

The Jewish Weekly

From Bleached – Blonde Princess to Queen Mother

By Rabbi Yerachmiel Tilles

Even before I was born, the plan was for me to be a star.

By age 3, I was having my hair bleached blonder and competing in beauty pageants: Little Miss America, Little Miss Half Pint. At age 9, I was performing in local theater, and at 12 I gained early admission to the High School for Performing Arts in Manhattan (of the Fame movies and TV series).

Throughout my childhood, I absorbed the message that everything important about me was on the outside and everything I could possibly want in life was somewhere "out there."

This ideology was reinforced at Performing Arts, where all of us aspiring actors, dancers and musicians shared the dream of being rich, famous, talented, powerful and gorgeous. What mattered was how we looked, how we performed, and how loud the applause.

I continued working in film, TV and theater in New York for the next 13 years, yet it remained for me a sideline. My mantra was "money can buy happiness" and the starving actors' life was just not for me. I didn't want to wait on tables and live in a shabby, walk-up apartment in the Bronx. I wanted a first-class life in Manhattan, with a doorman and concierge, on the Upper East Side.

To get these big bucks I used my charm and went into sales - first selling ridiculously expensive clothing and then real estate. By age 22, I was leasing director for River Tower in Sutton Place, "the most expensive rental building in Manhattan."

I got the Upper East Side apartment with a swimming pool on the roof and an enormous wrap-around terrace where I threw champagne-fueled soirees for the beautiful crowd. There were black tie events, VIP rooms, seaplanes, cigarette boats, and a presidential inaugural ball. It was glamorous, fun and exciting. Looking from the outside, one could say I had it all.

So why, when the last guest had left the terrace, or the club closed, or the vacation ended, did I feel so empty inside? Where was the satisfaction and peace? When the music stopped, I was alone with myself. The emptiness and void was unbearable at times. Something huge was missing in my life, but I didn't know what it was or where to find it. So I kept pushing forward, hoping that the next vacation, relationship or luxury purchase would be the answer.

It was during this whirlwind that I made my first fragile connection with Judaism.

Growing up, Judaism simply wasn't relevant. After my grandfather died when I was five, it was "out with almost everything Jewish. We'd light Chanukah candles and then go to our Christian friends' house for gifts around the tree. We attended a Passover Seder (the kind that gets

shorter every year: Dayeinu!) and ate bagels. For most of my life, that was the sum total of my Jewish connection.

And yet, my non-Jewish name notwithstanding, I had always felt Jewish in my heart. So at age 20, when I first heard about the High Holidays, I had a fleeting thought of attending services. But none of my friends were going and I heard you had to have tickets, so... it would be another five years till I made it to a Rosh Hashana service.

That experience went on for hours and was entirely in a foreign language, yet something struck a chord. Memories of going to synagogue with my grandfather brought me back to a time when I felt safe and part of something important and special.

I had been living half a life, disconnected from the essential part of myself, and it was failing me. I knew in precise detail what kind of house I wanted to live in, what kind of car I wanted to drive, and what kind of salary I wanted to earn. But what kind of person did I want to be? What did I stand for? What did I believe in? These were questions I'd never much considered.

I began attending some evening classes in Manhattan, and as I learned more about my Judaism, I slowly dispelled the stereotypes and misconceptions I was holding onto, like the belief that Judaism regards women as second-class citizens. Although I didn't know any religious Jewish women, I was certain they were all barefoot, pregnant and chained to the stove. Someone needed to rescue them, educate them, liberate them. It turns out I was dead wrong about that (I met observant Jewish women who were doctors, lawyers, corporate execs) and about many other things.

I began to study Torah in depth, one verse at a time. It was an intellectual adventure unlike any I had ever experienced. I found out about many Jewish holidays that I'd never heard of. I discovered Shabbat, the weekly dinner party with fine china, gourmet food and wine. I loved the conversation that moved beyond gossip, fashion and politics.

Above all, I found an atmosphere in these homes that was so much more peaceful than the frenetic lifestyle I was leading. Husbands and wives interacted with love and respect. The children were intelligent, respectful and refined. They were unlike any kids I'd ever met.

I will never forget turning to my mother at the Passover Seder we attended at the rabbi's house and saying, "Someday, I want to have kids like these." If you had known me then, you'd have laughed out loud. My life was so far removed from this family's reality that there was no possible way I would ever have children like these (if I'd even have kids at all).

This was all incredibly compelling - but I was like a "Judaism tourist": a nice place to visit, but I don't want to live there. I had been focused on externalities for 25 years, and just because I discovered my inner dimension, a soul that longed for truth and beauty and meaning, didn't mean it had any muscle whatsoever.

