

A Spiritual Life

A few years ago a Jewish magazine decided to devote an issue to spirituality and asked me to contribute a short piece describing “a spiritual moment.” I thought, a moment is best captured in a poem, I’ll submit a poem. In fact, I submitted not one but two poems, two very different poems. The first captured a poignant memory of packing away my Passover dishes one year, an act which forced me to acknowledge that the holiday had come and now was gone, that my unspoken, unconscious longing to see my mother during a holiday so full of childhood memories, my mother who had been dead already several years, was of course a longing unrealized, unrealizable. In the poem were the tears of my feeling abandoned by her, abandoned in the Universe, alone, alone, so alone. Out of the depths I call to you . . .

The other poem, a very different moment, though actually also a moment of tears. A twenty-year-old me sitting down to Friday night dinner for the first time with my life’s partner-to-be. He began to make kiddush, the traditional blessing over the wine, and I was overwhelmed by feelings of gratitude that my journey had delivered me to love, to shared meaning, to connection. As the Psalmist sings in Hallel, “The stone that was discarded is now the cornerstone.” In the poem I felt like that once discarded stone, as I sang out with joy through those old tears.

The Jewish magazine decided they had room for only one poem. For a while I thought I’d insist “both or none” but finally I gave in and told them to use the one with my Passover dishes: it seemed an unusual moment to share with readers, at least it could make them reflect on the idea that “a spiritual moment” was not only a moment of consummation, that a spiritual moment might equally be a moment of longing, of stretching toward something precious that was out of reach.

But really, what I wanted to do in offering both those poems was to give a glimpse of the complexity of terrain which constitutes spiritual geography. In some sense, I've been waiting in these intervening years for an opportunity to share not one, not two, but many many pictures of the life of spirit. I've been waiting for an opportunity to share through stories, through poetry, the important life stuff I know something about—the struggle to become who you are, the work to achieve peace with your past, the search for meaning and the assertion of meaning. Increasingly when I'm asked to teach or speak, I am conscious of the constraints of the agreed upon topic, and I work to make room within it for what I think is really important to say, for what I think the audience, whether it knows it or not, is hungry to hear about. To break through the cerebral, the polite, the conventional, the pseudointellectual, and to speak face to face, human to human, heart to heart, soul to soul. Scary. Easier to write a well-reasoned paper with respected accepted sources and then just get up to the podium and read with expression. Much safer. But I never seem to be content with safe. I want alive. More and more I want alive.



As I write these particular words, wrestling with the creation of something new, something which has never existed before, I don't know how it's all going to fit together. It's a lot like the story of my life (it is in fact the story of my life) and women's stories are so complicated. (True of men's stories too? Probably, but for the moment I'm taking refuge in one of my particularities.) Women's stories: not a linear plot, but levels of reality simulcast on three or four different screens. How to tell one coherent story when you know you're not living one coherent story.

So, a patchwork. For a while I was a quilter and my favorite part of the whole process was gathering all the different pieces of fabric, seeing the explosion of color and pattern, and then creating a design which celebrated each individual

piece but also maintained enough of a harmony for all the pieces to live together.

What are the pieces of this quilt? I lay them out on the dining room table: stories, poems, reflections, prayers. What happened to me as a child, what I've learned day to day as a parent, my experience of Jewish time and symbol and custom and text, the political and spiritual dimensions of living in a Holy Land, the longing to be loved and to give love, the pain and terror and challenge of living in community, the continuing evolution of my relationship to my parents both dead now for many years. These are the greens and blues and purples and yellows of my life of spirit.



Beginnings. You should always begin at the beginning. But where is the beginning?

Earliest of all I remember the sunlight. I am sitting on a child's chair, next to my grandmother. She had long white hair—actually, not “white,” rather, yellowed, ivory. It was braided, then knotted in a bun. She's wearing a dark Old Country dress, it buttons down the front, covering a body which is sturdy yet soft. Black leather shoes lace up to her ankles, “old lady shoes.” We are sitting in the sunlight, perhaps it is autumn. The warm sun penetrates me, embraces me, I feel relaxed, cradled. It is a sensuous moment, a moment of safety. Peaceful.

