Lifecycle Seminar for Rabbis  
Spring 2014  
PRAC 220

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Course Description: In this course we will explore the basic sources and development of the major Jewish lifecycle rituals - brit milah, bar/bat mitzvah, weddings and conversions. We will look at the various ways contemporary clergy perform these lifecycle rituals, as well as the counseling surrounding each lifecycle.

Requirements: Please do reading assignments as outlined in the syllabus. Readings will be posted on schoology. Source texts will be studied together in class. There are three written assignments:

Written Assignments:

1. Write a 2-3 page statement responding to the following question: A couple comes to you as the rabbi of a synagogue – mother is 6 months pregnant and Christian, father is Jewish. They say that they want to raise the child as Jewish with a respect for Christianity. They say that they have deep concerns about brit milah. They are willing to circumcise but want to do it in the hospital on the second day done by their ob/gyn. They are not members of your shul but are also interested in joining after the baby is born. You say to them….. The congregation can be any kind of synagogue you choose. Due by October 26.

2. Write a wedding drasha – 3 pages – using the method we discussed in class. Please interview and write a drash for a real couple. The couple can be already married, but the goal of the exercise is to have you practice gathering information as well as crafting it into a drasha. Due November 30

3. The following is a she’ela asked to the CCAR by a Rabbi in CA. “Recently, a woman in her mid-twenties has come to me seeking conversion. Her maternal grandmother had been a practicing Jew. Her mother was raised as a Jew but converted to Christianity when she married. The woman in question was baptized as a Lutheran and brought up in that church. Her sister has meanwhile maintained a Jewish identity and refused to undergo confirmation as a Lutheran. Their father's sister, while maintaining her native Christianity, married a Jewish man. Thus, there has always been a Jewish influence in this family, most evident at Passover, when the entire family would attend seder at their uncle's home. The woman in question has met a Jewish man whom she wishes to marry. Is she a Jew by the traditional, "matrilineal" definition? Even should this be the case, I believe that a full conversion is warranted, given that she was raised and confirmed as a Christian?”

How would you respond to this question? What kind of ceremony, if any, would you require of such a person? What kind of conversion counseling would you do with her,
and what kind of curriculum would you study with her [if any]. Please respond in 2-3 pages. Due last class.

Course materials: Please bring a Tanakh and/or Rabbi’s Manual to those classes indicated in syllabus (any denomination’s manual will do).

Schedule:

1. **February 6**
   Introduction to the Jewish Life Cycle
   Biblical sources for *brit milah*
   [bring Tanakh]

2. **February 13**
   Rabbinic/medieval sources on *brit milah*
   Reading:

3. **February 20**
   Issues in Brit Milah
   Readings:
   3. American Academy of Pediatricians Circumcision Policy Statement
   4. CCAR statement on matrilineal descent
   5. Selected CCAR and RA tsheuvot

4. **February 27**
   Performing Brit Milah & Brit Bat Ceremonies
   Guest:
   [bring Rabbi’s manual]

*1st Response paper due by March 6*

5. **March 6**
   Pre-marital Counseling for weddings
   Reading [or buy on amazon.com as I make .1 cents on each copy sold]:
6. March 13
The Wedding Ceremony and The Development of Wedding Liturgy and Customs [bring rabbi’s manual]
Readings:
   2. Solomon Freehof, “The Huppah”
   3. “Marriage on the Sabbath: A Responsa by Moshe Isserles”

7. March 20
Music of the wedding
[bring rabbi’s manual]
Guest: Hazan Louise Treitman

8. March 27
Marriage Ceremony Cont.
[Wedding drasha due by November 30]

9. April 3
Performing Marriage Ceremonies
Guest: Rabbi Darby Leigh

10. April 10
Rabbinic Sources on Conversion
Reading:
   2. Menachem Finkelstein, Conversion: Halakhah and Practice [excerpts]
   3. “Conversion for Marriage in Modern Times,” in The Jewish Political Tradition

11. April 24
Counseling for Conversion
Guest: Rabbi Michelle Robinson, Temple Emanuel
Reading:
   1. CCAR, RA, RRA, RCA Guidelines on Conversion
   2. Selected CCAR and RA tsheuvot on conversion

11. May 1
Conversion Rituals – best practices
Guest: Carrie Bornstein, Executive Director, Mayyim Hayyim

12. May 8
Bar/Bat Mitzvah preparation and ceremonies
Reading:
   1. *Putting God on your Guest List* [excerpts]

Guest: Rabbi Andy Vogel

13. May 15

Wrap-up