

The Jewish Weekly

My Faith Journey to Judaism

By Michele Sankar

I was always interested in my family history. My Irish grandparents had lovely stories of their ancestors. My Hungarian grandfather also talked about the difficult years growing up in southern Hungary. My Hungarian grandmother did not like to discuss the past at all, saying that the wars and Communism were painful to discuss.

Fortunately, my father's sister had an excellent memory and was able to help me put together my family tree shortly after I got married. My grandmother's name was Eva, and her mother was Elly. Elly's father was a doctor. Really? A doctor? And what was his name? Simon. Simon? But no typical Hungarian man has the name Simon unless.... I decided to take a chance, and I wrote to the caretaker of the Jewish cemetery in the town where Simon once lived. Did they have a burial record for a Dr. Simon Winter, who died in 1943?

Yes.

Things unfolded, leading me to more documents and discoveries that are another story altogether. Suffice to say, I discovered that my paternal grandmother was a Jew, born to two fully Jewish parents in 1914. In 1923, things were not good for Jews in Hungary, so my great-grandfather had the family baptized to improve their political and social situation. They did not maintain connections to other family members, and lived thereafter as Catholics.

My grandmother was devastated when I discovered her "shameful" secret. But my grandmother was a Jew, which means that my father is a Jew. The two people who were the most distraught by my conversion were Jewish according to Torah law. My grandmother was devastated when I discovered her "shameful" secret and did not acknowledge or discuss it with me.

I respected how painful it was for her, so I didn't probe – but my heart was aching. She passed away just before Passover three years ago. My research led me to discover that some of my Jewish ancestors and their families were killed during the Holocaust. Some tried to take refuge in the Portuguese safe-houses of Budapest, only to be forced out by the Hungarian Arrow Cross and murdered. Another survived and left the country, childless. My great-grandparents had to wear the yellow star, yet somehow survived in Budapest during the Holocaust. I do not know more because the one remaining relative from this time period refuses to discuss any of it with me. Even that person's own children do not know that their parent is Jewish.

My Catholic grandfather must have known about his wife's Jewishness, but if he did, he never mentioned it. My father and sisters were certainly surprised by the news. We learned, however, that during the war, my grandfather hid a Jewish colleague in their apartment. I also have old letters attesting that he looked after some belongings for Jewish neighbors when they were sent to the ghetto – and that he returned all of it.

More than ever, I felt responsible for bringing back the Judaism that was lost to my family through murder and assimilation. My children and



Rabbi Mendel Bernstein

I am the only living Jewish descendant of my great-great-grandparents. Hashem had a reason for bringing me back to Him. I needed to be the voice – and the soul – for those who could no longer speak.

So what was I going to do about it? It was a tremendous responsibility that Hashem entrusted to me. The truth is that during the first few years of married life, we had become somewhat lax in our observance. While I didn't write or go shopping or watch TV on Shabbat, we drove to synagogue, reheated food in the microwave, and flipped lights. I was blessed with three children. They all went to Jewish babysitters, and on to Jewish Day School.

Kosher? We had a separate meat and dairy section in our kitchen, and only food products with a kosher symbol were allowed. Despite the stringency at home, however, we still ate out, ordering "vegetarian" or fish.

One day, my husband came home and said, "Did you know that there is a synagogue here in Richmond Hill?"

"You're kidding!" I replied. "Where is it? What's it called?"

"It's Chabad Lubavitch, and it's actually in the basement of the rabbi's house."

I looked at him. "Lubavitch? Are you kidding me? That's really Orthodox. Aren't they all black hat and beards? No way!" I assumed they would know that I "didn't belong."

The truth is, I was worried. Such a small group in a personal space... I wouldn't be able to slip in anonymously or check out the lay of the land. I assumed they would know that I "didn't belong," that I was "just" a convert. I thought that I would be judged by stern and solemn people. No, thank you. A few weeks later, David convinced me to give it a try.

On one lovely Shabbat, we reached the home of Rabbi Mendel Bernstein and his family. In we went, and a nice young brunette named Toby sat near me and smiled. She was friendly, made nice small talk, and didn't ask any uncomfortable questions. After an hour, it occurred to me that she was the Rebbetzin (Rabbi's wife).