Now I am a little older. A busy street corner, a few blocks from home. We were holding hands, suddenly we are not. Separated from my mother, I look up: the older children, the adults, tower above me, they block my light, darken my piece of sky. No one is holding my hand. I am separate. Alone.

A memory that repeats itself, every year, year in, year out. It is Yom Kippur. My brothers and I are home from school,

everyone is dressed up in their best clothes. The adults fast, Roger and I compete to see who can “hold out” longest. Some of this is like everyday—competing in a game with my brother. But some is different—dressed up, sitting quietly in the living room. Most different of all is my mother: she sits in a chair reading to herself from a small elegant white leatherbound prayerbook, the edges of its pages embossed a shiny gold. It is her book, received at something called her confirmation. (We don’t belong to a synagogue, can’t afford Hebrew school for me, I never have a confirmation, never receive a small elegant prayerbook of my own.) She sits in the chair for a long time and what is extraordinary to me is that for 364 days of the year she busies herself responding to our needs, our demands, but on this day she says firmly, “Please don’t disturb me.” She is engrossed in her reading, her reflection; occasionally with her thumb and forefinger she rubs the bridge of her nose, signaling to me a headache, but clearly she is not much distracted by it. Many years later, living in Princeton, New Jersey, my street is blocked off each year for one day, a legal fiction which establishes private ownership by the university of this public thoroughfare. For 364 days of the year, my mother is our property—we push, we pull, she works, she cooks, she schleps, she listens, she smiles, she laughs, she touches as we beckon. On Yom Kippur, she closes off the street to traffic and quietly declares, “I belong to myself.”

I am 16 years old, in high school. It is the end of my senior year. We go on buses from New York to Washington, D.C. for the senior class trip. We stay in a motel—a first for me. I am excited by the motel, by sleeping in a room with girlfriends (I’ve never done that before either). We drive around Washington at night, I am thrilled by the buildings and monuments lit up, my eyes are wide open. I don’t come from New York really, I come from the province Brooklyn, I’ve hardly ever been out of it. The weekend is over, the bus brings us home in the dark, my classmates are singing—folk songs of the early ’60s, Broadway show tunes. Finally I can sing no longer, I go to sit in the back of the bus and look out into the darkness. It hurts so much to be alive. Some of my favorite

teachers have chaperoned this trip, a debate rages within me: could I trust my secrets to one of them, could one of them offer me relief, could one of them break through my isolation? I don't want to go home, I don't want to go home, the wheels of the bus go round and round, I don't want to go home, beautiful Washington with its white buildings lit up in the dark, beautiful Washington is getting further and further away, closer and closer is Brooklyn, the no exit apartment, the pain in the walls, in the linoleum of that apartment . . . One of my teachers sits down next to me, he senses the pain relentlessly throbbing, he senses that I am somehow in terrible trouble, he is caring, responsive, but he chooses the tactic of making me laugh—he doesn't have the courage to be a listener.

I am 18 years old, a camp counsellor in the Catskills. I am supposed to be taking care of a bunk of 13-year-old girls, but even though when fall comes I will be entering my junior year of college, this is my first time living away from home and these 13-year-olds know more about camp life and possibly life in general than I do. The troubles at home are unrelenting; deprived of the chance of a sleepaway college, I must be grateful for the free public education of the New York City system. I travel to Brooklyn College every morning by subway and return every night in time for supper. I jump at the chance to go away, anywhere, even to work at a low budget summer camp in the Catskills. But now that I'm here I'm thrown off balance, I'm afraid. I never realized the troubles at home that torment me are also so well known that in a strange way they are comfortable, safe. I don't know my place in this new world, none of the mirrors are familiar and so when I look from one to another to see who I am, I don't recognize myself. I am terrified, I feel myself coming apart. Each day I struggle to hold onto the reality of that day. One night I walk alone to the lakefront, I look up into the vast night sky, a canopy of stars. A prayer rises from the secret center of my soul: not, *please God, make my problems go away, solve my problems, make it all better, deliver me*. Not that, but, *God, give me the strength to live my life*. And I feel a response—I asked for strength, I have received strength. From the vast dark sky, a sense of peace descends, I am filled with a quiet sense of

peace. Subtly, the balance has tipped—after this night I am no longer a child with adult feelings and voices and urges. After this night I am an adult, doing my best to reassure and shepherd the fearful child, to smooth her hair and hold her close, whispering, “It’ll be alright. It’ll be alright. Sssh . . .”



