

|  |
| --- |
| **Growing Together** |
| *Cultivating Warm Relationships**with Baalei Teshuvah and Converts* |
| A guide to understanding, appreciating, and getting along with newly observant Jews |
|  |
|  |
| **by Aliza Bulow and Oralee Stiles** |
|  |
|  |

**Growing Together**

**Cultivating Warm Relationships**

**with Baalei Teshuvah and Converts**

**A guide to understanding, appreciating, and**

**getting along with newly observant Jews**

**by Aliza Bulow and Oralee StilesTable of Contents**

# Is This Book for You? ………………………………………………………………………………………. 6

# About the Authors ………………………………………………………………………………………….. 9

**Part I Setting the Stage: Growing Apart?**

## Chapter 1 Does This Play Sound Familiar? ………………………………………….12

Chapter 2 **The Big Questions** ……………………………………………………………….16

Chapter 3 **Turn the Kaleidoscope** …………………………………………………………20

Examining the same scene from different perspectives:

Reform Jews, Conservative Jews, Secular Jews, Secular Christians, Religious Christians

Chapter 4 **The Bigger Questions** ………………………...……………………………… 27

The value and gifts of changing perspective

Chapter 5 **The Phases of the Newly Observant** ……………………………………. 32

A general look at the developmental stages of the *baal teshuvah*

**Part II How to Accommodate and/or Live With an Observant Jew**

**Concepts, Practical Tips, and Reflections**

 Introduction to Part II: They’re Always Calling a Rabbi!...............................................39

Chapter 6 **Shabbat/Shabbos – The Sabbath** ……………………………………………41

* + - Oralee’s Personal Reflections on the Sabbath
		- What Is Shabbat?
		- How Do We Observe Shabbat?
		- Making Room in Your Life for the Sabbath Observer

Chapter 7 **Kosher Food – Kashrut** …………………………………………………. 49

* Keeping Body and Soul together: A Reason for Kashrut
* Passover
* Restaurants
* Eating and Traveling with Observant Grandchildren
* Tips for Restaurant Meals and Supermarket Shopping
* Tips for Having Kosher-eating Guests in a Non-kosher Home

Chapter 8 **Jewish Dress** …………………………………………………………………………… 57

* Yarmulke and Tzitzit
* Black and White
* Chassidic Garb
* Women
* Modesty
* Tzniut
* Oralee’s Reflections on Jewish Dress

Chapter 9 **Touching and Dating** …………………………………………………………………62

* Traditional Jewish Dating (Shidduch Dating)
* Touching
* Dor Yeshorim – Premarital Genetic Testing
* Baal Teshuvah Dating

Chapter 10 **Weddings** ………………………………………………………………………………68

* A Typical Orthodox Wedding Road Map
* Events Prior to the Wedding and Other Important Information
* Oralee’s Reflections on Weddings

Chapter 11 **Education and Day Schools** ……………………………………………………..80

* A Philosophy of Jewish Education
* Harry’s Magic: A true story about what one Jewish kid learned from the teenage wizard
* Aliza and Oralee’s Reflections on Schooling

Chapter 12 **Main Stream Culture: Engaging and Refraining** …………………… 86 Television, movies, media, music, reading materials, and entertainment

Chapter 13 **Grandparenting**  .…………………………………………………………………… 89

**Part III What About Us, the Parents and Friends?**

How can the baal teshuvah accommodate us?

Chapter 14 **Honor Your Parents – What Does This Mean?** …………………… 94

* Behaviors That Reflect Honor and Fear/Awe
* Honor: The Basic Concept
* Fear/Awe: The Basic Concept
* Oralee’s Reflections on Honoring Parents

