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My Summer Vacation

Drash/Pinchas

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Last shabbos, Lisa and I went to shul in my grandmother's church. Yes, you heard correctly.

While we vacationed on the east coast, we visited a bunch of my cousins who live in a little town on the North Fork of Long Island called Cutchogue.

I have a lot of relatives in that area because my ancestors settled there in the early 17th century, escaping religious intolerance in Rhode Island, where they'd moved to escape religious intolerance in Plymouth, where they'd moved to escape. . . . Maybe because of that history, my family have always been very private and closed-mouthed about their religious beliefs. I knew my grandmother always went to church and was even a deacon, but it shocked me to learn that she fully expected to be reunited with my grandfather when she died. I had mistaken her reserve for secularism.

My grandmother belonged to the Presbyterian Church of Cutchogue, a pretty, modest white building with a spire, built about 1900. This year Lisa and I noticed a sign in front of the church: North Fork Reform Synagogue, services every 1st and 3rd Friday. Well, this bore investigation, and Saturday morning we went to see if there was any sign of Jews.

Sure enough, about 40 people were gathered in the sanctuary singing Reform shabbos morning prayers when we walked in, and a young woman rabbi was on the bima. The focus of the morning was the Bat Torah of a 75 year old woman who had been born Jewish, but had entered a synagogue for the first time in her life only 5 years ago, impelled there by the recent death of her mother. She gave a lovely, literate and moving drash about her pathway to Judaism, and many of her extended family participated in the service.

I'd never gone to church with my grandmother, so as I looked around at the large stained glass windows on both sides of the sanctuary, I was startled to notice that one was dedicated to the memory of my great great grandparents, Joseph Hull Moore and Sarah Case Moore. I was struck by the connections being made for me in that space, between my birth heritage and the heritage of Jews, which has been mine for just over 10 years.

Some of you know my story of becoming a Jew, but I want to recount it again now. Like most stories in our lives, this one deepens for me every year, as I understand it better. Initially, I wanted to become a Jew—in fact, needed to—because Lisa's rabbinical school, HUC, told her she couldn't be ordained with a nonJewish spouse. This was in 1989, a full year before the Reform Movement voted to ordain lesbians and gay men, and immediately after we returned from Lisa's first year of rabbinical school in Jerusalem. In that whole year, we'd never heard of this rule. But Rabbi Shelly Marder, who was HUC registrar, even

asked Lisa if she wanted to keep my existence a secret! Now that was an ironic message, because Lisa was the first HUC rabbinic student to say to the school, I have a partner whom I wish you to treat like my spouse. It was our 'issue'—teaching HUC how to treat same-sex couples—so we weren't about to go back in the closet.

It turned out I didn't really know what it meant to go forward, however. I thought, OK, Lisa was obviously born to be a rabbi, so if I need to be a Jew for that to happen, Poof! Make me a Jew! Turns out that's not quite how it happens. First, you have to get yourself a sponsoring rabbi.

Have you ever heard that people seeking to become Jews are supposed to be rebuffed three times, as a test of their sincerity? Well nowadays, the Reform movement encourages rabbis to make people feel welcome to Judaism. In fact, in the Guidelines for Conversion just approved by Reform Rabbis, it says the old three-refusals tradition should be scrapped, and prospective Jews should be greeted with "joy and enthusiasm."

But I got the old-fashioned response, though for perfectly good reasons. For my sponsoring rabbi I chose to ask Rabbi Laura Geller, who was Hillel rabbi at USC, where I was getting an MBA. That poor woman was so busy I think the idea of taking on a student was the last thing she had in mind, and she asked me to *please* find an alternative. But I couldn't find anyone else I was willing to study with, and finally she said yes, on one condition: she would teach me about Judaism if I would teach her to get rid of her homophobia. As a straight woman with terrific progressive politics, she knew it was politically incorrect to have negative feelings about gay people, but she'd been taught a bunch of lies and attitudes just like anyone, and we all know it takes work to get rid of that stuff. So I agreed.

Meeting together, right away I wanted to be the good student and know exactly what I had to know or do to have her convert me. Imagine my surprise when she said, "Oh you can become a Jew anytime you say. After all, you've lived in Israel for a year, you keep a Jewish home, you live with a rabbinic student—you're more Jewishly educated than many converts and probably most Jews. So just tell me when you think you're ready."

Well, that set me back. I was working on the Poof! Make me a Jew! Model, all exteriorized and judged by others, and suddenly I had to listen to my own still, small voice on the subject. So we studied, and met, and talked about life cycle events, and lesbian and gay culture and history, and sexism in Judaism, and Arab-Israeli politics, and glbt civil rights, and I was just loving it. Finally, about sixteen months later Laura says, maybe it's time you thought about actually becoming a Jew. And I realized I was ready spiritually, not just intellectually.