Many moments come after these moments, but these moments are the beginnings for me. The beginnings of spirit.



So many paths to spirit are available, how and why did my spiritual path come to be a Jewish one? A part of the answer to that question lies back in my senior year of high school. My friends from the honors classes are studying for the SAT’s, going to visit magical places like Haverford and Wellesley, mailing in applications to Berkeley and Ann Arbor. These are the people I competed with on geometry tests, they were my lab partners in zoology, together we argued about the secret motivations of Iago. Then they packed their bags for Boston, leaving me behind. I asked my mother, aren’t there scholarships for kids like me, isn’t that who the scholarships are for? But she said no, scholarships don’t cover everything. A few years ago, when Ruth Simmons became the first black woman president of Smith College, she movingly told the *New York Times* reporter how her impoverished siblings and teachers chipped in to supply her with clothes when she went off to college. But no one believed in me the way people believed in Ruth Simmons. That was the part that wounded, that was the part that damaged. Only 16, and already stamped “not special.”

So there I was at Brooklyn College, riding the subway as I had in my high school years, taking a bag lunch as I had in

my high school years, sitting in endless required survey courses, mostly not as challenging as the courses I'd taken in my high school years. And I accidentally showed up for a freshman reception at Hillel, the center for Jewish students on campus. After the formal program, I sat in the large auditorium, dutifully filling out a form I had been handed. Responding to the question of what committee I might be willing to join—it seemed impolite to express interest in nothing—I absently checked off “social action.” My fate was sealed: the student chair of the committee wouldn't let me go. She had my address, my phone number, somehow with that check mark I had committed myself to a seemingly endless round of committee meetings to talk about and plan for “social action.”

Now I regularly found myself in the Hillel building where almost everything was strange and new for me: some of the students wore *kipot* (head coverings for observant Jewish males), some would put on a record after lunch and do a few Israeli dances—imagine, in the middle of an ordinary day, between lunch and classes, the ecstasy of dancing. These fellow undergraduates would spend their free time arguing about a passage from the Bible, sometimes be so engrossed in a discussion of Elie Wiesel or Martin Buber that they'd cut class to finish it. Nothing remotely as interesting was going on in the student center. I stayed. I made friends, we met on Saturdays and went to synagogue together, I took classes in Job, in Jewish mysticism, I stopped eating cheeseburgers.



Everything was exotic, magical: eating in *sukkah* (a simple outdoor harvest booth especially constructed for the eight day autumn festival of Sukkoth), Friday night candles, black Hebrew letters on white parchment, praying—imagine, praying, at fixed times, using prayerbooks. Other people who were attentive to the world in the ways I had always been privately attentive to the world. Other people had a language, there was

a whole history of a language, to express the reality of spirit I had previously known only in my private world. I remained unique—it's not that I merged with the group, lost my individuality—but suddenly I wasn't so odd, wasn't "too serious." Suddenly I wasn't so alone.

I was intrigued by this thing called Shabbat: because God, after working to create the world, took a seventh day to rest, we as humans have the opportunity to rest, to be God-like. (I can't honestly say we are "commanded" to rest—it's not my language—I don't think I've ever felt "commanded" to observe Shabbat or anything else for that matter. "Invited" feels like a more accurate verb for me.)

My imagination was more excited by the notion of Shabbat than by anything I had ever encountered before and probably since as well. I had never previously seen the opportunity to transform my own reality so profoundly. Mostly I felt imprisoned by the limitations of my reality. Here was a way of reshaping reality, transcending reality, which called to me more alluringly than did the enticements of an LSD trip. By not turning on or off lights and so heightening my consciousness of the sun in its course, by putting aside my school assignments and telling the supervisor at my parttime job that I was no longer available on Saturdays, by going to services on Saturday morning and reading and discussing the biblical portion of the week, by preparing food ahead of time and inviting friends to come eat with me after services—once a week I was turning Saturday into Shabbat, making for myself a different kind of day, a new kind of reality. In a sense what I saw was the difference between my ordinary day-to-day Brooklyn life and my mother's once a year Yom Kippur. I too could seize the power to say, "I belong to myself" and I could do it frequently, regularly, once a week.

