

## Information Literacy for Newly Orthodox Jews

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<http://www.pgabor.com>

The *Baal Teshuvah* is a segment of the Jewish population that has a number of unique information needs. *Baal Teshuvah* literally means "master of return" in Hebrew. A formal, religious definition of the term is "a person who turns to G-d in repentance, after willful or unknowing transgression of the Torah's commandments; a Jew of secular or not fully observant background who has decided to undertake full Torah observance" (The Baal Teshuvah 1) From a psychological or sociological perspective this refers to people who were brought up in a secular or marginally religious Jewish home and later in their life decided to follow a fully observant, orthodox Jewish lifestyle. Because they have not been immersed in the intricate customs from childhood they have limited knowledge and experience with. Jewish religious law, *halachah* in Hebrew, governs all major and minor aspects of life. This, with all of its complexity, is what the newly orthodox needs to gradually learn. The classic definition of information literacy applies to them: they need to be able to "recognize when information is needed, and have the ability to locate, evaluate, and use effectively the needed information." (Eisenberg et al 4) In this paper I will focus on the information literacy skills needed to be able to comply with *kashrut*, the religious dietary restrictions. First, however I need to provide the context on how the information for the *halachic* lifestyle is obtained and used in orthodox Judaism. I believe it is also beneficial to have a view of the history and demography of the *Baal Teshuvah* movement.

According to the Second National Jewish Population survey in 1990 about one percent of the US Jewish population was *Baal Teshuvah*. (A note on the term: for the sake of simplicity and in consideration for the reader unfamiliar with Hebrew, I will keep using this single masculine form of the idiom, while acknowledging that the feminine and plural forms are also in use.) More specifically 35 of the 3014 adult respondents identify him or herself as orthodox, while were not raised as such. (Lazerwitz 501) This number seems unimpressive from a demographical point of view. However, "their symbolic impact upon Jewry was impressive for they seemed to be proof of the timeless validity of traditional Judaism." (Heilman 145) Furthermore, I believe the movement has grown and gained visibility (at least within Judaism) since the survey was taken 17 years ago. I base this observation on my personal experience and familiarity of denominational Judaism, albeit I have not found any scientific survey that could prove it.

In order to understand the flow of information in observant Jewish life, such as the *Baal Teshuvah* takes upon her or himself, one need to be familiar with the role of Torah, rabbi, community, and authoritative texts. These sources of information regulate one's life in an interlaced fashion. Torah refers to the five books of Moses, the first section of the Hebrew Bible that is known as Old Testament from a Christian point of view. Torah has the ultimate authority, because it is believed the direct word of G-d. The other three sources are built around it, are just interpreting and expounding upon what they find in Torah. The rabbi also plays an important role in the neophytes' life. He (and in orthodox environment it is never a she) is the one they can turn to when they are in need of advice.

While authoritative texts can be consulted any time, but it is the local rabbi, the master under whose supervision the *Baal Teshuvah* develops his understanding of *halacha*, who would advise what is appropriate behavior and what is not. (For the students, who are still attending

religious educational institutions, *yeshivot*, the heads of the schools, the *roshei yeshivah* play a similar role.) The rabbi's word always prescribes the proper actions for the congregants, while the level of reverence and respect towards the rabbi varies from community to community.

The community also sets the social norms and expectations for the newly orthodox. Through formal and informal channels *Baal Teshuvah* can obtain information from community members. Being fully immersed in an environment, where everybody belongs to the same community and adheres to the same set of rules helps the newcomers to learn those very rules. Because not everybody has the same level of expertise-- and individual interpretations of those rules vary--members of the community are not consulted at the same frequency and their opinions do not weigh the same. Nevertheless the feedback community members provide-- whether the information was integrated and used by the newly orthodox in a socially sanctioned manner--is useful for evaluating one's level of understanding and knowledge.

A vast source of religious authority is in the form of traditional texts, both in written and oral format. These were accumulated through several thousand years. I do not need to provide detailed descriptions of all of its segments (such as the *Mishnah*, *Talmud*, or *Responsa*), because a 16<sup>th</sup> century book, the *Shulchan Aruch* codified and simplified the religious law and became the generally accepted authoritative compilation. Every *Baal Teshuvah* is expected to follow the laws as they are set down in them, although different denominations within orthodox Judaism might interpret them differently.