We became regulars. My oldest son, about 8 years old, began bugging me about covering my hair. For the sake of peace, I started to put a kerchief over my head. Over the period of a couple of years, the kippahs and tzitzits stayed on my boys even when they were out of school. My pants remained unworn in my closet, and I began wearing more modest clothing. It was a new critical point in my life. Through increased learning, I knew that our growth had to continue.

I decided that instead of announcing what I was going to observe, I needed to ask myself when I was going to embrace other aspects of Jewish life. These observances weren't burdens; they were gifts – gifts

It Once Happened...

that had been taken away from so many Jews in the past, and I was grateful for them.

Just as the instruction manual for our new appliances is written to ensure the best results – even when it tells us what not to do – so too Hashem wants what's in our best interests, and gave us an eternal manual called the Torah. We quickly learned that when a person wants to increase in observance, obstacles soon disappear and life becomes easier and happier. Being Jewish according to Torah law is truly a joy for me, but there were difficult times too.

Unlike my friends, I couldn't refer to my bubby's kreplach recipe, or my zaidy's traditions. Everything we did we had to borrow and personalize, secretly watching the rabbi, for example, to make sure we were doing a mitzvah right. And that scared me. I had a fresh Jewish soul and I didn't want to soil it. But I also know that, as humans, Hashem always gives us another chance.

Mistakes don't undo the good that has been done, and it doesn't tarnish the good we will do in the future. We need to live in the present, to make this moment count. I am a Jew. I never get tired of saying it, thinking it, believing it, loving it I used to feel sad that I had nothing Jewish to offer my children... no traditions, no stories, no heritage.

Now I know that every woman, no matter what her history or status, influences the dynamics in her home. Like most Jewish mothers, I fret over my menus for the High Holy Days, I grumble about the cleaning we need to do for Passover, I go into panic mode in the half-hour before Shabbos starts. But deep down, I am intensely grateful.

And that "stern Orthodox community" I was so worried about? How wrong I was! We quickly became a part of the Chabad family in Richmond Hill, sharing services, classes, celebrations, and friendship. This is a home where we have never been judged – only embraced. I am a Jew. I never get tired of saying it, thinking it, believing it, loving it.

Every day, there is that thrill in me that exclaims: "Yay! I'm a Jew!" Hashem made me work for my Jewishness, and because of that, I appreciate it every moment. I don't believe that any event in our lives is just coincidence. Every one of us has a wonderful ability to renew our commitment to Torah and good deeds, to learning, praying, and making a difference to others – every single day.

My wish for you is that every day you get hit with that thrilling realization, "Yay! I'm a Jew!" and that you do something with it. When someone gives you a designer jacket or an expensive purse, you don't leave them in the closet. You take them out, use them, and enjoy them. It's the same for your Jewish life. Don't keep your Jewish flame hidden in the closet. Take it out, utilize it, and go gently if you must. Flames can be shared without the giver losing any light; the more we share, the brighter it becomes. I pray that each of us treat every day as our first day as a Jew.

Reprinted from an email of Good Shabbos Everyone



Y-GRAPHICS

Shabbat Times – Parshat Chukat

	Candle Lighting	Motzei Shabbat	Motzei Shabbat ר"ת
Jerusalem	7:12	8:30	9:05
Tel Aviv	7:27	8:33	
Haifa	7:20	8:34	
Be'er Sheva	7:28	8:31	



Celebrating Shabbat at the Highway 6 Gas Station

By Rabbi Amram Sananes

There is a great story in Chaim Walder's People Speak 12, about a family that found itself stuck at a gas station over Shabbat and managed to unite Jewish people from all walks of life. A young rabbi, his wife and kids decided to travel from Ma'alot Tarshiha to his mom's house in Ashkelon for Shabbat. His sister and her husband asked to come with him, so he borrowed a friend's car to fit everyone. It was a two-hour trip to Ashkelon, and they left four hours before Shabbat, thinking that was plenty of time. Big mistake!

The car stalled about an hour into the trip. The rabbi and his brother-in-law had no knowledge of mechanics. He called a few garages, and they all said they'll be there soon. When no one showed up, he flagged down a car who stopped to help. The driver offered assistance, and he replaced one of the spark plugs. The car started, and they continued on their way.

