

ברשת

HIGH HOLIDAY SERVICES: FEELING LIKE A JEW, AT LAST

by Minna Morse



A week or so before Rosh Hashanah, I told a friend of mine that I was planning to go to Baltimore (from my home in Washington) to attend the Etz Chaim High Holidays Beginners' Service. My friend, had who been getting more involved in Judaism in some form for about a year, had attended the service the year before. I'd been at it--consciously--for, oh, a month or two. "Are you sure you're ready for that?" he asked, "You know that it's three days this year..." Well, perhaps I hadn't sufficiently thought this through.

In fact, I hadn't. I just did it. Signed up. Even the rabbi who suggested it in the first place, was surprised that I was going through with it.

Less than two weeks before, I hadn't even considered taking off work for the holidays. I never had before. Why now? Why make trouble for myself? But later that week, I attended a lecture on the meaning of Rosh Hashanah, and by the end of the hour I'd decided to take off from work, even if it meant taking a leave without pay.

The timing of the holy days, for me, was eerily perfect. Only in the past few months had I been become exposed to Judaism as a religion and a way of life (beyond the de-theologized Passover seders of my childhood). And now, having decided that I wanted to believe in G-d (a major obstacle for a born-and-bred agnostic), and having decided to take Judaism seriously,

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NEW YEAR/NEW FAMILY: LONG DISTANCE THE NEXT BEST THING TO BEING THERE

by Lisa Marcus

Dear Rabbi Rosenbaum,

Thank you very much for the London Rosh Hashanah recommendations. They certainly added to my most enjoyable vacation. I wanted to share some of my experiences with you, and perhaps the next time someone inquires about the Jewish community in London, you could pass on some details of my encounter.

First of all, London happens to be a fabulous city: clean, terrific underground system, much history and character, and lots to do. And, unlike many other European countries, *everyone* speaks English!

Since I was to stay in London for ten days, and would be separated from my family for Rosh Hashanah, I decided that I was going to make a meaningful start of my new year by comparing the British synagogue services with New York services. I'll let you in on my conclusions upfront -- Jewish traditions and prayers are the same all over the world. Whether you are from New York City or Timbuktu, Jewish observance remains unchanged.

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WHAT'S IN A NAME?

by Rabbi Aryeh Rodin

"These are the mitzvot whose fruit one eats in this world but whose principal remains intact for the world to come...visiting the sick..." (Talmud, Shabbat 127a).

As chaplain of a bustling hospital in Dallas, Texas, I come into contact with many patients who are in need. I see, first-hand, the benefits which ensue from the mitzvah of visiting the sick, benefits which enrich the patient and the visitor alike.

Clearly, being a patient in a hospital is no fun. The pillows may be soft; the mattress may be firm; the television reception may be better than at home. None the less, all these amenities do little to compensate for the discomfort, the anxiety, and the boredom that characterize one's hospital stay. Any disruption of the hospital routine is welcome, but none more so than a visit from smiling face, the sound of a cheerful greeting, and the opportunity to share one's worries and troubles. And yet, as is so often the case, the "giver" winds up on the receiving end. One who visits a hospital, learns quickly that no part of the miracle which we call life is to be taken for granted. Encountering the pain of another, often brings to the surface one's subliminal gratitude for the many aspects of

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FEELING LIKE A JEW, AT LAST (cont. from p. 1)

how could I miss this holiday--which is all about declaring belief in, and, allegiance to, G-d?

Still, while part of me liked the notion of allegiance, the old agnostic in me held back. Was I, as my friend suggested, trying to go too far, too fast? Signing up for the Rosh Hashanah services simply felt right, like a logical next step. But my friend had a point, the steps I was taking were beginning to get bigger and closer together.

