

Why Orthodox Judaism Is Appealing to So Many Millennials

Young Americans might be leaving religion in large numbers, but for some, rules, ritual, and tradition are attractive ways to find meaning in daily life.

[Emma Green](#) Mar 31, 2016

HOUSTON—On a typical Friday night in Houston, many young people are out drinking at bars or curled up watching Netflix, grateful to be done with the obligations of the workweek. But in a few Houston homes, Jews in their 20s and 30s have opted to fill these evenings with a different kind of obligation: strictly observing Shabbat, or the Jewish Sabbath. This means no texting, no music, no use of electronics, no driving, no meeting last-minute deadlines, no carrying objects outside of a few hundred square yards. It is a choice to embrace ritual over leisure, a sacrifice of freedom in behavior, diet, and dress for an ancient set of rules.

On its face, this seems like a generation-defying choice. Young Americans are moving [away from traditional religious observance](#) in large numbers, and Jews are no exception. Roughly a third of Jews born after 1980 think of their Judaism as a matter of identity or ancestry, rather than as a religion, [according to Pew](#).

But even the young Jews who gravitate toward Orthodoxy, rather than away from it, are still making individual choices about their beliefs and practices, picking among rituals and crafting lifestyles that fit their environments. And

rules and rituals seem to have appeal. A greater proportion of Jews in their 20s and early 30s identify as Orthodox than do Jews over the age of 50; the opposite is true of every other Jewish movement. Many of these young people were likely raised Orthodox and have chosen to keep the traditions of their upbringing. But a small portion are *baalei teshuva*, a Jewish concept drawn from the Hebrew word for “return”: it denotes those who have become Orthodox as a way of “returning” to God. Like the rest of their generation, they are largely nonconformists—just traditionally minded, rule-bound nonconformists.

It takes particular chutzpah to choose Orthodoxy in the context of what one might call the “deep diaspora”—places like Houston, Texas, which has a long-standing and vibrant Jewish community but also sits squarely in the Bible Belt. In large, coastal cities like New York or Los Angeles, Jewish life is ambient and available; a slide toward ritual may well help young people fit in with a cultural community. But in a place filled with mega-churches and immigrants from all over the globe, Orthodox Judaism isn’t something young people slide into. It is an active choice.

The sprawling city of Houston has a large Jewish population sorted by highways and suburbs: Since it can take so long to drive from one side of the city to the other, geography often dictates what kind of Jewish life is accessible. Many Orthodox Jews live in one of two pockets in the Meyerland neighborhood. The more strictly observant synagogues are located to the southwest, where members often adhere to the codes of behavior and dress—wigs for women, black hats and visible shirt fringes for men—that one might find in a place like Borough Park in New York. A modern Orthodox synagogue lies on the other side of the interstate to the northeast. If you met its young congregants on the street, they might seem like any other Houstonians—they wear American-style clothes, lots of women leave their hair uncovered, and many have jobs in medicine or oil and gas. But the

choices they've made about how to live—like keeping kosher homes, largely observing the rules of the Sabbath, and moving into homes within walking distance of a synagogue—define the patterns of their days and weeks and years. Although the members of this community would likely consider themselves observant, they're also negotiating how that observance best fits into a distinctly American, secular world.

Young people don't exactly dominate the modern Orthodox community in Houston, but a number of people under 35 attend services and live in the same handful of apartment buildings close to the synagogue, or shul. These Jews exist in a diaspora that's not just geographical, but cultural: Their religious commitments put them fundamentally at odds with the values and habits of their generational peers. This difference is somewhat embedded within the term *baal teshuva* itself, which suggests that traditional observance is the only way of being with God. But these young, American *baalei teshuva* are offering their own spin on the concept. In picking and choosing the aspects of Orthodoxy that appeal to them, they are trying to reclaim not just traditional Judaism, but the kinds of communal rhythms and obligations that are so often missing from contemporary American culture.

The Jewish Community Center in Houston (Michael Starghill Jr.)

Within a few months of moving to Texas from Washington, D.C., last summer, Josh Furman and Alisha Klapholz knew they wanted to start a new minyan, or prayer group. A lot of Jewish life in Houston is mediated through institutions, particularly when it comes to programs for young people: The Jewish Community Center runs Mishpacha & Me, a program for families with small children; Houston Hillel, which serves multiple college campuses and hosts city-wide events, runs a program called "Jewston," which coordinates social outings for 20-somethings. There aren't a lot of grassroots, independent groups, especially not for prayer, said Elise Passy, who until

recently was the coordinator of an organization called Big Tent Judaism. This is part of “the conservative, with a small ‘c,’ nature of Houston,” she said; people tend to gravitate toward the institutions they’re used to.