When they pulled onto Highway 6, the car stalled again. A telephone in the emergency Highway box rang, and the operator said, "We see from the cameras that you pulled over; we're sending you a service vehicle." Ten minutes later, it arrived. "A plug went," the mechanic said. "I just replaced one twenty minutes ago," said the rabbi. "Another must have burned out," the mechanic clarified. He replaced another spark plug, and the family resumed their journey, hoping to arrive in Ashkelon before Shabbat.

All hope was lost when the car stalled again. Another mechanic was dispatched, and the rabbi asked the mechanic to follow him while he pulls over and into a gas station. They somehow manage to crawl there before the car sputtered and died for the fourth time that day. With eight minutes until sunset, suddenly it hit him. The rabbi, his wife, his two young children, his brother-in-law, and sister were all going to spend Shabbat in a gas station on Highway 6!

He quickly ran into the convenience store and bought packaged rolls and snacks. As it grew darker, more and more people started to approach the car. "Hey, you're religious. Why are you here?" "Our car died," the rabbi said. "We're having Shabbat at this gas station." "Oh no, please let me give you all a lift," countless people offered. The rabbi looked at his family, "Thank you. But it's Shabbat, we can't travel."

The Non-Secular Jews Joined the Rabbi in Singing "Lecha Dodi"

People found it hard to leave the gas station and a crowd started to form. The rabbi went up to them and asked, "Want to help me?" Everyone said, "Sure! Whatever you need, let us bring you home!" "No, no not that. Please join me for a minyan." And so, in the middle of nowhere, at a gas station on Highway 6, a group of unrelated, mismatched Jews start to sing Lecha Dodi.

The rabbi was so touched, he started to cry uncontrollably. They prayed Arvit together, said Shabbat Shalom, and the rabbi invited people to join the seudah on a stone table. He made Kiddush on a bottle of coke and handed everyone a small piece of a roll with chips and pretzels.

Other Jewish people stopped at the gas station and they all had suggestions: "I have an Arab friend who can take you home." "Come have your Shabbat at my house, it's only ten minutes away." But the rabbi gently reminded them he can't travel on Shabbat, and he offered for them to come sit with their happy group.

The rabbi started to give a Devar Torah. It was a scene beyond belief. Thirty random Jewish people sat with the charedi family and enjoyed Shabbat together with food and Torah. All of them asked for the rabbi's phone number so they can check on the family after Shabbat was over. He gave his name but not his phone number, afraid they would write it down. "Call information after Shabbat and give me a call!"

The Night Became Really Cold

The singing ended, night fell, and it started to get really cold. The rabbi said to his wife, "You and my sister stay in the car with the children, and my brother-in-law and I will sleep on the benches." At this time, people milled around the station to fill their tanks. Hundreds of Jews passed through the station, approached the family that was stuck, and offered help.

The rabbi and his brother-in-law fall asleep on the benches, unaware that cold temperatures can be extremely dangerous. At midnight, they were so weak from their freezing state, and they heard some voices. A few buses carrying fans of rival soccer teams heading home from a game stopped at the gas station on Highway 6.

"Let's cover them so they don't freeze to death!" One after the other, they removed their team scarves, red and yellow, and placed them on top of the rabbi and his brother-in-law. Dozens of scarves covered them, and their temperatures slowly rose back to normal.

The Rabbi's Plight United Rival Soccer Fans

When he came to, the rabbi held the makeshift blanket and asked, "Where did these come from?" One of the soccer fans crouched down, "Achi—my brother, we are fans of two rival teams. Enemies. During a game, they need policemen and armed security guards to keep us apart. But we heard what you people did here for Shabbat, and look, here are scarves in both colors. We're here together to warm you up. Come dance, so you can bring your temperature back up."

Hundreds of fans gathered in a circle and danced with the rabbi and his brother-in-law, while the women and children looked on in wonder. The next day, more people came to the station with ideas, and the rabbi asked again for a minyan.

Motzei Shabbat arrived, and with it, hundreds of calls to the rabbi's phone to see how the rest of Shabbat went. Most of the people who called said they decided to keep that Shabbat, a first in many years.

Five years later, the rabbi is still in contact with dozens of people he met at the gas station, with a dozen now fully keeping Shabbat. He is now known as the Rabbi of Highway 6, and he is incredibly grateful for being able to experience a Shabbat with Am Yisrael, who went above and beyond, and who forgot all their disputes, uniting to help a stranded family.