I had to stop and ask myself, why was I doing this, this whole "Jewish thing"? And these are the answers I came up with:

1) I am a Jew, which is something I accept, and I like. I have, I like to think, a "Jewish soul." 2) I like the idea of G-d. It is a premise I am willing to accept, or, at least, one that at this point, I refuse to dismiss. 3) I like the way the prayers make me feel. I like the image of G-d, which the prayers conjure up in me. I like the notion of our relationship to such a G-d. I like the humanism embedded in the religion. 4) I want to be literate in Judaism. I want, at the very least, to be able to pass on to my children more than what was passed on to me. So I dive in, in a way I have done before in other matters. What do you learn from dabbling, from dipping your little toe in the water? I want to get immersed. Get the feel, the big picture. But, right now, I assure myself, I'm doing it as a student, a participant-observer. 5) I want to know the source, the unabridged version, of the religion before I choose what to take, what to leave. I don't want those choices made for me. That is why I'm starting as a participant-observer of Orthodoxy, rather than some more "palatable" version.

That is why I think I felt "ready" for this Rosh Hashanah service. I was entering it as an observer, but without the reservations of skepticism bogging me down. I read once somewhere that there are two ways of analyzing, or coming to understand, something. The more popular of the two is doubting. We look for the holes in something, the crack in the framework which would bring a towering structure tumbling down. The other is believing. Seen on its own terms, does it stand, despite its apparent "cracks"? I tend toward the believing approach these days.

So, on Wednesday afternoon, I hopped on the train for Baltimore, secure in my motivations (having analyzed them thoroughly), but completely unsure of what to expect from Etz Chaim.

What I found pleased me.

First of all, as an out-of-towner, I'd been accepted as the guest for the duration of the holiday at the home of a family in the Etz Chaim community. In my case, that was the family of Rabbi Gottdiener and his wife, Robin.

I am not beyond suffering a twinge of culture shock in Orthodox homes--the complexities of kashruth, the many children, the, to me, foreign names of those children. (Before this visit, I'd only heard names like Rifka and Malka in The Fiddler on the Roof). But, luckily, the Gottdieners knew who they were dealing with. They were patient with me, and were happy to answer all of my questions.

Within the first hour in their home, I stood frozen before their double sink, fork in my hand, asking nervously which side was for milk. Robin laughed and said, "I like you, Minna; you ask the right questions."

I went to services that night with Rabbi Gottdiener and his

eldest son, Yosef. Though I'd never before attended Rosh Hashanah services, I had been to Sabbath services, and had always suffered the "what-page-are-we-on-in-the-prayer book blues." Most often, I would give up, listen to the Hebrew, and take in the "atmosphere."

But at the Etz Chaim service, with the help of commentary and page directions from Rabbi Jonathan Seidemann of Ner Israel Rabbinical College, I was able to follow along in English.

I also appreciated those times when Rabbi Seidemann had the congregation recite certain passages in English, rather than Hebrew. Those of us who didn't read Hebrew got a chance to pray in unison with the rest of the congregation, an act which gave strength to the words we each spoke. On the other hand, had the entire service been presented in English, we could not have felt that other sense of unity which the service brought, not just with the others standing there in the room, but with Jews everywhere, who were speaking the same words, in the same order, in Hebrew.

The next morning's service, though longer, felt more comfortable. Having followed the text the night before, I was able to begin to absorb it more that day. And with each reading, (for there was a great deal of repetition), I was able to consider the words, their meaning, their implications, more and more.

The morning began with a Beginners' Service, led by Rabbi Gottdiener, which served as a nice warm-up for the rest of the day. It gave me a chance to identify the other "Beginners" and to get into the right mindset before entering the "real" service downstairs.

Actually, I found that aside from that morning session, I did not spend as much time with the other "Beginners" as with Etz Chaim regulars. I was pleased to see what a mixed group there was, from the black-hatted strictly observant, to modern Orthodox, to semi-observant explorers like me. I found everyone I spoke with, warm and welcoming.

I also found, as I had before, that the separation of men and women in the service was not an issue for me. From the proliferation of material on the subject in our orientation packets, I gathered that the center expected it to be an issue for some.

From a purely pragmatic point of view, when there is no separation, families stick together, and it is rather hard for a semi-reserved single person to get to know anyone. Also, I find that I like the idea of a community of women on one side, and a community of men on the other. And certainly, crucially, in prayer, who needs the distraction of even *unconscious* "scoping"? I surprised myself when I realized that I would have preferred it if the only men who were visible were Rabbi Seidemann and the *chazzan* (cantor). The one time I was glad for some visibility was when it enabled me to witness a woman passing her infant over to her husband for his "turn". I understand this is not common practice, but three cheers, anyway.

