven days afterward. Before they can begin having sex again, she must go to the *mikvah*, where she immerses herself in a ritual bath. The laws of family purity don't disturb modern Orthodox women nearly as much as one might expect. In fact, two weeks of abstinence is seen as a great boon to sex during the rest of the month. "*Mikvah* really does a lot for your sex life," says one woman. "Even rabbis say it keeps you going, keeps you fresh. Neither of you is as likely to say that you're exhausted when you're just bored."

Although women are free to work, by custom it is their task to take care of home and children. By the same law, they are not required to attend synagogue, nor are they expected to read the

Talmud, which should be the main avocation of their husbands.

What bothers women most are restrictions on how and where they can pray. Only men can form a *minyan*, or prayer group (which requires a quorum of at least ten who are over thirteen), and only with a *minyan* can certain prayers be said. Women are encouraged to pray alone in the home, but many miss the camaraderie of a prayer group. Diane Sandoval is one of the leaders of the Women's Prayer Group, which meets every month or so on Shabbat with the backing of Lincoln Square's senior rabbi, Saul Berman. It never meets on the premises of

the synagogue, however. That would further inflame the sentiments of the people who disapprove. Sandoval is cautious when she describes the effort. She is quick to say that none of the prayers they recite requires a *minyan*. "We are all committed to Halakah," she says. "Our desire is to join together for learning, to get and give sustenance."

It doesn't sound like a big deal, but it has upset some otherwise calm people. Hillel Gross, a longtime member of Lincoln Square, is violently opposed to women gathering separately for learning and prayer: "It's an explosive issue," he says, "with a terrible potential for divisiveness. Women need to occupy themselves with the real, essential nitty-gritty of Judaism," he says. "Women are entrusted with the very pillars of what Judaism is.

The women who are demanding to be called up to read the Torah in *shul* should first learn the basics. They're going for the glamour instead."

For many adults, becoming Orthodox means giving up a way of life that they considered to be their birthright.



AFTER SYNAGOGUE ON SATURDAY.

BECOMING AN OBSERVANT JEW AS AN ADULT INVARIABLY involves making sacrifices. It means giving up a way of life that most young, successful people consider their birthright. Not everyone who tries can do it. For some, the cost is too high. For others, the rewards are adequate compensation. They do not swallow the doctrine whole. They think and study. And sometimes they are consumed with frustration, angered by the rigidity of their ancient religion. They do not give up. Somehow, they find a way to stay with their faith.

"There's so much that Orthodoxy gives me," says Ellen Goldstein. "The things that bother me about it don't seem that important. I think it would be crazy to dump the whole thing because I don't want to cover my head all the time and I want to wear blue jeans. If I find it intolerable, I don't do it. Nobody's going to excommunicate me for it; that's not what Judaism is about. You can't expect things to change too fast. You're talking about a 4,000-year tradition that's been pretty good to women. Judaism was the first religion to prohibit a man from summarily dismissing his wife when he grew tired of her." ■