

BERESHITH "IN THE BEGINNING"

A Newsletter
for Beginners,
by Beginners

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בראשית

ONE FOOT IN, ONE FOOT OUT

Skylar Bader

I sometimes wonder how I got to this point: a New York Jewish lawyer. Even stranger, I am now a married Orthodox woman! What's next, a mother to 6 kids?! I grew up as the only child of a lower middle class atheist family in the Bible Belt...Southern Baptist escapees. Now I'm living in New York City, an Orthodox Jew, and a lawyer -- when I was child, even one of those qualities must have seemed as far away as the moon to my parents. But somehow, I discovered Judaism, then Judaism led me to law, then an Orthodox conversion led me to NYC.

I define myself as a strongly independent, fiercely opinionated, cynical, pragmatic, liberal, academic nerd. Today, others might define me only as an Orthodox woman, with a set of predetermined stereotypes. These two women don't have to be mutually exclusive, and I believe Judaism says they shouldn't be. Only after I converted did I realize that while everything about my life had changed, everything about me was still me. *(cont. on p. 2)*



THE ULTIMATE CONNECTION OF TORAH

Rabbi Daniel Wolfe

Rabbi Paysach Krohn tells a beautiful story about a Jewish American medic who was helping Holocaust survivors immediately after World War II. The medic would go from survivor to survivor and take care of each one's medical needs. One day, toward the beginning of his day's work, he approached a survivor who insisted that the medic give him a *Bava Kamma*, a tractate from the Talmud. The medic looked at him inquisitively and responded, "I would love to, but I am a medic. I give medical attention to all those in need. To get you a *Bava Kamma* would require that I stop work for the day and seek out a *Bava Kamma* in the ransacked yeshivas or synagogues." To this the survivor told him, "The Nazis took everything from me. They took my family, my home, my entire life. The last thing I was doing before they took me away was studying *Bava Kamma*. It is all I have left. Please, just bring it to me." Touched, the medic closed his office for the day and set out to find a copy of this famous Talmudic tractate.

Rabbi Krohn explains that this is what King David was referring to when he wrote in the Book of *(cont. on p. 3)*

HONORING MY MOTHER-IN-LAW

Georgia Kornblatt

Twenty four years ago, I was blessed to meet my future husband, Joseph, my *bashert* (destined soulmate). Our lives together have taken us on many journeys, including the journey of becoming fully observant. We met as teenagers and have been together ever since.

One thing a *bashert* comes with, is family. A few months after I met Joseph, now my husband, I met his parents, Marshall and Lillian. I was very blessed, for in almost no time, it was clear that the bond that I shared with Joseph extended beyond his own soul to include his parents. I felt an especially strong bond with Joseph's mother. While I had a good relationship with my own mother, my relationship with Lillian was such that she became a second mother to me in every sense of the word. It was a beautiful bond that was free of any unspoken issues.

When I began exploring the world of observant Judaism during my college years, Lillian was always there for me. Whereas my own parents were not very accepting of my new, changing lifestyle, Lillian was both supportive and encouraging. In fact, she taught me about *(cont. on p. 3)*

ONE FOOT IN, ONE FOOT OUT (cont. from p. 1)...

When I left the mikveh, I felt no different than I did getting in it. I felt gratitude, calmness, and simple relief that a stressful era of my life was finally over. But did I feel like a new person? Did I suddenly feel “Jewish”? No, not really. Sometimes I worry that my conversion didn’t stick, and I’m not really Jewish. (This fear is common among converts, but among people like me, with OCD, it can be particularly pronounced.) If I were actually Jewish, surely I’d feel different! But I don’t.

I could have begun calling myself by my chosen Hebrew name, Kochava, and downplayed my past and my history, but I didn’t and I haven’t. My past is essential to my identity as a person and as a Jew. Intuitively, I know that I’ve always been the same Jewish person I am today, but it’s a concept that becomes hard to prove when you start talking metaphysics and *halacha*. After the mikveh, however, I worried about how people in the community would react to Skylar continuing to be Skylar. Maybe I still worry about that sometimes, even though I’ve never had a problem.