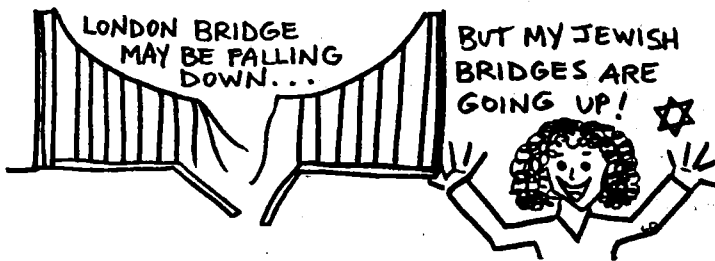
In all, I felt very comfortable with the people at Etz Chaim, and increasingly comfortable with the act of prayer. Before attending these services, I'd never *davened* (prayed). By the end of the second day, I found myself bowing and straightening at all the appropriate parts of the *Amidah* (central prayer). All of a sudden, it felt natural!

The steps I'm taking toward Judaism are indeed getting bigger and closer together. But they are not huge, not

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NEW YEAR/NEW FAMILY (cont. from p. 1)

So, the highlights. The Sunday before Rosh Hashanah I visited the Jewish Learning Exchange in Little Venice, which is run by Rabbi Rashi and Ruth Simon, and Rabbi Daniel Kirschner. Well, if I was homesick before I arrived, I wasn't after I left. I spent the day there attending the pre-holiday Seminar which included three classes about the Bible and High Holidays. Not only were Ruth and her assistant, Michelle, wonderful hostesses, but Rabbis Simon and Kirschner were exceptionally stimulating speakers. I immediately felt as though I was at Rabbi Buchwald's Beginners Service at Lincoln Square (which I am a big fan of!), and, best of all, they even use some of Rabbi Buchwald's training materials!



For Erev Rosh Hashanah, I ran from the matinee performance of "Miss Saigon" (not to be missed!), to Marble Arch Synagogue. Upon entering the synagogue, my bag was immediately rummaged in search of bombs, weapons, etc. A short service was led by Rabbi Jonathan Saks (inspiring leader, appointed Chief Rabbi as of Sept 1, 1991), and Reverend Lionel Rosenfeld (dynamic Chazzan, with super voice and charismatic personality). Then, off to a traditional dinner with the Lawrence family -- Zeddy, Yvonne, Grandma and Grandpa, their nephew Ari from Israel, and friends from Brazil. This lovely family welcomed me as though I were part of their own, and we ate, sang and talked all night long. And, as my weary head hit the pillow that evening, my family in the U.S. was just sitting down to their meal.

Rosh Hashanah. Lots of beautiful British hats (I must not leave this country without one!). Green dot at my seat. Should a terrorist attack take place, I was to run to the green marked place in the synagogue, where I would be given instructions for evacuation. After services, lunch with another welcoming family, as well as Rabbi Saks' charming family. Lively discussions, reflections of my grandfather born in England, and thoughts of my great grandfather Katz, who was an Orthodox rabbi from Hungary.

At the end of the day, we pushed our elbows from the table, and Rabbi Saks led us to a stream at Regent Park for *Tashlich* service. As I spoke to the members of this synagogue who were so excited because I was from New York City (and I was equally thrilled by their marvelous accents!), I felt a confirmation of my strong Jewish identity. As I threw my pieces of bread into the running water, I thought of my ancestors performing the same ritual for generations and generations before -- and I felt much peace, fulfillment and happiness.

I was not with my family this Rosh Hashanah. However, this New Year in London, United Kingdom, will always be treasured. Thank you again and good Yom Tov!