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To subscribe to THE JEWISH WEEKLY or to dedicate a month, please contact us by email: editor@thejewishweekly.org or www.thejewishweekly.org

In this week's Parshah we learn about the Mei Meriva. Hashem tells Moshe, take the stick, and gather the nation, talk to the rock, in front of their eyes, water will come out of the rock and there will be enough for all to drink. Moshe took the stick as he was told. Moshe and Aharon gathered the people around the rock and said to them "שמעו נא המרים המן הסלע הזה נוציא לכם מים" - Now listen, you rebels from this rock water will come out." Moshe picked up his stick and hit the rock twice, and the water came out and the nation had what to drink. Hashem says to Moshe and Aharon, "because you did not trust Me in front of the nation, therefore you won't be the ones to bring the nation into the land."

Where exactly was the lack of belief in Hashem in the actions of Moshe? Rashi indicates that had Moshe spoken to the rock instead of hitting it, it would have created a greater impact. Hashem told him to take the stick. What did Hashem want him to do with the stick? asks the Ramban. Remember this is the same Moshe, who used the stick for the ten plagues and Kriat Yam Suf, and all those places when he was told to take the stick, it was to use, why not here?

The Rambam at the end of the fourth perek of Shmona Perakim explains as follows. Moshe was punished for getting angry at Klal Yisrael when he said "שמעו נא המרים" - Now listen, you rebels. Because the people around him, knew that Moshe, doesn't just get angry. If Moshe is angry, it is because Hashem is angry. We don't find anywhere to indicate that Hashem was angry. They complained they were thirsty, Hashem said to bring them in front of the rock and tell the rock to give water, and the water will come. Since Moshe gave the nation the false impression that Hashem was angry, he was punished.

Perhaps what Rashi is saying is, had he just spoken to the rock, i.e. the heart of Klal Yisrael at the time, without blasting them or calling them rebels, and just shown them look, dear friends, lets show you how much Hashem loves you, then spoken to the rock and the water would have come and flow, and the Kiddush Hashem would have been massive.

Friends, we need to know that the Ribono Shel Olam loves us so much more than we can imagine. No matter how far we have gone, our Father is waiting for us right behind the door, waiting for us to come home so He can give us a hug and kiss to express the love He has always had for us. Though sometimes, we make ourselves unresponsive of that love, through our actions, Hashem's love for us is infinite, and if Chas v'Shalom (Heaven forbid) you ever hear otherwise, that some individual told you, that Hashem is angry at you, or that Hashem does not love you, they are lying and have no authority to tell you this. כי לא תהפץ במות המת, כי אם בשובו מדרכו וחי. - Hashem does not anticipate the death of a person, he would rather he do Teshuva and live. ועד יום מותו תהכה לו, אם ישוב מיד תקבלו. - Until the day a person dies, Hashem is waiting for him, if he returns, he is immediately accepted. ואתה יודע. אמת כי אתה הוא יוצרם, והוא יודע. - It is true, You have created them and understand their temptations as they are human. Let us pray that we should merit to just come back home where we feel that love of the Ribono Shel Olam, without any barriers, He is waiting for us. The electricity is flowing strongly in the outlet, unfortunately, some of us unplug from the outlet, or we strip our wires, but that does not mean that the connection is not there, we just need to replug in and we will feel that flow of energy just as strong as ever.

B'ezrat Hashem this year Shiva Asar B'Tammuz and Tisha B'av will be turned to Chagim when we come home and give our Father back the hug He has been giving us this whole time.

So let's try replug ourselves in and let's pray for the soldiers, police and medical professionals protecting us and for those who need healing, shidduchim, children or parnassah and may we be blessed to have the most awesome, gorgeous, beautiful, peaceful, healthy, amazing, relaxed, spiritual, sweet and happy Shabbat.

Yossi

The Jewish Weekly's PARSHA FACTS

NUMBER OF MITZVOT: 3
MITZVOT ASEH: 3
MITZVOT LO TAASEH: 0

NUMBER OF PESUKIM: 87
NUMBER OF WORDS: 1245
NUMBER OF LETTERS: 4670

HAFTORA: Shoftim 11:1 - 33

This week we study Chapter 5 of Pirkei Avot

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