You could, if you wanted to enough, rearrange the reality of your life. You could make a life of heightened meaning, of deepened meaning. Our lives are filled with moments of spirit, extraordinary moments ripe with meaning and nourishment, if only we can remain aware. I increasingly saw the spiritual

realm of my everyday existence as a vast uncharted territory which could be cultivated as I chose—I had control over the depth and potential of this everyday realm, to sanctify or not to sanctify: the food I ate, the sky overhead as it lightened and darkened, Shabbat, the study of text, the cycles of the year, community.

I understood keeping Shabbat and *kashrut* (traditional Jewish dietary laws) as the radical assertion of meaning, the creative imposition of Jewish meaning on my previously secular world: the epiphany was that I could have control over my spiritual life. This religious metamorphosis took place over the four years of college, during which time I lived at home. How did my parents and I navigate the potentially troubled waters of a “born-again” adolescent Jew in the bosom of a secular family? One case in point (some would say a quintessentially Jewish one) expressed itself through food.

When I was growing up we did not have a kosher home. My mother did not keep kosher, my grandmother did not keep kosher, in fact I had no idea if my great-grandmother kept kosher. We had ham in the house pretty regularly, we did not separate milk and meat. In college then, when I realized that I wanted to keep kosher, I was faced with a dilemma. I knew of peers in similar circumstances who kept a pot and pan for themselves, who ate on a separate placemat at a corner of the family table food they had prepared for themselves alone. I was horrified by what seemed to me such a divisive, holier than thou approach. I thought my mother especially deserved better from me. So I made my commitment to *kashrut* with a reversal of the common Jewish concession to America and its culinary delights—while the usual practice is to keep kosher at home and eat out *tref* (non-kosher food, forbidden in the Bible), I kept kosher when I ate out, but at home I ate the food my mother prepared for all of us. This unique compromise was my way of saying that when I am in control of my own food, I will eat as I see fit and express my intention to keep a kosher home when I am out in the world on my own. Meanwhile, I am living under my mother’s roof, I will show her respect.

But the story doesn't end there. My mother, catching on to the growing importance of this way of life for me, stopped buying ham. She then began shopping at a kosher butcher. By my senior year of college she was using the everyday dishes for dairy and the fancy company set for meat . . .

In the tradition, there are three special commandments (*mitzvot*) for women: to light Sabbath candles, to separate a piece of the dough when baking challah, to go to *mikvah*, a ritual bath, after your monthly menstrual cycle. None of these "women's" *mitzvot* did I learn from my mother. What I did learn from my mother was to honor the path that each person takes, to honor the person and the path in all their uniqueness.



Just as I needed to accommodate my food requirements during these years, I needed to find a way to celebrate Shabbat in a home where Friday night was for TV and Saturday for cleaning and shopping. I spent most Friday nights and Saturdays with three friends who were also students at Brooklyn College, also from secular homes, also active in Hillel. This was my first experience with the pleasures of community. Friday night we'd walk together to the home of a newly married Orthodox couple. The small living room of their apartment felt warm, cozy. Gail, the young wife, served tea and cake. We'd sit, we'd laugh, we'd talk by the light of their Shabbos candles. Then the long walk home through the dark Brooklyn streets (observant Jews—which is what we were learning to be—do not drive or ride in public conveyances on Shabbat). Four friends, two young men, two young women, we never dated each other, but in those long walks home we enjoyed a special intimacy of friendship, conversations which ranged from the religious to the political to the psychological, conversations which had room for intellect and for gossip. The exhaustion at the end of a busy week, the lateness of the hour, aching

limbs, and cold air on our cheeks somehow made the walk all the more delicious.