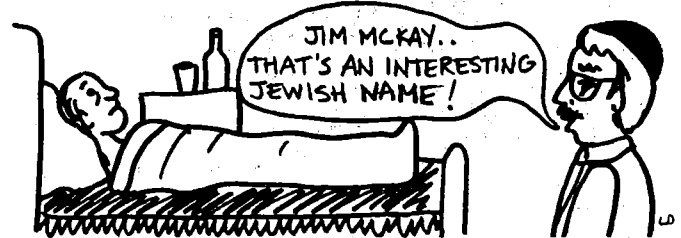
Fondly,
Lisa Marcus

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WHAT'S IN A NAME? (cont. from p. 1)

one's own life that "go right" and, are therefore, often unnoticed. The visitor is also privy to uncommon courage, and stands to gain a great deal from witnessing the unshakable faith demonstrated by others who face uphill battles as they fight for their lives. A hospital visit can be most inspiring, and it is concerning one such encounter that I would like to share with you.

Medical City Hospital in Dallas, Texas, the hospital with which I am affiliated, provides its chaplains with a "religious census printout" which groups patients according to their religion. It is my practice to visit all Jewish patients, and after exchanging a few pleasantries, I ask if there is anything I can do for them.



I end my visit by asking them their Hebrew names, and recite a chapter of Psalms, asking G-d for their speedy recovery.

Many of the names on the printout are typically Jewish: Cohen, Goldberg, Levy, Schwartz. But on one particular day as I glanced at the roster, one name caught my eye. . . Jim McKay*. Though I thought that this person's name must have been mistakenly recorded on the Jewish list, I still visited Mr. McKay. Surely, it is always appropriate to extend a kindness to a fellow human being.

I entered Jim's room and asked him about his circumstances. He had contracted meningitis, and at first the doctors weren't sure whether he would survive. Yet, with the help of G-d, he pulled through, and by the time I saw him, he was well on the road to recovery.

In our conversation he made mention of where he lived. To my knowledge it was a remote neighborhood, where one would assume no Jews resided. I asked him his Hebrew name, and he told me that he did not have one. It seemed that my original suspicion was confirmed.

I asked him outright, "Jim, are you Jewish?" He said, "Rabbi, I'm 100% Jewish. My mother married a convert, that's why my name doesn't sound Jewish." The manner in which he answered my questions reflected a certain amount of Jewish pride, and it prompted my next question. "Is there anything you do that relates to Judaism?"

To this he sadly shook his head and said that the only thing he does religiously is to say the prayers before he goes to sleep.

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* Not his real name

FEELING LIKE A JEW, AT LAST (cont. from p. 2)

insurmountable, not even daunting. I am not forcing myself into anything unnatural for me.

What have I done? Since early August, I've put a mezzuzah on my door, I've given up pork and seafood, I've started attending a class on prayer, and I'm learning Hebrew. Now that I've attended Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur services, for the first time in my life I really feel like a Jew.

Minna Morse, is an editorial assistant with Smithsonian Magazine and attends classes with Etz Chaim in Washington.

WHAT'S IN A NAME? (cont. from p. 3)

"What do you say?" I asked "I say 'Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the L-rd my soul to keep.'" "Jim," I interjected, "That is not a Jewish prayer." "But, Rabbi, then I say 'Shema Yisroel Hashem Elokeinu Hashem Echad'. I try to say it every night, but sometimes I forget. After this brush with death, I will try to never miss saying it!"



I was truly taken aback! Here was a person who seemingly had veered very far away from Judaism, an individual who didn't even have a Hebrew name, who lived among non-Jews, who had no Jewish affiliation, yet who would still recite the sacred prayer of his saintly forefathers before going to sleep. The *Yiddische Neshama*, (the Jewish soul) the *Pintele Yid*, (the spark of a Jew) lay dormant beneath the blanket of assimilation, but it had not perished.

I felt my heart rise within me, and I said, "Jim, you inspire me!"

Jim McKay smiled, as though I had given him a very precious gift. But his gift to me was by far the more valuable.

"These are the mitzvot whose fruit one eats in this world, but whose principal remains intact for the world to come...visiting the sick..."

Aryeh Rodin, is the rabbi of Congregation Ohev Shalom, Dallas, Texas.

We are pleased to announce the availability of "The Crash Course in Basic Judaism," a series of 5 tapes by Rabbi Ephraim Buchwald. The set is \$25, and can be ordered from the National Jewish Outreach Program: 212 986-7450.

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