Minyan Kochav defies that tendency. The group meets in various people’s houses on Friday nights for Kabbalat Shabbat, the songs and prayers that formally welcome in the Sabbath. It’s a lay-led, egalitarian group, meaning there’s no rabbi, women and men sit together, and women are allowed to lead the prayers. Nevertheless, the environment is designed for people who keep a strict Shabbat observance: No instruments are played, and cellphones stay hidden and turned off. On a Friday night in March, the Furman-Klapholz family hosted about a dozen adults and a few joyful children in their tiny apartment. Women lit candles, cutting arcs in the air with their hands as they moved to cover their eyes. Fresh-baked challah laid waiting on the counter for dinner, next to rows of casserole dishes filled with kosher food. Men and women belted the Hebrew of the psalms, with melodies alternately mournful and full of rhythmic, sing-song patterns. No one used English, and everyone followed along from a different book; Klapholz called it “varsity-level *davening*,” a Yiddish word for praying.

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Lay-led, independent minyans are increasingly common in big cities like New York; Furman and Klapholz said they intentionally modeled their new group on communities they had been part of when they lived in D.C. This isn’t to say they’ve given up on institutional Jewish life in Houston. Most Saturdays, they attend services at two different synagogues near their apartment—when they first started dating, it was modern Orthodox for her, Conservative for him, but now they often go together. “We didn’t create Minyan Kochav because we thought the Jewish community is moribund,” said Furman, who is 34. They

were seeking to create a certain kind of spiritual prayer experience: something smaller, more communal, and more personal than a synagogue, with a focus on singing. “The fact that this has come together so quickly speaks to the health of the Jewish community here,” said Klapholz, who is 35.

There are a lot of synagogues in Houston. Unsurprisingly, some of them are facing the same problems that are troubling Jewish communities across the country: aging congregations, costly infrastructure, and an upcoming generation that’s making far less money than their parents did. But while independent minyans don’t carry the costs of a staff or a building, they aren’t a true replacement for synagogue affiliation. “The older model is that the couple has kids and then they need the synagogue to send the kids to get a Jewish education, to get Bar or Bat Mitzvah, or whatever,” Furman said. “We have no designs to turn Minyan Kochav into that kind of institution.”

A number of the young Jews I met in Houston regularly attend a modern Orthodox shul, United Orthodox Synagogues. One 26-year-old woman who grew up going to a Conservative congregation in Austin and not keeping kosher at home told me that when she moved to Houston after college, she decided to take on a more traditional practice and kept doing so once she got married. The feel of the communities is different, she said: At Orthodox and modern Orthodox synagogues, people don’t dress up as much, and there’s more talking and mild chaos, like babies running around. After all, when every day is shaped by Jewish ritual observance, Saturday morning services don’t carry the burden of being people’s sole weekly experience of Jewish life. Daily rituals and greater involvement in Jewish life also mean that the difficulties facing some Jewish institutions don’t necessarily affect Orthodox communities in the same way.

Customers shop at Jumbo Judaica of Texas in Houston (Michael Starghill Jr.)

Whether someone grew up Orthodox or is new to it, choosing to maintain a strict Jewish ritual observance represents some degree of inconvenience—from leaving work early on Fridays to get home in time for Shabbat or not being able to eat in the homes of friends who don't keep kosher. While strictly observant Jews often follow Jewish law uniformly, other Jews decide which laws and traditions they're going to embrace, concerning everything from diet to sex to clothing. "My parents said they would give me a traditional education and share the traditions they do," said Sophie Lee Landau, a 22-year-old chemical engineer who grew up in Manhattan and moved to Houston to work in the oil-and-gas industry. But, they said, "Once you're out of the house, you're on your own, and free to pick and choose what you like."

