



לְזָכֹר וְלַעֲשׂוֹת הַרְבֵּה מְעֹלָה
בְּחַלְוֵם בֶּן הַתֵּן נִטְעָה לְזָכֹר
מִיָּד וְלִפְנֵי

1 Where It All Began

Walking from shul to shul, looking for what, I did not know. We dressed in fancy dresses, hats, and high heels all in the 1950s style on the High Holidays. Often, we wandered the three synagogues within a mile radius, preening and hoping that the boys would look at us. I always began at my father's synagogue, which was in a small little house (called "shteibels" in Yiddish) with an upstairs balcony where the women sat. The ceiling was blue with stars painted in them – as I often gazed above wondering what it was that I was supposed to feel. The women around me would be chatting or reading their prayer books; but when I asked a question I was told to "sha shtill" (keep quiet in Yiddish). So, I learned to look down to the ground floor longingly at my brother, my father and my best buddy Michael as they prayed in a language I did not understand, thinking that they knew something I did not. I so wanted to be part of the action, but as a girl growing up in an Orthodox Jewish family that knowledge was not available to me. Often my mother would be at home cooking the extensive meal that we would eat when the services were over. So, my girlfriends and I would wander aimlessly until the services were over; then we could go home to take off the painful high heels and the hats that made us look like old women, rather than the teens that we were.

I started to question it all at an early age, since it had no meaning to me. I was told that God was up somewhere looking at me and judging my behavior. That bearded man was sitting on a throne saying "Meir tour nicht" – we should not. I was never sure what it was that we should not be doing, but I did know that it meant very little to me.

Oh, I did have a confirmation (an Americanized ritual for Jewish girls coming of age) at the age of twelve, in a class of four other girls. In fact, I even won the essay contest on "What it means to me to be a Jewish girl". It was my mother who wrote the essay because her Judaism meant so much to her. I even cheated on the exam that determined if I had written the piece, quoting my mother in the essay I was supposed to have written on my own Jewish practice. I also went to Hebrew school for a short while where the teachers were all austere men who hit one's knuckles with rulers if you got the Hebrew alphabet wrong.

Finally, I rebelled and begged to go to the I. L. Peretz Workmen's Circle school where the teacher was a Holocaust survivor and a socialist. Here I found some joy, with the singing, the learning of Yiddish (the language of the Eastern

European ghettos). There was music, celebration of International Workers Day and lots more that drew my attention. It was my first introduction to thinking about progressive politics as well.

But I believed nothing about a God; to me the concept was irrelevant, although I saw my mother and father praying regularly. As a young woman I found myself in Boston on Passover; my friends and I decided to go to Durgin Parks (a world-famous prime rib restaurant that had been there since the founding of Massachusetts). There I ate non-kosher food for the first time; when I walked out, I expected that God was going to strike me dead. When that did not happen, I began to doubt more and more. In fact, I even began eating non-kosher seafood and having milk and meat together. I was falling away from the belief system that was being crammed down my throat.

My father was a Holocaust refugee out of Lithuania, who had lost his whole family to the Holocaust by bullets, outside his small village Kupiskis. On his way to the U.S. he had thrown his ritual phylacteries into the ocean, but purchased another set as soon as he landed, feeling that he needed to hold onto the rituals he had grown up with. He continued to pray this way for the rest of his life. My mother had also been brought up Orthodox, not learning English until she went to public school, even though she had been born in the U.S. The house we lived in was kosher, with the rabbi coming every year to throw out the non-kosher food for Passover. We followed all the rituals, Shabbat, high holidays, minor holidays especially with the foods traditionally associated with each holiday. We maintained two sets of dishes for milk and meat and had separate everything for Passover. It was quite a chore to prepare for that holiday. And my mother was a fabulous cook, thus food was the centerpiece of all holidays. I soon became overweight because of food being the manifestation of love in that household.

We were surrounded by my mother's family, with many immigrants from Poland and Russia, all speaking Yiddish, each having suffered some trauma in the Holocaust, either themselves or having lost close family members. Additionally, I grew up with a dear uncle who was diagnosed as a schizophrenic while I was still young. His many psychotic episodes happened right in our home, with me often calling the police to come take him away in a strait jacket to the nearest mental hospital. This happened countless times in my youth.