Saturday mornings we went “*shul* hopping” together—synagogue shopping. Within a mile radius of where we lived in Brooklyn were many different synagogues of many different persuasions and we tasted them all. Probably our favorite was a small down-on-its-luck Conservative congregation, populated mostly by middle aged and elderly men (when we walked in they would exclaim excitedly, “The young people are here!”). They were warm and unpretentious, the rabbi was interesting, his sermons often bridged traditional interpretations of the text and observations on the turbulent times we were living through in the late sixties. Then one of the four of us would invite the rest of our small band home for a lunch that inevitably seemed to feature tuna fish. We would argue some more about the biblical portion of the week, sometimes even lingering till the sun set and three stars in the sky declared the Sabbath was over.



The first rabbi I ever met was Norman Frimer, the director of Brooklyn College Hillel. He returned from sabbatical to find me amongst the crop of new active students and set about getting to know me. He himself was Orthodox, from a traditional family; his three sons all went to Orthodox day schools. But his understanding of the life of spirit transcended his own Jewish particularity. He never asked me whether I observed *kashrut*, whether I attended synagogue. He simply asked me to go for a walk with him. Quickly it was clear he had no interest in small talk. As God asks Adam in the Garden, Norman Frimer asked me: Where are you in the world? Unlike Adam, I was prepared to talk. And he listened. What power is the power of a true listener, bringing understanding, bringing healing, bringing peace. Over the years of listening, he helped me to ask the questions which were my questions. Occasionally he offered answers.

A few years after college, already married, I described to him the spiritual wilderness I felt myself wandering in. What can I believe in, how can I have faith, how do I know what direction is the right direction for me in this world? He answered me with, "It's time for you to have a baby." Long after, he shared his memory of that conversation: "You thought I was telling you that because you were a woman. You thought I was saying, motherhood is your proper role as a woman. And you were so angry you wouldn't look me in the eye, so angry to have your theological torments written such a prescription." Quite so, he knew me well, he had accurately read me. But he had been wise enough to hear the question I didn't know to ask then. In those years I didn't want children, was afraid of raising children, lacked the courage for children. He was telling me, the questions you are asking, questions of faith, of meaning, these aren't intellectual questions, they are the stuff of life, they can only be answered in the living of life, in the trenches. Your life has as much meaning as you invest it with. And that probably means focusing more time and effort on the lives around you than on the philosophical contemplation of self. And while there are many ways to engage in human intercourse, one of the most demanding and therefore potentially most rewarding, is through the growing of children. He knew what I was terrified of facing: that for me, the leap of faith was the decision to become a mother and there was nothing more I could learn poised, stuck, frozen, on the edge of that leap.



In the early stages of my Jewish exploration, my gender seemed irrelevant. I was faced with the enormity of gaining entry into an ancient tradition of which I knew nothing. So many "firsts"—going to synagogue, saying the blessings after a meal, celebrating the rich variety of holidays from the ecstatic dancing on Simchat Torah to staying up all night studying biblical texts on Shavuot. I vividly recall the first weekday

morning service I ever attended, walking into the room and seeing men wearing *tefillin* (two small black leather boxes containing scriptural passages, bound by black leather strips, worn on the left hand and arm and on the head). I had never in my life seen *tefillin* and the sight of these men whom I knew engaged in their morning prayers was such an intimate scene for me that I felt embarrassed to have intruded with my presence—somehow I shouldn't be viewing what felt to me so private a moment. The furthest thing from my mind at that moment was to question why no one invited me to put on *tefillin*.

I wanted to understand the system, from the inside, on its own terms. If it had assigned a different place to me than to Yehuda and Norm, I wasn't disturbed by that. In fact, one year when the student board at Hillel was voting on whether or not to have a *mehitza* at services (a curtain separating the men and the women during prayer, considered discriminatory by most contemporary feminists), I was one of those who voted yes. I thought, seeing the men was distracting to me while I was trying to concentrate on my prayers and I didn't want them to be able to see me either—I wanted my privacy. I was unconscious of not being counted in the *minyan*, the quorum for prayer traditionally consisting of ten Jewish males over the age of thirteen—there were always plenty of men present and I think I was unaware of a count and also therefore unaware of the fact that I wasn't being counted. Similarly, I didn't feel excluded or offended not to be called up to the Torah for an honor—I had no idea how to do all the intricate things they were doing up there—I was struggling to just learn the Hebrew letters and certainly felt in that context undeserving of an honor.

