

Multiple Religious Identities: The Experiences of Four Jewish-Buddhist Teachers

Emily Sigalow and Wendy Cadge
Brandeis University
September 2012

Additional Materials about Alan Lew

Biography

Rabbi Alan Lew (1943-2009) studied Zen Buddhism for ten years before becoming a Conservative Rabbi. He served as the pulpit rabbi of San Francisco's Congregation Beth Sholom and founded the Makor Or center for Jewish meditation. Rabbi Lew was born in Brooklyn, New York to a world that was largely Jewish. His family moved to Usonia, a cooperative community in Westchester County, when he was seven. While most of the people in Usonia were young Jewish professionals, the area outside of the small community- including the neighboring town of Pleasantville where Rabbi Lew went to public school- was almost exclusively Protestant. Growing up in this Protestant milieu, Rabbi Lew experienced countless episodes of anti-Semitism. Rabbi Lew had a mostly secular Jewish upbringing; outside of Hanukkah parties and Passover seders, his family had no other Jewish observances in the house.

Rabbi Lew attended University of Pennsylvania and majored in English. During college, he did not engage in any formal spiritual activity but was active in the movement for Civil Rights. After he tried out a few other paths, it became clear to Rabbi Lew that he wanted to be a writer. He applied and was accepted to the Iowa Writer's Workshop. After graduating with an M.F.A from Iowa, Rabbi Lew moved to California and landed a series of makeshift jobs to pay the bills.

In California and at the encouragement of a friend, Rabbi Lew began sitting *zazen*, Zen sitting meditation, at the San Francisco Zen Center. Rabbi Lew moved to Berkeley where he began practicing *zazen* in earnest at the Berkeley Zendo. Rabbi Lew moved in to the apartment building next to the Zen center and became one of the most active members of the community. Mel Weitsman was Rabbi Lew's primary teacher at the Berkeley Zen Center, although Rabbi Lew also attended longer retreats (sesshins) at Green Gulch Farm and Tassajara Mountain Center. For the next decade, Rabbi Lew was a serious Zen practitioner and became the first director of the Berkeley Zen Center.

When it came time for Rabbi Lew to take ordination as a Buddhist priest, he realized he could not go through with the ritual. He felt that doing so was a betrayal of God and his Jewish soul. Eventually Rabbi Lew left the Zen scene and met his second wife, Sherril. The courtship was short, and after thirteen days they decided to marry. They found a rabbi in Santa Rosa to marry them, and this same rabbi re-introduced Alan to Judaism. After reengaging with Judaism, Alan decided that he wanted to be ordained as a rabbi.

Alan attended the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York and was ordained a rabbi in 1988. He became the rabbi and spiritual leader at the conservative synagogue Congregation Beth Sholom in San Francisco from 1991 to 2005. At Beth Sholom, he founded and directed the Jewish meditation center, Makor Or (Source of Light), the first

Jewish meditation center in the country associated with a synagogue. He taught meditation there and in other Jewish contexts, in order to cultivate a deeper understanding of Jewish prayer and communal practice and to enhance spirituality in everyday life. Rabbi Lew was also a staunch activist and publicly supported a range of social justice causes. He authored three books: *One God Clapping* (Kodansha, 1999), *This Is Real And You Are Completely Unprepared: The Days of Awe as a Journey of Transformation*, (Little Brown, 2003), and *Be Still and Get Going*, (Little Brown August, 2005). Rabbi Lew died of a heart attack in Baltimore where he was teaching at the Rabbinic Training Institute, a program of the Jewish Theological Seminary.¹

Video

PBS Religion and Ethics NewsWeekly: Rabbi Alan Lew.
<http://video.pbs.org/video/2264716985/>

We were not able to interview Alan Lew because he passed away in 2009. To learn more about his approach to identity, please read:

Lew, Alan. 2001. *One God Clapping*. New York: Jewish Lights Publishers, p. 302-307 - Chapter 44 “What I learned from Buddhism about how to save Judaism.”

Lew, Alan, 2003. “Becoming who you always were: the story of a Zen Rabbi,” in *Beside Still Waters: Jews, Christians, and the Way of the Buddha*,” eds. Harold Kasmow, John Keenan and Linda Klepinger Keenan. Somerville, MA: Wisdom Press. Skim the chapter focusing on pages 50-55.

¹ Sources: Alan Lew. *One God Clapping* (New York: Jewish Lights Publishers), 2001; Matthai Kuruvila. “Alan Lew, Innovative Rabbi, Dies.” SFGATE, January 16th, 2009. URL: <http://www.sfgate.com/bayarea/article/Alan-Lew-innovative-rabbi-dies-3254180.php>.