It was a family with many troubles, poverty, survivor guilt, traditional old-world values and lifestyles, mental illness, and angry outbursts. As I grew older my anger grew and grew, especially about all the constraints placed upon me. Fortunately, I was a sociable child, making friends at school and becoming the class actress and public speaker. I had a teacher who saw my skill at speaking; thus, I was mentored by others who saw my potential as a leader. I had many friends whose families showed me that there were other ways to live in 1950s America. I often spent time at their homes, eating foods that were unlike what we had, seeing other lifestyles that seemed to suit me more.

2 My Belief System

I became an atheist at an early age. I could not embrace the man sitting on the throne and I saw no relevance to all the rituals held in my home that were done in Hebrew, a language I did not want to learn. We often sat for hours listening to the Hebrew, never understanding what was being said and hoping it would all end soon so we could eat.

The Jewish that I was became secular – I was a cultural Jew but an atheist in belief. Early in college I read the existentialists, especially Sartre and Camus. I also fell in love with Kierkegaard, even visiting his grave in Denmark; I found it perfect that in a large family plot Soren's actual spot was a small marker at the foot of the site. All the existentialists believe that being is nothingness, that life is just what you make it and nothing more, that there is no God, which suited my nihilistic value system; I questioned the value of human existence. I sat late into the nights reading and discussing this philosophy that had great meaning to me. My life had been dark and sad as a child, with much arguing and insults thrown at me; existentialism seemed the right way to explain the world. I remained an existentialist until I began to read the anarchist Jews whose ideology suited me even more. But that was years later. For now, "being is nothingness" fit my way of seeing the world. I also carried so much anger that in the 60s I called myself "Fury". I was furious at how I was being treated as a girl who was told she was "stupid", "crazy like your uncle", and that I knew nothing. All I wanted was to be respected, which never came from my family.

As I aged, I did attend high holidays periodically. When teaching college, I would duck out of my classes to run to the chapel where the Hillel director was holding services; I did not believe but felt that I should show up (why I was not sure). I never joined a synagogue, even for the commu-

nity that I might have wanted. I felt that would be sacrilegious since I was not a believer. If I ever went to sedars they were always self-created freedom sedars, with feminist underpinnings. I saw these events as political and not religious.

When my child was born my father had a baby naming for her in his synagogue, but I did not attend, feeling that it had no relevance to her or to me as a family. My husband at the time was born Jewish but also had no interest in the religion either. So, we raised our child with nothing related to Judaism. All she knew was that she was 100% Ashkenazi Jewish, with no understanding as to what that meant.

It was not that I had not been seeking some form of spirituality my whole life. There were times I went on silent meditational retreats lead by a Sufi guide. Those events were quite profound, with remarkable experiences as part and parcel of my weekends. Once I was sitting in a field meditation when a deer approached me. We stared at each other for quite a few minutes, looking intensely at each other, wondering what the other was all about. At another time I was on a porch looking at a small pond when a butterfly lit on my hand and remained for quite a while. Clearly, I had attained some level of peace if those beings were drawn to me.

Another time I was working with my guide on an early childhood trauma I had experienced about the murder of my family in the Holocaust. During that remarkable experience the guide was helpful in bringing my murdered family into the room and I was able to communicate with them; I determined that they had found peace after their own traumatic death's; they urged me to do the same with my own intergenerational trauma. It was quite helpful indeed.

Another time I visited a Zen Buddhist monastery where the monks were droning on and on. I listened for a while, trying to connect with their voices and prayer. However, what I really came away with was that if I was going to listen to droning, that I might as well return to the synagogue, where at least the droning was in a language and sung by my own people, to whom I could relate.

Also being an atheist did not mean that I did not adhere to the Jewish values I had been imbued with. I did believe in doing good in the world, and dedicated myself to social justice work very early, including walking to school with an African American school chum when my mother had forbidden it. I went to civil rights demonstrations in the 1960s, became an ardent feminist in the 1970s as well as a radical

therapist. My values were Jewish, even if I did not know upon which they were based. I saw the injustices in the world, especially the ones that I had experienced at home; I identified with those who had been victimized, as I too had felt victimized.

My work has always been about changing the world, perhaps a Jewish value that I took on without thinking of where it came from. I became a social worker, a professor, a writer on social justice, a political activist, and a practitioner of restorative justice, rarely connecting my Jewish upbringing with why I was doing this.