By embracing who I am and who I have been, I believe that I’m a better Jew and better able to accomplish the life purpose G-d gave me. No matter how flawed or stubborn or just plain wrong I am sometimes, my “outsider” perspective helps build a better, stronger Jewish people. Let’s change the cliché a little... Complacency is the enemy of the good.

There’s an “uncomfortable” passage in the Talmud about converts that I think applies here: “Converts are hard for Israel like thorns” (*Yevamot* 47b). There are many interpretations of this statement and what it means about converts and born-Jews, but I believe it speaks to how converts challenge born-Jews. We can make them uncomfortable. We show an extreme version of active dedication to G-d, to mitzvot, and to the Jewish people, just as Ruth showed when she abandoned everything she knew. When you’ve been born into such privilege, it can be hard to appreciate. And perhaps that’s why G-d wants us to welcome all the Jewish souls hidden in non-Jewish bodies: “G-d exiled Israel among the nations so that they would in-gather converts...” (*Pesachim* 87b).

I recently read a review copy of a new book called *Rising Moon: Unraveling the Book of Ruth* by Rabbi Moshe Miller. My relationship with the book was complicated, but this part of the author’s commentary spoke directly to me:

*Ruth now understands that if Israel is to embody what Creation is meant to achieve, it must include the entirety of humanity. There must be room for the assimilation of converts. She realizes that she can actually offer something that Naomi cannot. **The purpose of geirut [conversion] is to bring the world to Israel; the convert is not to leave the world behind.** Therefore, it is no longer ‘And the two of them went.’ Instead, it is Ruth of Moab who has returned from the fields of Moab. And it is as the Moabite who has returned that Ruth makes her enduring contribution. She remains Naomi’s daughter-in-law. While she is still ‘with her’ (imah), she is now independent of Naomi, having grown fully into her own identity and history.” [Commenting on Ruth 1:22, emphasis mine]*

That passage highlights the struggle I have faced: People

(especially early-stage conversion candidates) often say that the “goal” of conversion is to fully assimilate into the Jewish community. Is that really a goal every convert should aim for? Should I have worked on my clothing and Yiddish terms until I “passed” as frum-from-birth... or at least a *baalat teshuva* (a Jew who became observant)? What good would it do for the Jewish community to have a carbon copy of Chani from down the street? Obviously, G-d gave me these life experiences and brought me to this place for a reason.

I live between worlds: the Orthodox Jewish world (and the various kinds of Orthodox), the non-Orthodox Jewish world, the secular American world, and the Christian American world. It can be tiring, but usually it’s invigorating, challenging, and keeps me on my toes. But it has a darker side too: the doubts. Sometimes I feel like I don’t belong anywhere. As I said above, OCD causes me to take those fleeting thoughts of doubt that we all have a little more seriously than perhaps I should. Going outside my comfort zone makes those challenges stronger and more frequent, whether it’s being involved with the secular world or interacting with an insular approach to Judaism that I reject. Doubts swirl: Did I really accept *Matan Torah* and *Kabbalat HaMitzvot* (the giving of a Divine Torah and the acceptance of the mitzvot) when I converted? Do I still accept it? Do I really believe in G-d, or am I trying to make myself believe it? Am I Modern Orthodox because it’s not as demanding as a more insular life and I would have to give up these secular pursuits? Am I living a lie so well that I’m not even aware of it??

Life would be so much easier if I could live in a Modern Orthodox bubble, keep my head down, and ignore the challenges I see within the community, especially for converts and conversion candidates. G-d himself kvetched to Moshe about us Jews being a stiff-necked people, and nothing has changed. Being so stiff-necked when it comes to Judaism and Jews is probably the most “Jewish” thing about me, the one thing I never doubt, and the Gemara must’ve seen me coming when it said converts would challenge Israel.