The *halacha* derived from these four sources defines behavior, practice and intentional thought in daily life. It covers spiritual and corporeal aspects of life, including liturgy and prayer, holidays, social norms, sexuality, and lifecycle events (for example births, weddings, divorces, and deaths). It was extended to provide answers for questions of modernity. For example using

the internet from one's home is often discouraged on *halachic* grounds, because it can too easily distract one from obligations to G-d and family. Using it from a public space for work and studying purposes, under careful monitoring, however, is allowed in some orthodox communities. The public nature of this kind of usage would enforce appropriate use. Nevertheless when teaching information literacy skills to *Baal Teshuvah* the educator needs to know exactly what kind of customs her/or his students follow in this regard. It does not make much sense to teach how to locate and evaluate relevant resources online if the students would not have socially approved access to the internet itself.

A basic human activity is procuring, preparing and eating food. The set of prescription defining what constitutes kosher food and ingredients and what are the appropriate ways of preparing and consuming food is called *kashrut*. The aforementioned sources all provide input into the laws of *kashrut*. It can be challenging for a newcomer to learn all the complex rules and then apply them every time they are in touch with sustenance.

I recognize it as a vital information need to be able to find reliable information on *kashrut* that is acceptable in the *Baal Teshuvah's* specific congregation. In order to do so they need to have good command of multiple kinds of literacies. Language literacy, more particularly Hebrew and Aramaic (and possible Yiddish) is needed for reading the authoritative texts. Media literacy also helps, because the format of these texts--both in their traditional paper and in their digital format--can be dauntingly complex. Visual literacy is needed for recognizing the marks, *hechshers*, that identify packaged foods as *kosher*. Because a wide variety of *heschers* exist, depending on which rabbi or organization provided rabbinic supervision at the preparation of the food, one has to be able to find and identify the signs on the package and differentiation between them.

The American Association of School Librarians and the Association for Educational Communications and Technology developed the Information Literacy Standards for Student Learning. It has three categories and each contains three standards. (Eisenberg et al 21) The first set relates to information literacy and talks about the ability to access information efficiently and effectively, to evaluate it critically and to use it accurately and creatively. These are the exact skills needed when making decisions what food items to purchase. The standards also emphasize the importance of independent learning and social responsibility. These also exist for the *Baal Teshuvah*, albeit in a different format. The former is replaced with communal or paired of learning, while the appreciation of learning and striving for excellence is embedded in Jewish educational system. Under the social responsibility heading the academic standard talks about contributing to the learning community, practicing ethical behavior and participating effectively in groups. These are essential values of the Jewish community too. The newly orthodox, if they were not exposed to it earlier, have to acculturate themselves to these standards.

Within the context presented one sees the significance of the having adequate responses to the information need of the *Baal Teshuvah* regarding kosher food. I believe by enhancing their information literacy skills in general they could gain the ability to evaluate whether a product is kosher or not according to their religious beliefs and the consulted sources. More specifically they will need to be able to seek out, evaluate and integrate related information from multiple sources (Torah, the authoritative texts, rabbis, websites and the community) and then act upon them when shopping and preparing food. This is an essential skill for them for which more help is surely appreciated.

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## LIS560 - Kashrut survey

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<https://catalysttools.washington.edu/survey/gaborpor/32269>

This survey is intended to assess the information needs of Jews who wish to become more observant in terms of Jewish religious law and custom. If you are one of them, please fill out this questionnaire. The results of this survey will be used in designing a course aimed at exactly your needs. The answers and information you submit will not be shared with any other party and will be kept confidential.

1. Describe your religious background, upbringing:

- Reform
- Conservative
- Orthodox
- Secular
- Other, please describe:

2. Describe your current level of observance:

- Fully observant of halachah (Jewish law)
- Attend Sabbath services
- Celebrate Jewish holidays
- Do not observe Jewish law and custom
- Other, please describe:

3. Describe your level of compliance of kashrut (Jewish dietary laws.) Check all applicable options.

- Maintain a kosher household
- Avoid forbidden food (e.g. pork, shellfish...)
- Do not mix milk and meat.
- Eat kosher at home, but not when eating out
- Do not eat kosher
- Other, please describe:

4. What kind of kashrut you observe, if any:

- Eat only OU food (kosher according to the Orthodox Union)
- Eat food marked with any hechsher (stamp/sign of rabbinical approval)
- Eat "kosher style" (cursory observance of kashrut)
- Other, please describe:

5-8. Describe your knowledge of Hebrew for each of these areas on a scale of 1 to 5, one having no experience, and five being fluent:

- Read 1-5
- Write 1-5

- Speak 1-5

9. Preferred way of learning:

- Online
- From books and printed materials
- From audio and video sources
- In classrooms
- Immersed in the environment
- Other, please describe:

10. Describe the reasons you want to become more observant. Check all applicable options.

- Have a meaningful life
- It is a commandment
- Intellectual reasons
- Have a warm social circle
- Belief in G-d
- Social/peer pressure
- (Potential) spouse is observant
- Other, please describe:

11. Is there anything else you would like to share?