Chapter 15 **The Rabbi and Teacher as Ally** …………………………………………98

 Oralee’s Reflections

Chapter 16 **Making Room for Your Family’s Views and Lifestyle** …..… 101

Chapter 17 **Compassion** …………………………………………………………………… 106

* An Essay Directed to the Newly Observant
* A Letter to the Baal Teshuvah

Afterword ………………………………………………………………...………………………………………..109

Appendix A **39 Categories of Work** ………………………………………………………………… 110

Appendix B **Check List for Sabbath Preparation and Observances** ………………... 112

Appendix C **The What and How of Kosher Food – Kashrut***………………………………..* 116

Appendix D **Shidduch Resume Samples** ………………………………………………………… ..120

Appendix E **Helpful Books** ……………………………………………………………………………….123

 Appendix F **Glossary and Helpful Words** ……………………………………………..125

Appendix G **Aliza’s Story** ………………………………………………………………………………… 144

Appendix H **Oralee’s Story** ……………………………………………………………………………. …162

**Is This Book for You?**



**Note: This book it is not intended as a source of practical *halachic* (legal) rulings.**

**For matters of *halachah,* please consult a qualified *posek* (rabbi).**



Someone you know or love may have put this book in your hands.

You may have picked it off the shelf in a bookstore or in a friend’s home.

  Is it because your grown child or grandchild has decided to become an observant Jew, and you wonder if they will grow apart from you?

  Is it because **you** have become more religious and want help growing together with your family?

 Is it because you have friends who are becoming more religious?

  Is it because your child is converting to Judaism?

  Is it because your child has married an observant Jew?

  Is it because you are willing to grow and be open to other lifestyles?

This book will give you ideas and information about all these situations. You may be surprised and entertained. You may be inspired. You may have more compassion for your own journey. You may grow along with your family and friends.

Our idea of “growing together” is rooted in our gardens and can be transplanted to our hearts. In a garden, plants can be very different from one another and yet they all grow. We expect the variety of plants to respond to the soil, water, and sun as individuals and yet we hope they all grow to the best of their ability. As each plant in the garden flourishes, growing on their own but next to each other, we could say they are “growing together.” In our hearts, we grow together when we love and respect each other. And when that love and respect increases, we are surely “growing together.”

This book supports the mutual growth of families and friends. When we make room in our lives to grow into new ways of understanding and acceptance, when we can be open to the impact of another’s path on our own, we enrich not only our own growth, but the strength of the relationships we have with those we love and cherish.

This book is a response to many people who have asked for help in understanding and relating to religious Jewish relatives and friends, especially the newly religious or observant (*baalei teshuvah*) and to converts (*geirim*) to Judaism.  It is also a response to the *baalei teshuvah* and converts who want some guidance in getting along with their families and friends. Aliza and Oralee, daughter and mother, respectively, are in a unique position to write this book: Aliza converting to Judaism at age sixteen, embracing a full Orthodox life, and maturing into a wife, mother, and Jewish educator; and Oralee, a teacher and entrepreneur, attentively observing her daughter’s journey, while maintaining a close relationship with her throughout.

# Comment from Oralee:

My daughter, Aliza, asked me to write a book for parents of newly observant Jews. She is a guiding mentor for many of them. There are books to help them, but when someone asked her for a book they could give their parents, she could not find any.

 “My mother should write one,” she thought.

“Why me?” I asked. “I am not even Jewish, why would they pay attention to what I have to say?”

“You have been through it. You have lived through hard times and good times and come out a stronger and more loving mother. When you were forty, you had never even met an Orthodox Jew and didn’t know what kosher really meant. Over the decades of having a daughter who lives a fully Jewish observant life, you have learned a lot. And professionally, you are a spiritual director. You are a good listener. You care about people, relationships, and peace in the world, and this book will help all three. You have a lot of wisdom to share.”

“Well, when you put it that way. . . .” I am easily flattered. “But I will not write it by myself. You would have to write it with me.” I also love companionship.

So we agreed to set out on this journey together. That was years ago, and we are still traveling the road. We have each had detours and major life distractions, but the intention remained with us. If my grandchildren understand our journey in their adult years, it will be worth it. If even one family grows together or opens doors to understanding each other, it will be worth all the effort of creating this book.

May that family be yours.**About the Authors**

 **Aliza Bulow** became an Orthodox Jew at the age of sixteen. She spent four years in Israel, where she studied at Brovenders, a college for Orthodox Jews, and at Hebrew University of Jerusalem, and served in a religious unit of the Israeli Army. She graduated from Hunter College in New York with a B.A. in Hebrew Language and Jewish Social Studies. She is married, has six children, a daughter-in-law, two sons-in-law, and several grandchildren (may there be many more!). She lived in Long Beach, New York for the first sixteen years of her marriage and now lives in Denver, Colorado. Her husband and children have also traveled, studied, and lived in Israel.