Certainly, you don’t need to wait for a convert to challenge you, to push you to new heights in your appreciation for and dedication to Judaism. Shavuot, the holiday that marks the renewal of the marital vows between G-d and Israel, so to speak, is the perfect time to challenge us all to step up our game. And I don’t mean being challenged to a cheesecake eating competition! Try a new mitzvah, improve on a mitzvah that you do now half-heartedly, or take a mitzvah to a new level; but be sure to find a new way to connect emotionally with G-d and with your fellow Jews. Don’t choose something just because Chani down the street does it; choose something that will strengthen your relationship with G-d and Judaism.

Skylar Bader is the writer and teacher behind the blog You’re Not Crazy: Becoming Orthodox Without Questioning Your Sanity. She is also a small business lawyer and entrepreneur. She welcomes all NYC area converts and candidates to join the NYC Orthodox Jewish Conversion Meetup, hosted on Meetup.com.

THE ULTIMATE CONNECTION OF TORAH (cont. from p. 1)...

Psalms, "The Torah of G-d is so perfect and complete that it soothes the soul."

Here was a man who had lost everything in the most devastating manner possible, and yet the only thing that he wanted was to connect, once again, to the Holy Torah.

On the holiday of Shavuot we celebrate the precious gift that G-d has given us. The Torah is a constant wellspring of strength and hope throughout the often arduous journey of our lives.

Three years ago, I moved from Jerusalem to upstate New York. While I definitely appreciate upstate New York, particularly the bone chilling winter, there is certainly no comparison whatsoever to the spirituality and connection to spirituality that I felt in Israel. In fact, upon landing in the Holy Land on a recent trip for a mere twenty-five hours to celebrate a family simcha, I took an intense, deep breath of Israel's pristine, holy air and honestly felt that had I turned around and flown home immediately, the long flight would have been worth it.

When I moved to New York, I consciously realized that I needed an extra boost of spirituality to help me remain a growing, inspired Jew. I therefore took it upon myself to wake up very early each day before synagogue to study some Talmud. I will be honest; sometimes it wasn't easy. One particular morning, I was staring groggy-eyed at a particular passage in the Talmud (in the tractate called Shabbat), and asked myself if it was really worth it. I told myself that it probably would be healthier for me to go back to sleep for another hour. But, I resisted the urge and continued my studying.

Arriving at a new chapter only a few minutes later, I realized that I did not know very much about it. As I began reading the lengthy chapter introduction of the English edition on the Artscroll iPad app, I quickly realized that this coming chapter would be about why we light Shabbat candles. I was following along on my iPad when, suddenly, the power in my house went out, and all the lights went out. Being so early in the morning, it was still pitch black outside. After about five seconds of confusion and wondering how to proceed, I realized that I could continue studying from my iPad, which was conveniently shining as brightly as before.

Shortly thereafter, I came across the following words (exactly where I had left off!): "It is difficult for someone to enjoy the Sabbath when his house is dark and he cannot see where he is going or what he is eating..." My mouth dropped. I couldn't believe it. The summary was describing that one of the reasons that we have Shabbat candles is for the often

DARK ROOM



taken-for-granted idea that we want to see what we are doing! I couldn't believe how G-d was putting on a show for me at just that moment to give me a real life example! When I was discouraged and tired, and wondering if my waking up early was worth it, the Torah consoled me and gave me new strength.

As a rabbi, I have a fair number of people coming to me depressed, anxious, angry, or sad about how their life circumstances are unfolding. In response, I often open a volume of Torah for us to study together and witness this same sense of

consolation. Studying Torah together enables those who are challenged to walk away reinvigorated, inspired and uplifted.

On Shavuot, we celebrate how G-d chose the Jewish people, out of every nation on the planet, to convey His message and to inherit His perfect Torah. G-d willing, by celebrating the Torah through studying it for many hours over Shavuot, we can tap into the Torah's unparalleled words of inspiration.