Landau grew up in a household that is both *shomer kashrut* and *shomer Shabbat*: Her family maintains the dietary rules outlined in the Torah, and they are fully observant on Shabbat. Here's a sampling of what that means during most days of the year: Her family does not eat pork or shellfish, nor consumes food that does not carry a certification from a rabbinical organization. They use two separate sets of dishes for meat and dairy, wash those in different parts of the sink, and do not mix the two kinds of foods during meals. From sundown on Friday to sundown on Saturday, they do not drive, write, or use electronics of any kind, including cell phones and lights. They walk wherever they need to go, and they do not carry things unless they are within a small area marked by a physical boundary line called an *eruv*. Perhaps most importantly, they do not work on Shabbat. These conventions represent just a few ways in which Jewish time is unlike secular American time: The week is oriented toward a day of rest, rather than two days of leisure.

For those who don't grow up this way, the barrier to entry is fairly high. It requires a significant amount of education to master the logistics of keeping kosher or fully observing Shabbat, let alone to understand the meaning

behind all the rules. A number of people I talked to spoke of going through transformative learning experiences that led them to take on strict ritual observance: spending time at a yeshiva, or Jewish study center, in Israel; participating in one of the many youth programs sponsored by outreach organizations, such as [Chabad](#) or [Aish](#); meeting a charismatic rabbi who was willing to answer basic questions and regularly meet with them one on one.

The rules themselves seem to be a part of the appeal. Landau said she likes how *kashrut* guides her in the grocery store, for example, and provides a meal-to-meal template for how to move through the day. Jewish law creates limitations, but “I choose the obligation,” said Klapholz, who said she became a *baalat teshuva* while living abroad in China. “I find meaning within the practice of Shabbat and not touching my phone. It’s 25 hours, and 25 hours where the world just ceases to exist; it’s prayer, and family, and friends.”

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Rules can also create their own sense of identity: They’re a steady flow of ritual speed bumps that remind observant Jews of who they are. Megan Kamaras, a soon-to-be-30-year-old who mostly grew up in San Diego and runs an education start-up in Houston, decided to start keeping Shabbat while she was in high school after attending a retreat. She and her husband now keep a kosher home in Houston. She said she likes the nonjudgmental attitudes of the people who attend United Orthodox Synagogues. But she also misses the Pico-Robertson neighborhood of L.A. where she lived after college; there, she said, she was “held to a higher standard” of observance in her Judaism. When she was living there, she knew a lot of people in their 20s who were drawn to incorporate more spirituality and religious observance into their practice. “Nowadays, people really crave that feeling of authenticity that you find in Shabbat,” she said.

Particularly within the modern Orthodox movement, there’s some flexibility in how people incorporate Jewish laws and customs into their lives. Kamaras,

for example, said she has a goal to attend shul at least once a week this year, but so far, she hasn't quite made it. Steve Simon, a 29-year-old Houston native and lawyer, said he used to wear tefillin—the small, black, leather boxes that contain verses from Torah—during weekly morning prayer. “But, as with a lot of *baal teshuv*as, I got to a point where either it didn't have meaning for me, or I didn't have time,” he said. “The time that I really enjoy doing it is either when I'm going through a really hard time or when I'm traveling.” Even though women are exempt from the commandment to wear tefillin and customarily don't, Klapholz said she has used them before and would be interested in getting to a point in her practice where she's putting on tefillin in the morning and praying three times a day. “You play around with things, and you find what feels most you and most comfortable,” she said.

A lot of the laws and customs observed by the Orthodox are different for men and women, which can be its own source of fascination for Jews who are used to environments in which men and women have nearly identical ritual lives. Many Orthodox prayer spaces are divided by gender, with men and women sitting on either side of a barrier called a *mechitza*. Women are usually not allowed to read from the Torah, at least not when men are present; they usually won't wear a tallit, or prayer shawl; and many married Orthodox women cover some or all of their hair. Women also have special obligations, including lighting the Shabbat candles and going to a mikvah, or ritual bath, after their menstrual cycles, a time during which many couples also abstain from sex.

“I would never describe myself as egalitarian,” she said.

But these differences don't necessarily make Orthodox women feel disempowered. Several women I spoke with said they “don't care” about not being allowed to read from the Torah. Kamaras said she doesn't feel a lot of

connection with the feminine parts of Jewish ritual practice. Klapholz, who described herself as an “Orthodox feminist,” said her husband is “very fiercely egalitarian,” meaning he believes women should have equal ritual roles to men. “I would never describe myself as egalitarian,” she said. When they attend prayer groups with mixed seating for men and women—which is the standard at Minyan Kochav—“I don’t sit next to him,” she said. “I find it distracting.” Klapholz takes pleasure in rituals like going to the mikvah; although she has often found it complicated: She had a hard time finding a place where she felt comfortable going before she was married. “There’s judgment: ‘Why are you engaging in any sort of sexual activity where you would need to be going to mikvah when you’re not married?’” she said. “They can’t stop you, but there’s judgment. And people talk.”

