

Steps along the path

When Steven and I first knew each other, we used to argue-- great animated, frustrating interchanges-- about religion. What is religion? Are spirituality and religion synonymous? Were God and organized religious practice necessary for one to think of oneself as a religious person?

I had come into our relationship as a non-practicing Christian, almost a religion major in college, having read incessantly the words of Paul Tillich. Mine was an existential view of religion. Religion as connection to the transcendent core of universal meaning and truth found through deliberate action in the world. On this score, I knew that Steven was a truly spiritual person, never happy with the mundane existence of everyday life, never satisfied unless he felt somehow he was contributing to the greater good, always seeking the deeper meaning of things. But he denied a religious self. At this stage of his life, he would have nothing to do with organized religion, even though through his teenage years he had been an active and extraordinarily knowledgeable participant in his Jewish congregation, completing a minyon on many Saturdays, preparing kids for their B'nai Mitzvot, even being paid at times to chant Torah. What great arguments we had.

As time went on, the arguments faded. Our lives proceeded along the normal path of adulthood: finding jobs, buying a house, having children. Then, when our firstborn was 5 years old, Steven decided to enroll her in Havurah's Shabbat School. Out of a desire to be sensitive to me, he whisked Emily away each Saturday without

a word. This went on for a year-- leaving me in silence, isolation. Finally, I spoke up. Why was he taking her off to this program without involving me? If there was to be religion in our house, it would be a family activity.

After that, I participated in the Shabbat school program. This was a parent-run program, which meant that I, the Christian, got to teach these little Jewish kids about their history, culture, and their Bible. Of course, this is my history, too, though I'm not sure the other parents understood that. I had, after all, been taught the 10 commandments, knew the stories about creation, Abraham, Moses. But teaching in the Jewish tradition was not easy. Each time my turn to teach came up, I leaned heavily on Steven's knowledge and his lack of anxiety about taking charge of a group of kids. With his support, I took little steps towards understanding and involvement in the Shabbat school program. Reluctantly, nervously at times.

In teaching, I learned. I learned about Israel, about Jews living in concert with Islamic society in the Middle Ages and Renaissance, about Abraham and Jonah and Ruth and Rebecca. Sometimes I was just going through the motions, doing what was expected, not certain how I felt about these obligations.

Each year we went to high holiday services. I always went the first day of Rosh Hosannah but usually left before the end. (Shifting from hourlong Christian services to all day praying was not easy. Having two little kids who couldn't sit through hours and hours of services provided an easy excuse.) I never fasted on Yom Kippur, though I always attended Yiskor and Neilah services.

Often, I contributed food for the break-fast. The year Steven and I were honored with an aliyah I felt the warmth and protectiveness of the congregation like a huge collective tallit surrounding me. Another year, the anguish of facing my confusion about my identity and beliefs and where I fit in forced me to leave the service.

Gradually, I have taken on the ritual and actions of a practicing Jew. A major turning point was preparing my children, and me, for their B'nai Mitzvot. It was like therapy in a way, making me confront, and openly express, my hopes for my children and my inner spiritual and communal needs.

I am a timid person, not easily taking on practices or behaviors unless I feel completely competent. But I was allowed to take small steps at my own speed, being welcomed, even honored with aliyahs and opportunities to participate in ways I felt ok about, without pressure to do more than I was comfortable with.

The path was not always a smooth one. I had no conscious sense of direction. I didn't and don't know where all this will lead. Would it be better if I had just converted and let the faith, religious practice, spirituality fall into place? Jewish "wisdom" (so to speak) would argue that the non-Jewish partner should be cajoled, even required, to convert early on in the relationship, for example, before marriage. But does this order of things connect one to the transcendent, to the core of universal meaning and spiritual life?