May we always remember that no matter what we go through in life, the Torah will always be there for us, ready to give us the boost that we so often need.

Danny Wolfe grew up in Denver Colorado, and double majored at Brandeis University in Near Eastern and Jewish Studies and Politics. For the last three years Rabbi Wolfe has served as a campus Rabbi for Aish New York at SUNY Albany and this summer he and his family are moving back to Denver to work with Young professionals with the Jewish Experience.

HONORING MY MOTHER-IN-LAW (cont. from p. 1)...

keeping a kosher kitchen and about how to create a beautiful, Jewish home. When I hesitated, had questions or doubts about how I wanted to live my life, Lillian was always willing to share what she had gone through and the things with which she had struggled over the years. Lillian was truly an inspiration to me as I moved toward becoming an observant Jew.

So, by now you are probably asking yourself, what does this have to do with Shavuot? On Shavuot, we traditionally read the Book of Ruth. Ruth is recognized as one of the great Jewish heroines for two reasons. Firstly, Ruth's journey toward conversion to Judaism showed a desire for, and commitment to, being Jewish that went above and beyond what one born into the religion may have expressed. Secondly, after losing her husband, Ruth remained extremely dedicated to her mother-in-law, Naomi. These two merits, while seemingly intertwined, since Ruth not only left her homeland and all that was familiar to her in order to return to Judea with (cont. on p. 4)



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HONORING MY MOTHER-IN-LAW (cont. from p. 3)...

Naomi, are each unique approbations to her character. What Ruth did, she did with her whole heart. Rather than let her mother-in-law go hungry, Ruth went to the fields to gather the fallen remnants of grain in order to provide food for both her mother-in-law and herself. At the same time, she held her head high and set an example to all, even when she was rejected by the people around her.

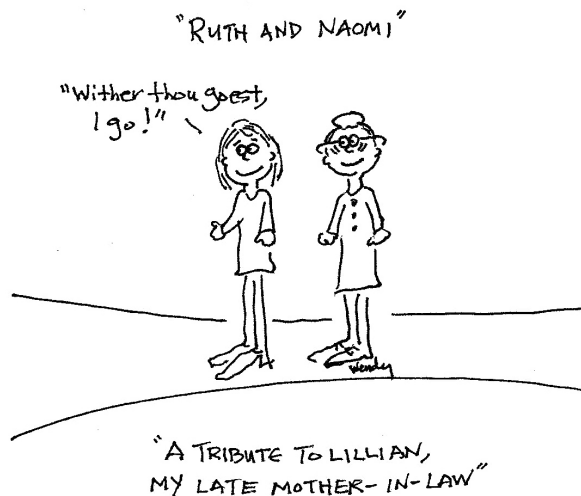
Like Ruth, Lillian was a convert to Judaism. As she entered her adult life, she found that she desired to follow the path to Judaism. She went through years of tireless dedication and study in order to fulfill her longing to enter the covenant of Israel. As the biblical Ruth did so long ago, Lillian whole-heartedly committed herself to her family, her community, and to God. With great honor and love, I spent many years learning from her example and hoping that one day I would be able to emulate that spirit.

On February 13, 2015, the *neshama* (soul) of Leah Yehudis

bas Avraham Aveinu, my beloved mother-in-law, was returned to God. Since her passing, the absence of her spirit and her light in our family and our community has been noticeable. Just as Ruth clung to her mother-in-law, Naomi, I also felt a bond with Lillian that extended far beyond a relationship bound by marriage. She was my mother, the grandmother to my children (whom she adored more than anything), and my friend. The legacy of Lillian's life will be something to be passed on now through my own deeds and words.

Since her passing, on each Shabbat, I kindle one extra candle in Lillian's honor. I write these words in her honor. My only hope is that this tribute will serve to inspire many others to follow in her footsteps. Good Yom Tov!

Georgia Kornblatt is a nurse, wife and the mother of two wonderful kids and two cats. She lives in Kingston, PA.



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