My attitude was more like the Billy Joel song: "I'd rather laugh with the sinners than cry with the saints - the sinners are much more fun!"

It Once Happened...

The pull in my old direction was just too strong. One Friday night I was invited to a rabbi's magical Shabbat table and got a call to attend the Saudi princess's birthday party in Miami. It was no contest and I was on the next plane.

Who knows what kind of life I would have today if the two parallel worlds I was straddling hadn't come crashing together.

My friend tried to set me up on a blind date with a guy who was not only "orthodox" but lived in - gulp! - Buffalo. I had zero interest. I put it off for four months and then finally agreed to a mercy date just to satisfy this friend who kept pushing the match.

When I came down to my lobby expecting to meet the pasty-faced, clammy-handed, hunched-over religious guy, imagine my astonishment when I saw an Adonis in blue jeans and a white jacket posed like Rodin's "The Thinker" on my lobby chair. OMG, that can't be him. } But it was! From the start I was amazed that he really wanted to get to know me, inside and out.

But orthodox?! I was totally irreligious when we met and he had been keeping Shabbat and kosher for many years. At the same time, he had been on tour with the Rolling Stones, acted in a few movies, and was a successful businessman. He had it all: the flash and the substance, the physical and spiritual, body and soul. Who could resist such a package? Not me.

Three months later, we were engaged, and four months later I was on a yacht, circling Manhattan, starring in the role of my life at my own big fat Jewish wedding. I was sailing off into the sunset to begin on-the-job training as an observant Jewish woman.

My first real hurdle to clear was this vague sense that living a Torah life was all about obligations and responsibilities. I'm not so altruistic and I wanted to know: What's in it for me?

Once I got into it, being observant wasn't at all what I expected. I thought it would be an interesting, if perhaps burdensome addition to my "real" life. But I discovered that Torah all those "rules and regulations" turned out to be time-tested tools for success in the most important areas of my life: relationships, parenting, and handling all kinds of challenges. Torah gave me tools for attaining true inner peace, balancing home and career, and for keeping the romance alive in marriage, decade after decade.


I took my time growing into Jewish observance, moving at my own pace. Judaism is not an all-or-nothing proposition.

And the more I observed, the more I came to appreciate the many layers of depth behind it all. Now [5773/2013] my husband jokes that I'm too religious for him!


It turns out that the fulfillment I was looking for all those years wasn't somewhere "out there." It was right inside me all the time.

As for those children I wished for at the Seder? Believe it or not, I have four just like them. I feel like a real queen and am incredibly grateful for it all.

Reprinted from an email of Shabbat Stories.



Shabbat Times – Parshat Vayikra

	Candle Lighting	Motzei Shabbat	Motzei Shabbat ר"ת
 Jerusalem	6:17	7:30	8:11
Tel Aviv	6:32	7:32	8:08
Haifa	6:24	7:32	8:10
Be'er Sheva	6:35	7:33	8:11

The Pair of Tefillin For the French Jew

By Rabbi Yehuda Winzelberg

Rav Nissim Yagen, zt"l, once related the following story. A French Jew living in Ramat Gan told about how he had become a completely frum and observant Jew:

I was living in Paris and I owned a small store, which was my source of income. One Friday, a very poor religious man arrived in Paris. He had no food at all. This man came into the store and begged me, "I have nothing for Shabbat, can you please help me?"

Not knowing why, I was overcome by a wave of pity. I opened the cash register, took out all the money that was there, which was the whole day's profit, and I told him to use this money, not only for Shabbat, but for the entire following week. I told him to enjoy the money.

I have no idea why I did this for a stranger, as I was completely irreligious. A few days later, a Christian woman entered my store. She sat down and was not leaving. I asked her to leave but then she asked me the most shocking and ridiculous thing, she wanted to marry me!

I asked her, "What do you want from me? I am a Jew and you are not. Leave me alone and find one of your own kind!"

She responded that she is very wealthy and is not lacking anything. She wanted to marry a Jew to become closer to Hashem.

I told her, "I am not a believer. I don't believe in Hashem and I don't keep any of the Mitzvot. Find someone else to marry!"

But it didn't work! She told me that she was planning to convert. Finally, I agreed to marry her, but I told her to never talk a word about "Yiddishkeit" (Judaism) to me. And she agreed. She converted to Judaism and kept everything, and I continued living life as a Non-Jew.

She bought me a pair of Tefillin, but just as she agreed, she never mentioned a word about it. It just sat on the shelf. One day, I had to catch a train at 8:00 in the morning. It was 7:30 A.M. and I knew I still had some time to get to the train station. My wife turned to me, and for the first time since we got married, she said to me, "Please put on Tefillin."

