

MY JEWISH JOURNEY AND THE CONSIDERING GOD SALON

I suspect there are as many different experiences with religion, and religious identity, in this room as there are people here. I'm honored to have been asked to share a bit of my experience, and my story of how Or Shalom and the Considering God Salon opened the way for me to feel fully part of the religion I was born into.

As a child I knew I was Jewish, but the meaning of that was fairly vague, having to do with attitudes toward, and actions forwarding, social justice. As a very young child, for example, I remember standing in a picket line with my mother, helping push my little brother's stroller, in a march for workers' rights. And as I grew older, there were many conversations with my father about what was right, what was fair, for all people. I didn't think about any of this as particularly Jewish, and yet somehow that was what I came to identify as being Jewish. There was no discussion of religion, or of religious belief, or even of being Jewish, except, indirectly, on the very few occasions when, as a child, things were said to me that I later came to understand were antisemitic.

I was not told what to think, but I was taught to question and to seek truth, and thus began a lifelong search for meaning that has led me in many directions. Rare experiences in synagogues, however, left me uncomfortable with the fixed beliefs, the God-focus, and the paternalistic liturgy. My search led me to activism, and, for several years, to Buddhism. I learned and benefited a great deal from these experiences, but still never felt I had found my home.

It was only in my early 60s that I realized that I wanted to know more about Judaism, and my place in it. A Jewish Buddhist friend's invitation took me to a Reform Temple, where I began my study of Judaism and Torah, but where I ultimately felt out of place. Next, I tried a progressive Conservative congregation. In both those congregations, while I was drawn to the sense of community, and where (as I was reminded last night) I loved the music, I eventually felt out of place, with the God-focused, paternalistic language and liturgy. Next, I joined a Jewish secular humanist group. In all of these places, I became actively involved, studied, and participated. Always, though, I became more and more uncomfortable, especially with the liturgy, no matter how hard I tried. And while, in each place, I could discuss my questions with a few friends, this discussion could never be congregation-wide.

Finally, through another friend, my husband, Michael, and I learned about Or Shalom. We heard R. Katie speak at a Lunch & Learn about being a seeker. That fit, and I immediately went to talk to her. She told me about the Considering God Salon, and we went to our first meeting soon afterward. In that meeting, I found a place where there was no fixed belief system, neither a "requirement" to believe in God nor a demand not to, and an

open, thoughtful, questioning, and supportive group of people. And I knew I'd finally found my home.

What's been most remarkable about this now more-than four-year experience, both with the Considering God Salon and with Or Shalom, is that I have found a congregational family, in which I can embrace, and enlarge, my own experience as a spiritual being, and in the course of that I've found ways to express this that I'd never imagined.

With the help of the salon and of R. Katie, and my own limited level of Hebrew language learning, I've been able to design a few expressions, in Hebrew, that I could think and say during prayer that have meaning for me, and that enabled me to participate and still feel true to myself.

I went to R. Katie for help with this, and she suggested some alternatives I might try. For example, instead of the masculine form of "blessed are you," "baruch ata," I could say the feminine form, "bruchah at yah." And, she supported me in creating Hebrew expressions to replace Adonai or other terms referring to God. I wanted to use Hebrew, which has a dimension and depth in prayer that I don't experience in English. So I developed my own opening to prayer, "bruchah at yah, ein-sof," "blessed is the infinite, without end," which I follow with "ruach v'nishmat chayim," "spirit and breath of life," words that I can speak along with the congregation, but that are consistent with my beliefs.

And at home, I developed a practice that includes both a daily morning prayer and a Mussar reading; and at nighttime a gratitude prayer that my husband and I share, followed by saying what we are grateful for that day.

In this way, and many others, I have found a group in the Considering God Salon, and a congregation in Or Shalom, where I can share my thoughts, searches, and experiences, and those of the others in the group, and in our community, in ways that are sometimes challenging, but always fulfilling and enriching, and never, it seems, complete. I will always be grateful for the gifts that Or Shalom and the Considering God Salon have given and continue to give me, and, I hope, many of you as well.