3 How the Transformation Began

After retiring as a dean in California I was looking for community. There was a little progressive Jewish synagogue not far from my home and a friend invited me to attend. I remember the first high holiday when I saw the rabbi in a skirt; Kol Nidre was sung with a guitar. I was shocked since this seemed far from that which I had experienced as a child. One of the women there was talking about angels and I thought this was a strange, weird group of people. But I stayed because I liked the music and the rabbi had been a drag queen in another iteration. I thought these might be my kind of people. Because I often take on leadership positions, I was invited to join the board, which I grudgingly did, to be of service.

The years went by and COVID hit, so we were not going to the building. We were on zoom and the music still gripped me; the rabbi's drashes were meaningful and profound. I stuck around, slowly moving from the back row to the middle, as I became more imbedded in the community.

Then in 2022 I was called to the ark during Kol Nidre where, as a board member I was handed the Torah to hold for part of the service. I had never in my life held one and I wept! It was a transformative moment for me, realizing how I had not been allowed access to the wisdom and teachings that influenced my life without knowing it.

That night I wrote to the Rabbi, telling him how meaningful that moment had been for me. He suggested that I could now wear the Tallit (prayer shawl that Jewish men wore as they prayed). I said I could not; I had not done the work of reading Torah to be allowed to wear it, by my own judgment. I often felt distressed when I saw people who knew nothing about being Jewish putting it on to pray. So dear Irwin (the Rabbi) suggested that perhaps the time was now

right for me to do the work, to read from the Torah. I demurred. I did not want to learn Hebrew; it had been difficult as a child, and I did not want to struggle with a new language at the age of seventy-eight. But I said that if I could do it in Yiddish I would like to try.

What an offer I made! He took me up on the idea and the die was cast. I had signed on to have a Bas Mitzvah two years hence. I decided to call it a Bas Mitzvah because that is what it is called using the Ashkenazi Hebrew, rather than the contemporary Hebrew, which is Sephardic based on current Israeli language.

4 The Process

Indeed, I did not realize what I had taken on! It was hard work. Even if I was going to read from the Torah in Yiddish, I had to learn the prayers and songs in Hebrew. It was a language that I still did not understand and was impossible for me to really get. I could read the letters, but the words were foreign to me. Yiddish was comprehensible, I could read the letters and if it was transliterated, I understood it completely. Irwin found me a Yiddish translation of the Parsha I would read, and I mastered that very quickly.

It was clear I needed a teacher to help me with the Hebrew. Thus, I began to study with a member of the synagogue who taught young B'Mitzvah students how to read and sing in Hebrew. This man, Gesher Calmenson, became my guru. Not only did he teach me to read the Hebrew, but he also gave me access to the esoterica of Jewish thought. I began to see, while studying with him, just how deep and meaningful Jewish study could be. No longer was this study just about the letters and putting the words together. It was not about what I once considered "Bubbe Miesses" – grandmother's tales about the Bible. Now it was about the numerology, the Kabbalah, the meanings of the stories we were reading. It was about the metaphors, the meaning behind the simple stories, the symbolism, and lessons for life they were conveying. I realized there was something there worth knowing. I remembered my father reading the Zohar when I was a kid; he told me that one had to be at least forty years old to access this information. Well, I was now seventy-eight and felt it was time to find out.

There were times when I was studying with Gesher that tears came to my eyes because I was getting actual knowledge, access to the depth, the substance of Jewish ideas. I was given entry to the mysticism, the beauty of the thousands of years of thought that had gone into the creation of

a religion; it had meaning, importance to me. Look at what I had missed all those years. Perhaps it was because I was now so much older, had run so far away, that I had now come back on myself; I could embrace the things I rejected because they did not have the painful sting of my childhood.

5 That Which I Do Not Understand

I once heard a cantor refer to God as “that which I do not understand”. It was a phrase that resonated with me. I do not understand much about the world, why it exists, how it came into being and what life is all about. The phrase had resonance because it embraced the unknowable, the ineffable of being, the complexity of never being able to truly understand it all. Sure, there are models for understanding, that is what religion is all about, as well as science. But the more we know the more we know that we know very little!

I liked the explanation that there is much about the universe and the meaning of it all that is not comprehensible. I began to use this term because it spoke to me in ways that the term “God” did not. I could relate to not understanding it all and being quite confused about the mysteries of life and death. No one had ever used words that explained how I felt in my skin or my spiritual beliefs. This phrase said it all for me.