I yelled at her. "What?! Not another word about 'Yiddishkeit'! I was so upset, I took the Tefillin, and in a fit of anger, I tossed them out of the fifth-floor window. My wife saw this terrible sight and began to cry uncontrollably. She thought to herself that she was to blame for this disgrace to the Tefillin. After all, she had promised me that she wouldn't say anything about them, and then she did. She apologized, and I went angrily to go catch my train.

My wife went outside to get the Tefillin. She kissed them, and respectfully placed them in the bookcase of the living room. All day long she cried and fasted, and Hashem saw her tears. That night I had a dream. I was standing on my balcony and it was about to come crashing down. I called my family for help, but no one heard me. Then I woke up.

The very next day, on my way to work, I suddenly became paralyzed and fell on the ground. No doctor could tell me what was wrong with me and why I suddenly became paralyzed. I went from hospital to hospital, but no one could figure out this medical mystery. All the scans were normal, but I could not move! I was confined to a bed for twelve months, and I was still unable to move on my own.

One day, I told my wife, "I have taken an oath, that starting tomorrow, I will begin to put on Tefillin. Please bring them to me."

She was in shock, and with excitement, she brought the Tefillin to me. That night I had another dream. Once again, I was standing on the balcony and it was about to come crashing down. But this time, when I called out to my family for help, they came to help me. Once I started putting on Tefillin, I soon made a complete recovery!

Reprinted from an email from Torah U'Tefilah.

Where do we find Adam in the book of Vayikra?

According to Rashi, there is a reference to Adam right at the beginning of the book. At the commencement of Vayikra, the Torah introduces us to the concept of sacrifices, and we're told, "אדם כי יקריב מכם קרבן לה'" - When anyone amongst you offers a sacrifice to Hashem..."

Now, Rashi points out that usually the term for 'anyone amongst you' is 'איש' (ish) but on this occasion, it is 'אדם' (Adam) and the reason is to remind us about a fact relating to Adam. The first person on earth could never bring an offering to Hashem from stolen goods. That's obvious because there was nobody else for him to steal from! Similarly, says Rashi, we should never bring an offering to Hashem from goods that were improperly or illegally obtained. From here we derive the Talmudic concept of a 'מצוה הבאה בעבירה' - a sin which facilitates the performance of a mitzvah'. An example provided by the Mishnah is 'לולב הגזול' - if, Heaven forbid, one steals the Four Kinds in order to make a blessing over them during Sukkot, first of all, you're guilty of theft and second of all your mitzvah is no mitzvah!

The great 19th Century Rabbi, Rav Yisrael Salanter expanded on this concept often. For example, on one occasion he was invited to a wonderful family for a Friday evening meal. At the commencement of the meal, his host told him how he had been looking forward for so long to having the chance to study Torah with the rabbi over the Shabbat table. Rav Yisrael Salanter responded by saying, "Actually, if you don't mind, please can we rush the meal?"

The host was astonished. He said, "What's the problem?"

"Well," said Rav Yisrael Salanter, "I noticed that you have a maid in the kitchen. We shouldn't be performing the mitzvah of Torah study in a manner which will force her to go home late tonight."

On another occasion, during the shul service, Rav Yisrael Salanter noticed how somebody dashed into the shul in order to catch a Kedusha as part of a minyan, and in the process, he trampled over somebody's feet. At the end of the service, Rav Yisrael Salanter approached him and he said, "I hope you don't mind if I tell you that, first of all, that Kedusha of yours was no Kedusha, and secondly you owe an apology to that person. I suggest you pay for his shoes to be repolished!"

So from the surprising appearance of Adam in the book of Vayikra, we learn the important lesson that when it comes to mitzvot - the end never justifies the means.

In this spirit may Hashem bless and watch over our people with peace, no more fighting. By doing Mitzvot, we should not have to suffer great tragedies, as we have in the past. So let us join together to pray for peace as well as praying for our soldiers and emergency service personnel who risk their lives to defend and help us, as well as those who need healing, shidduchim, children or parnassah and may we be blessed to have just continuous joy and to only go from one simcha through to the next, the most awesome, gorgeous, beautiful, peaceful, happy, healthy, amazing, relaxed, spiritual and sweet Shabbat.

Yossi

The Jewish Weekly's PARSHA FACTS

NUMBER OF MITZVOT: 16
MITZVOT ASEH: 11
MITZVOT LO TAASEH: 5

NUMBER OF PESUKIM: 111
NUMBER OF WORDS: 1673
NUMBER OF LETTERS: 6222

HAFTORA:
Yeshaya 43:21-44:23

