



Karen Petrone

DR. KAREN PETRONE is a professor of History at the University of Kentucky and the Department Chair. Karen was born in Queens, New York City in 1965. She was raised in a Roman Catholic home though later in life she identified as Jewish. Her mother was a secretary and then homemaker while her father was a bookie until after her sister, Diana, was born in 1951 when he became a roofer.

Karen attended Hunter College High School, an elite high school in Manhattan. After an experience with an exchange program to the Soviet Union in 1983, she began studying Russian history and literature. She pursued these interests at Harvard University where she graduated with a major in Russian history and literature in 1987.

Karen later received a PhD in History from the University of Michigan in 1994, where she also met her now husband Ken Slepyan. While she was in graduate school, they started dating and with their courtship her formal introduction to Judaism began. They married in 1991, and had two daughters, Anya and Mara, whom they decided to raise in Reform Judaism. For Karen, that decision was partly motivated by the feminist philosophy that informs her professional and religious life.

"...I wanted a, um, religion with gender equality, and you know what, you can have a female rabbi. You can't have a female priest."

Karen officially converted to Judaism after their tenth wedding anniversary. Ultimately, Karen and her family joined Lexington's Temple Adath Israel because of its inclusive membership policy—her children wouldn't have to undergo a formal conversion process as long as one parent was Jewish. At Temple Adath Israel, she became a member of the choir, adult education committee, and social action committee.

"...in the mid-2000s, uh, that I wanted to convert, and this was my own--you know, totally my own choice. I didn't have to do it--nobody said you can't, you know, you can't be part of this unless you're Jewish, um, and, uh, so I converted..."

Just as Karen's feminism drew her to Temple Adath Israel, it also guided her approach to her daughters' upbringing. She is proud to have raised two feminist daughters who stand up for what they believe in. After the 2016 presidential election, she and her daughters became modern-day activists. Not surprisingly, they, and other activists like them, are experiencing outrage fatigue from feeling the need to constantly defend oneself.



Karen with her two daughters

Before becoming chair of the History Department at the University of Kentucky 2011-2015 and again from 2016-present, Karen taught two courses per semester in Russian History and was a faculty co-advisor for Hillel.