Also, the process was enhanced by a friendship I developed with my friend Shari Brenner, who became the doula for my event. She knew Hebrew well and all aspects of the service, the meanings of each component, and held my hand from beginning to end. In fact, she was present when I bought my tallit at the Judaica store. When I put it on both she, myself and the woman owner all wept. Later she sat by me during the service to help me deal with the anxiety. Her friendship provided a bridge to a world heretofore not known to me. I was grateful to have a pragmatic guide.

Because of my prison work doing restorative justice with offenders and their victims I was given a grant by a Chasidic organization to talk about Jewish values and the spirituality that take place in these sacred moments of healing between harmer and harmed. I have been on the road, teaching about Jewish values and restorative justice to over 50 organizations around the world. As a result, the organization gave me a Chasidic woman teacher, my dear Rivky Slonim. They believed, rightly so, that I needed to learn more about Chasidic thought to inform my own teaching. So, another teacher was added to my education. And what

an education it has been. Rivky and I talk about the Sefirot, Counting the Omer, Jewish mystical thoughts on death, the Kabbalah, and other areas that I never even knew existed in Jewish thought. It had opened my eyes to the depth, substance and spirituality that is present in Judaism. I have been honored to study with both profoundly deep and meaningful teachers. I am privileged to be their student.

In addition, I began to learn to sing some of the prayers and the songs from the service. My dear friend Sheridan Gold lent me a tambourine, taught me how to sing a few songs and I learned a few prayers to sing as well. I often said that studying for my Bas Mitzvah was much harder than obtaining my PhD. In that effort I had not had to learn to sing or to learn a whole new language. This was very hard work indeed.

6 The Bas Mitzvah

On June 29, 2024, just a week before I turned eighty years old, I had a Bas Mitzvah. It was a joyous experience, with me playing the tambourine for the songs, reciting the Ve’ahavta and the Shema with my dear friend Orren, who had helped me learn it for over a year. I did my parsha in Yiddish, with English transliteration, and then a drash about my reading of that parsha and its relevance to me and to Israel today. I spoke about being a grasshopper and becoming a giant, and how Israel too has become in the eyes of the world. Although I feared a strong reaction by some, it was well received.

My family came from Boston, Florida, Los Angeles, Oregon and Seattle, some people I had not seen for many years. I gave honors to each part of my family and friends, to appreciate what they had all done for me. Almost two hundred people were in person, or on zoom. Many spoke of it being a spiritual experience for them to be in the room. Some said that their grandparents showed up, and one said she had a deeply moving, transformative experience that brought her back to her childhood dedication to spirituality.

I do know there was an energy in the room that was remarkable for the whole two- and one-half hours. One of the highlights from me was the singing of Micha Mocha, with a rendition by Debbie Friedman. In it I played the tambourine, accompanied by the drums, violin and guitar. The whole room was alive with the energy of all of us celebrating the crossing of the Red Sea, with timbals and drums, like Miriam and the other women after they crossed to the other side. Many of the congregants formed a line, dancing

around the sanctuary in a tearful and joyous celebration. Even my brother, who is not prone to dancing, joined the remarkable excitement that everyone felt.

When it was over there was a catered Eastern European meal and a klezmer band to round out the whole event. It was quite a high, with three languages used, lively music, soulful prayer and dancing around the synagogue by many of the participants. It was a joy for all of us present.

7 The Aftermath

One week later I turned eighty and two weeks later I was flattened by a serious case of COVID-19 that I had avoided for four years. The highs and lows of life came crashing in on me in just a short time, taken low by illness and age.

Nonetheless, I have awakened in myself a newfound appreciation of spirituality. To me that means more than the rote learning of the prayers and the devotion to tradition. My experience has now led me to seeing that there is so much to be learned. Where I once only found true connection to the universe through nature, I now feel it when I am in community. I feel it when I read a meaningful piece of liturgy, I feel it when I sing with my peers at the synagogue, I experience it when I am studying with my teachers, as I gain access to knowledge I had heretofore never known. I feel it in the company of others. I feel it when I am alone and contemplating my place in the universe. I feel it when I am teaching, I feel it in an I-Thou moment with my friends, I feel it when I am listening to deeply profound music. I feel it when I am doing meaningful work, and when I am at rest, doing nothing.

Perhaps it is aging or finding my way as a seeker; I do know that there is more to life than nothingness. Life is what you make it, but it also what you find as you are looking far and wide, searching for oneself.