

March 30th, 2007  
Denis Hiebsch embracing the covenant

Beth Chayim Chadashim  
Los Angeles, CA

Shabbat Shalom!

I have a small story for you. My small story.

Imagine this: A guy born in East Germany, the older son in a family that is consciously not religious, raised in a setting where Christmas is like Thanksgiving: A big family get-together with a lot of food and but also gifts, growing up as a regular East German boy under communism. And now that guy stands in front of you proclaiming he is a Jew. What happened?!?

Well, a lot of things happened.

The first is a miracle.

Seven years ago, when I was 20, I was deeply convinced that my perfect life would be characterized by a good job, recognition, a house with a nice garden, children, and a wife! The latter expectation-having a wife sometimes caused me to get depressed and I did not understand why.

At that time I was exploring the Internet as a medium to chat with people far away from my ugly little college town east of Berlin. I do not know how and why, but I contacted this person who seemed interesting: A guy from Mexico. Well, I did not know a single person from Mexico at that time, so when I saw his picture I figured that all Mexicans must look like this! This person happened to visit Berlin which was two hours away by train from my little town. I decided that it was my job to show Germany to that guy from Mexico. After 2 months of exchanging emails, and my insistence that we have to meet, we finally did so. We met for the first time at a train station in Berlin. There, having been in the conversation for some time, he asked me whether I was gay. I said no. Well, I should mention that the web site where we met was called outpersonals.com. So obviously he knew more about me than I knew or than I wanted to know at that time!

We spent the weekends together, me traveling back and forth between my ugly little town and the big exciting city of Berlin. One of our trips brought us to lake Wannsee, just outside of Berlin. We went to the Villa Wannsee, where the infamous conference about the final solution to the Jewish question; was held in 1942. Here at Wannsee, Nazi leaders laid out how to plan the genocide of the Jews. I had actually been inside this building before, which is a museum today, with my high school as part of an educational trip. Although I was talking with my Mexican guy the whole time, we had not yet talked about the museum. So walking up the stairs into this beautiful building-whose beauty stands in stark contrast to its history I asked my guy from Mexico: Do you know what happened here? He answered, Of course, I am a Jew.

I had never met a Jew before. I stared at him and froze: I felt I could not enter the building. But finally we did enter, and once inside the museum, I just felt overwhelmed. I felt like I couldn't breathe, like I was running out of air. I had to go outside. This museum had just turned into something deeply upsetting. In that same moment I realized that my Mexican guy's strong German accent was actually Yiddish, which he had learned growing up but of which I knew nothing up to that point.

Well, this is how I met my first Jew. And Aaron has been my partner ever since then.

When Aaron received his tenure with UCLA, I came with him to Los Angeles-first on a study abroad program and then as a graduate student. At UCLA Aaron met the rebbetzin Tracy, of course! and at her invitation we both came to BCC.

Here at BCC is where I attended, for the first time ever, a religious service of any kind.

It was very strange, I remember people constantly standing up and sitting down, bowing to the left, right or down, reading a book from the end to the beginning in letters I could not read and with English translations I did not understand. Instead of questioning, I just tried to "perform" like the people around me-turning pages from the back to the front of the book, standing up and sitting down, several times! all the while trying to understand what's going on. I remember: the scariest moment was the point during services when I had to cover my eyes, because I could not see what was happening next and when to continue. Or maybe it is because it is the single moment which has to stand out from the rest of the service!

Visiting BCC for some time with my partner Aaron, I got more used to its practices-I knew when to bow, when to turn, and in which direction! Aaron joined BCC as a member and I joined shortly after that, having secured financing for my graduate studies and hence the right to stay legally in this country. Realizing that my membership dues were relatively low (BCC had just created a student membership level for cases like me), I felt I should give to BCC in other ways. And suddenly I became the treasurer of this place! Then, as a member of the Board and Executive Committee, I began to get really involved with this shul.

But despite my involvement in BCC, it stopped somewhat short of my own spiritual development. That happened more gradually, over time, through attending classes and building deep friendships here at BCC. One year ago, I just felt I had to have my berit mila. It felt like a natural and obvious decision. You know, I am more of a logical thinker-I studied mathematical finance and am working now as a quantitative analyst for a bank-but the decision to do the irreversible step of a berit mila is something I cannot really explain. It felt like there really was no decision to be made it just fit in my life.

But it took me another year before taking the next step conversion which, unlike the berit mila, requires active effort. So

1. I attended Torah classes at BCC with our Rabbi, Lisa Edwards, and the Introduction to Judaism course at the University of Judaism with Rabbi Neil Weinberg, both exposing me to the stories and customs of the Jews;

2. I listened to the Yiddish songs of our cantorial soloist Fran Chalin, connecting my spiritual development with my own family background;

And I studied with our student rabbi, Daniel Mikelberg, to learn to read Hebrew.

This past Tuesday, as a final step in this process, I went to the mikveh. For that special moment I invited a handful of BCC members to join me. They told me how moved they were that I would share this special moment with them. Actually, it is the other way around. It is I who am fortunate. The people who came included born Jews who had re-discovered Judaism and Jews by choice, and together they taught me their rich knowledge of Judaism and taught me lessons by sharing their life story with me. I grew with your shared knowledge. And I thank you for giving me that gift.

BCC the house of new life; gave me a new life on a level I had no experience with or exposure to, before I came to this temple. It is this temple that has given me my Jewish identity. This identity enriches my life, makes it more meaningful, and gives me a feeling of wholeness a very conscious life. I am very grateful to have arrived at this moment.

Thank you.

Shabbat Shalom.