I'm going to leave out a lot of backstory here, but suffice it to say, if my 25 year old self could have looked into a crystal ball and seen me then, at age 47, I would have been totally shocked. For years I was agnostic at best, suspicious and resentful of organized religion for lots of perfectly valid political reasons. What I didn't count on was, 20 years ago this spring, getting sober, which did wonders for putting me in touch with my spirit. Once I knew I had a spiritual life separate from organized religion, I had the opportunity to work out some kind of relationship with my creator.
Still, there <u>were</u> all those objections to 'organized religion' to beat back. When I became a

Jew, I said there were three factors making it possible for me: one is the secular history of Jews, where I saw my political values expressed; the second is feminist Judaism; and the third is a method of study I had learned as a lit crit major in grad school. I totally *got* the joys of challenging a text until it can work for you, or at least until you can take it on its merits. "Two Jews, three opinions" made me feel safe from the 'take it on faith' line that had sent me running from Christianity. Even though I harbored a lot of concerns about the patriarchal--and homophobic--and hegemonistic aspects of the written texts, I was willing to engage, to wrestle with G-d as Jacob showed us.

So today when I read Pinchas, this week's torah portion, I feel presented with a lot of options as well as some hard work. In addition to a run-down of all the wonderful holidays in the Jewish calendar, which now are the backbone of my life, there's all that weird stuff about animal sacrifice. Fortunately, I've learned, 'the rabbis' decided to do away with animal sacrifice after the destruction of the Second Temple, just over 2000 years ago. There's also a ton of patriarchy marching along, with the Census of all the Israelites just before the invasion of the Promised Land.
Within that census, as each tribe's allotment of land is apportioned, comes the story of Zelophehad's daughters, often pointed to as a feminist point of light in a dark sky of male-only rights. It seems that, in a world of total male inheritance, Zelophehad had no sons, but five daughters—who are all named, by the way (Machla, Noa, Haglah, Milca, and Tirza), a small triumph of inclusion that women are always grateful for. These plucky chicks come before all the top guys—Moses, the priest, the chieftains, and the whole assembly at the tent of meeting, and say, "Our father died in the wilderness. . . and he has left no sons. Let not our father's name be lost to his clan just because he had no son! Give us a holding among our father's kinsmen!"
And amazingly enough, as you see in your seat bulletin, G-d says—and please note, this is not a decision of Moses or the assembly, but of G-d —"The plea of Zelophehad's daughters is just." G-d then expounds on the laws of inheritance, which actually make it fairly unlikely that a woman will ever inherit anything. Furthermore, the rabbis come along in Talmud and restrict women's rights to property even further.

Kinda make you mad? But wait! As Lisa always says, and Rabbi Lappe taught us this year, let's look for a minute at the macro lessons of these two pieces of Jewish tradition, animal sacrifice and the property rights of women, and see what they tell us. Who the heck were these rabbis anyway? Well, they were just rabbis. Smart people who read a lot of Torah, argued about its meaning, and had their arguments documented in Mishnah and then dissected in Talmud.

What they did was radically change the laws and practice of Judaism. Over a few centuries, they justified the abandonment of the most central, sacred rituals in Judaism, sacrifices, because the demands of the 'modern' world—their 2nd through 6th Century CE world—led them to believe that was the correct path. They also took the lesson of Zelophehad's daughters and ringed it round with all kinds of restrictions, which they also deemed correct in their day.

Steps forward, steps maybe not so forward, but see the point? Steps! Rabbis Geller and Edwards and Lappe teach us that Jewish tradition DEMANDS change, that it is the responsibility of every generation to reinterpret the tradition. Yes, that process must be

careful and long. But the imperative of change is there, in Torah and in Talmud.

A person who wishes to embrace the covenant one goes before a Bet Din, court of three Jews, usually rabbis but not necessarily, followed by a lovely rebirthing ritual in the mikveh. For my Bet Din I asked Rabbi Geller, Rabbi Denise Eger, and Rabbi Sue Elwell, [as well as my favorite rabbinic student as an observer].

Now, a Bet Din is supposed to verify one's sincerity in wishing to become a Jew, and can ask any question they wish, like "Who's your favorite character in the Bible and why?" I can't actually remember much about my Bet Din except for one question: How will you know you're a Jew on Wednesday? For me, in my early days of living a Jewish life, I'd connect most strongly with my Jewishness on shabbos, or another holiday, where I was called upon to assert myself as a Jew. But over the last decade, answers to this question have gathered until now I think I'm more likely to know I'm a Jew on a Wednesday, because I *respond* as a Jew. Like the Wednesday some years ago when my boss made an anti-Semitic comment, or the Wednesday Lisa's father had a stroke. Of course, actions and responses braid together in a life that is simply Jewish at the core, the way I'm lesbian at the core.

By the way, that was the central 'Aha' for me and Rabbi Geller in our homophobia study: that Jews and queers are who we are because of intrinsic identities, not behaviors. Like the mezuzah on the door of my grandmother's church, our identities are layered, built on the traditions we are born into as unique individuals and woven together by the experiences and choices we make throughout life. That's what I was trying to express when I made this tallis, using the log cabin quilt squares that my Yankee ancestor aunt made in the late 1800s, layering them with the correct kosher fabrics to fashion a prayer shawl that would bring together both traditions, tying the tzitziot in the magical prime number of 613 knots to commemorate the 613 commandments found in Torah. Tonight, my two favorites are the commandment to welcome the stranger, the foundational commandment for accepting new Jews into the people Israel, and the commandment to love one's neighbor as oneself, our best hope for peace in this world.

Shabbat shalom.