

Debra and Michael Kaufman

Professors Debra and Michael Kaufman may be retired from their respective decades'-long professorships, but their intellectual curiosity and vibrant creative energy swirls through our interview. Academics to the core, they are learned and accomplished in their fields. Debra is a sociologist in Contemporary Gender and Jewish Identity Studies. She recently retired after teaching for 40 years at Northeastern University. Michael, whose academic field is English and American Literature, just retired after teaching at Cornell, Brandeis, and for the last 20 years, at the Gordon Institute at Tufts University.

The Kaufmans have immersed themselves in social justice all of their lives, also sharing this moral value and imperative to speak out and act with their now-grown children, Marc and Alana. For all the Kaufmans, social activism is a natural outgrowth of their Jewish values. Debra explains, "It's an intrinsic part of who we are and how we interact with the world."

The Kaufmans originally moved to Boston from upstate New York in the early days of their careers. Most recently, Debra and Michael came to Temple Hillel B'nai Torah from the Newton Centre Minyan. They joined HBT after hearing about Rabbi Penzner through Debra's network of Jewish scholars. They were drawn by the diversity and openness of the congregation as well as by its particular brand of Reconstructionist philosophy and its emphasis on social activism.

The Kaufmans divide their time between their homes in Jamaica Plain, Brewster, and a much beloved "little shack" in New Hampshire where they spend their summers. Their 19th century shack was once the farmhouse for a working farm owned by "Annie," a feisty camp cook who was widowed as a young woman. The Kaufmans are interested in writing a book about mountain women, using Annie as their prototype, as they trace her life history through interviews with those who knew her personally and those who knew of her. Their combined commitment to feminism and feminist issues propels their research interest in the lives of women over an important century, up to contemporary times. Their approach is to focus on this subset of American women previously overlooked in historical narratives.

Debra was drawn to feminist and Jewish feminist studies beginning in the 1970s, after a cousin with strong feminist leanings was "picked up" at the Western Wall by the Lubavich Chassidim. This cousin, like many of the young people who stopped in Israel on their way to India during those turbulent times, was a hippie. Debra's cousin went on to yeshiva and then became a Baalat T'shuva. "Fascinated about this 'return' to Orthodoxy among adult women, many of whom were once feminists, I wrote a book entitled Rachel's Daughters. This work brought me into the world of Jewish Studies scholarship and I have been an active participant as both a researcher and lecturer ever since." Debra was the Founding Director of the Women's Studies Program and later one of the founding members and directors of the Jewish Studies Program at Northeastern. Later, she accepted a 3-year leave as a Matthews Distinguished University Professor to do research on post-Holocaust Jewish Identities, especially among young adults, in both the U.S.A and in Israel. Debra is a prolific writer and the author of a long list of books, scholarly papers, and editorials.

Debra also has a passion for cooking and is known among friends and family for her tasty results. The couple keeps a kosher home and celebrates the major Jewish holidays and weekly Shabbat dinners with their grandsons. Debra explains, "We are the Shabbat for the grandkids."

Since Debra and Michael are away at the Cape or in New Hampshire for almost all extended weekends and usually cannot attend HBT Shabbat services, they have found a niche for themselves at the temple's weekly minyan gatherings instead. They enjoy attending minyan, finding the experience fulfilling and "just perfect."

Michael recently agreed to lead a four-session American Jewish Literature Continuing Education Class at the temple, scheduled for next year. Michael's enthusiasm for participating in the life of the synagogue, not only as a congregant but also as a teacher, is infectious. He explains two significant motivators: Their grandchildren, Max, age 8, and Theo, who is 4-1/2. Marc and Megan, their son and daughter-in-law, are an interfaith couple. Michael and Debra are eager to introduce their grandchildren to HBT and to help them to carve out a comfortable place where they can gain greater exposure to Jewish traditions and custom. For the grandparents, Michael sees their task to be to learn more about where Jewishness can exist in a mixed marriage. They believe that HBT can be a valuable resource for this journey.

The Kaufmans' son, Marc, is a freelance editor who designs science and social science websites. Previously, Marc was the editor at the Templeton Foundation's award winning magazine, *Science and Spirit*, which focuses on "the Big Questions" where religion and science overlap. Although the Templeton Foundation is known to be conservative, Marc accepted the position on the condition that he would have full editorial rights to choose topics and to ensure that no anti-Semitic, anti-gay, or anti-feminist writings would ever appear in the magazine. The Foundation complied and Marc won numerous awards while working as an editor there. He presently engages in a broad range of social justice work, focusing primarily on ecological justice. Mark, Megan, and their two sons live in Roslindale.

Their daughter, Alana, is a psychoanalytic therapist in private practice in New York City. Her sub-specialty is in eating disorders. Debra describes Alana as a strong feminist and an "activist therapist." Her clientele covers varying ethnic groups, including success in serving Orthodox Jewish women and couples, even though she is not a part of that community. She has served as a pro bono event planner for charities such as children's cancer and cerebral palsy.

The congregation at HBT offers a welcoming embrace to this couple and their family.