Although the choice to take on strict Jewish ritual observance complicates many aspects of life, it’s particularly significant when it comes to sex, dating, and marriage. Simon has found it tough to date, even using an Orthodox-oriented matchmaker service called Saw You at Sinai. “I don’t want someone to become observant for me,” he said. “I really want to share Judaism with someone. That makes it harder.” Several of the people I met had significant others who tweaked their practice to match their partner’s; Landau, for example, said her college boyfriend became a *baal teshuva* after meeting her.

Seeking out and marrying someone who has a strict ritual practice can also make observance seem more serious and binding. Kamaras said she feels like keeping kosher and observing Shabbat is less of a choice now that she’s married, even though she would independently want to do so; she and her husband implicitly made an agreement to keep that level of observance when they decided to wed.

People who become *baalei teshuva* have to consider how their families will react. Simon, who grew up Reform, said he enlisted a whole group of rabbis

to help him figure out how to explain his observance to his parents. “My mom is a typical New Orleans Jewish woman. The first thing she said to me was, ‘So, are you not going to eat my shrimp anymore?’” he said. “Every mom’s fear is that you’re throwing away the tradition that she gave me, or that the tradition she gave me wasn’t good enough.” Of course, reactions can also be positive: After Jen and Mike Drob, who are 26 and 28, decided to keep a kosher kitchen when they got married, Mike’s parents in Iowa started keeping their own set of separate dishes for meat and dairy. “It’s funny how it rubs off, and how they’re learning, too,” Jen said.

“My mom is a typical New Orleans Jewish woman. ‘So, are you not going to eat my shrimp anymore?’” she asked.

Relationships and community may represent both the greatest opportunity for loss and the most appealing opportunities for gain in becoming more traditionally observant. Because of rules that limit driving and carrying things on Shabbat, many Orthodox and modern Orthodox Jews live in close physical proximity. The apartment complexes where Simon, Kamaras, Landau, and the Furman-Klapholzes live feel like present-day pseudo-shtetls: Several dozen young Jews all living as neighbors in clustered buildings, walking to shul together on Saturdays, and hanging out together during Shabbat.

But strict observance can also be isolating. Klapholz works in a Reform temple in Houston, and she purposefully doesn’t cover her hair all the way because she thinks the congregants there wouldn’t be accepting of it. For the Drobbs, who aren’t strictly observant on Shabbat and don’t go to an Orthodox shul, their choice to be more devout can be socially difficult. “We’re definitely more observant than most of our friends here,” said Jen. “Saturday mornings, when we’re at shul for half of the day, they’re out shopping, doing other things. Sometimes it’s hard to not feel left out a little bit.

“But at the same time, we’re trying this out,” she said. “This is what we decided we were going to try to do together.” As her husband, the *baal teshuva* of the family who has now become more intense than she is about going to synagogue, said, practicing Judaism is a way of “positively affirming a Jewish identity.”

Josh Furman and Alisha Klapholz participate in a havdalah ceremony at their home in Houston, Texas. (Michael Starghill Jr.)

Every Jewish community has its own set of standards about what is and is not acceptable. Very observant Orthodox Jews might look at the modern Orthodox and condemn them for not living in strict conformity with Jewish law; meanwhile, Reform and Conservative Jews might in turn judge the modern Orthodox for their hard-line positions on everything from women’s roles in religious services to intermarriage to creative adaptations of ritual. American public life has its standards and norms, too, and modern Orthodox Jews test the boundaries of mores on ubiquitous phone use and egalitarian gender politics and an obsessive work culture. But difference doesn’t have to create conflict: Everyone I spoke with said he or she felt welcomed and accepted by the Houston Jewish community and Houstonians generally.

Still, embracing Orthodoxy of any kind does mean living in defiance, however subtle, of contemporary American culture. Perhaps this choice is motivated by “an awareness of what is missing” from secular life, including the community, structure, and sense of meaning that come from a ritual-driven life. It could come from a feeling of connection to the Jewish people, with micro-obligations on food and clothing flowing out of macro-obligations to a cultural inheritance. Or perhaps, as the Droys are doing, it’s something to try: an intense experiment in identity; an affirmative choice to be bound; a way to find meaning in the relentless rhythms of daily life.