I think the first time my identity as a woman was a source of alienation or pain for me as a Jew was as an undergraduate in a Hillel class studying the third century rabbinic anthology *The Ethics of the Fathers*. I was reading along, blissfully engrossed in unlocking the treasures of the text, when I hit my head on the line: "Let your house be wide open to strangers, treat the

poor as members of your own family, and do not gossip with women.” The first two sentiments of course were noble, enriching, filling me with the ever-increasing pride I was feeling at the beauty of this tradition. But the third injunction, casually included in such an ethical series, literally knocked the breath out of me. Suddenly, I was “other,” in fact, I was the enemy. Moreover, the injunction made clear that my assumption of being addressed, being included by the text, was false, untrue. This was a text written by men, written for men, describing a male religious tradition elucidating subjects of ultimate concern about how men ought to lead their lives and behave in the world.

The sudden recognition of all of this flooded me; I was conscious as well that the insult was not solely an ancient one, but that a continuing line of learned men had failed to edit out the offending sentiment and so had cumulatively added their stamp of approval. I closed the book. The men sitting around the study table with me offered bits of apologetics, none to my mind satisfactory; after a while they tired of this sidetrack we’d gotten off on and so finally, sensing their heightening impatience, I released them to go on to the next verses. But the damage was done. Like suddenly being confronted with incontrovertible proof that a dearly loved and trusted friend was guilty of some truly despicable act, there now was the beginning of a fissure between me and this ancient tradition I had increasingly been cleaving to: I began to ask myself, what was my place in this Jewish world as a woman?

I dealt with my immediate hurt by laying the blame at the feet of the text and it was many years before I again was willing to open the pages of *The Ethics of the Fathers*. But the more I learned, and the more my day to day life became inextricably tied to Jewish tradition, practice, and sensibility, the more I would find myself recycling that question: what was my place in this Jewish world as a woman?



In my senior year of college the Hillel director acquired a new crop of rabbinical students as assistants. Every year several seniors from the Jewish Theological Seminary (the New York institution which trains and ordains Conservative rabbis) came to work as interns at Hillel. Mostly these young men—in those days they were all men—were already married; this year one of them was single: an intense, intellectually keen 24-year-old red-head. What began as a friendship budded into a romance. Since Eddie had compunctions about “dating a student,” we agreed I would take none of his classes. Further, we determined our privacy was best served by dating in secret. What that meant in those days in provincial Brooklyn was simply to see each other in Manhattan. Very quickly we came to love each other. A girl who had heard of neither Sukkot nor Shavuot until she was 18 was on her way to becoming a rebbetzin at 20.

Often through the years when people have heard that I grew up in a secular home, they assumed that I “got religion” under the marriage canopy, to please or accommodate my husband the rabbi. Clearly though, I was already well embarked on a spiritual exploration of Judaism when we met. This is not to say however that the Jewish path I continued to travel was unaffected by my travelling companion. Most definitely the contrary was true. I think it would be accurate to say that I continued my search but did so for the next many years on his path. His was the path of someone with a rich and complex family history of observance, someone who was knowledgeable, well educated Jewishly, someone who was religiously sophisticated and destined to participate in shaping a new Jewish future in America.

Eddie and his friends had a difficult time of it at the Seminary. While they received an unparalleled scholarly education there, they longed for a religious environment that could provide community, serious personal interaction with text, social action, and spiritual intensity. They decided to found a new seminary, Havurat Shalom (fellowship of peace), informed by all those ideals and to locate it in the Boston area where some of the central players already lived. Their vision was radical,

daring. Their dream was nothing less than the restructuring and rebirth of the American Jewish community.

I had entered the Jewish world at Hillel as a well behaved novice, a sponge. I was uncritical of what I found there for two reasons—one, I was enchanted by the tradition, and two, I didn't know enough to be critical. If I'd grown up in a Jewishly observant home, I probably would have been ripe for rebellion, but in some sense, this entry into Judaism *was* my rebellion. Now suddenly I was in league with a group of people who were enormously sophisticated in their Judaism and ready to make a revolution. I joined them because I was in love and didn't want to be separated from Eddie, because I was excited by their new Jewish venture, and because it was my ticket out of Brooklyn.