Aliza has been involved in Jewish outreach and education for over thirty years. She was the study coordinator and telephone mentor’s mentor for Partners in Torah, and the program director and senior educator for The Jewish Experience in Denver, Colorado. She is currently the coordinator of the North American women’s program for Ner LeElef, a Jerusalem based Jewish leadership training program that places rabbinic couples in communities worldwide. She coaches young rabbi’s wives as they grow into their roles and continues to write, teach, and lecture in Denver, as well as other cities across the country and worldwide.

**Oralee Stiles** has a large extended family with very diverse religious livesthat gives her ample opportunity to practice staying connected. She is the mother of two daughters – one who loves soccer and Mexico and is living there now, and one who loves Judaism and Israel, who had hoped to live there. Oralee is grandmother to Aliza’s children, their spouses, and several great-grandchildren. She also plays grandmother to the children of her stepchildren, who are being raised in a Jewish family, a Zen Buddhist/secular humanist family, and a Swedish Lutheran/secular family. She witnessed Aliza’s journey to Judaism as a teenager, her life in Israel, and her marriage to an American Orthodox Jew. Since 1985, she has taken part in the Orthodox Jewish lifestyle of the Bulow family and their communities, including spending three summers in a Catskills bungalow colony.

Oralee has been a high school and college teacher, community organizer, entrepreneur, and consultant. Her religious upbringing was in the Protestant Christian tradition. She has also acted as a spiritual director with the Interfaith Spiritual Center in Portland and as the pastoral care associate at a church in Wilsonville, Oregon.

**See Appendix G and H for their personal stories**.

### Part I

### Setting the Stage: Growing Apart?

### Chapter 1

**Does This Play Sound Familiar?**

*There is a wedding in the air. Both sets of parents, aunts and uncles, sisters and brothers gather at the home of the bride’s parents for Thanksgiving dinner. The bride and groom, from New York, met in Israel where they were both studying. During their time in Israel, they began eating only kosher food, keeping the Sabbath, dressing in accordance with Orthodox tradition, and observing other Jewish laws and rituals.*

*Their families in New York enjoy American culture with a Jewish flavor. They attend services on the High Holidays and contribute to Jewish causes. They made sure their children had bar and bat mitzvah celebrations and certainly assume the wedding will take place under a chuppah with a rabbi officiating, but neither family was ready for the change in direction they are now experiencing from the engaged couple.*

# Debbie’s father: “Where’s Scott and Debbie?”

**Debbie’s mother** (with sarcasm): “It’s Shlomo and Devorah, now that they’re back from Israel, and they’re not here because our house isn’t kosher enough for them. Anyway they think Thanksgiving isn’t really a holiday because it’s not Jewish.”

**Debbie’s aunt:** “I thought you said they were coming later and bringing their own dessert.”

**Debbie’s mother:** “I hope dessert for all of us. After all Debbie, ah Devorah, doesn’t think twice about us eating food **she** prepares. It’s **our** food that’s not good enough for her.”

**Debbie’s father**: “Now, dear.”

**Debbie’s mother:** “Well it’s true. I fed her all her life and now she won’t eat what I make. It was good enough for her and all her friends then. I’m not the one who changed. My cooking is still the same. It’s not like I’m serving a roast pig.”

**Debbie’s aunt:** “Same with us, no pork in the house. Whenever we go out for Chinese food, I make Harry leave all the leftover pork dishes in the restaurant. We only bring home beef or chicken.”

**Debbie’s uncle:** “What’s the big deal with pork? Now that we know how to cook it and trichinosis is no longer a threat, why not eat it? You probably don’t approve of shrimp either. You’re as old fashioned as Debbie.”

**Debbie’s aunt:**  “Speaking of old fashioned, have you seen the way Debbie dresses lately? She has such a beautiful body, why does she have to hide it like that? If I had what she has, I’d flaunt it. Last week she told me she was shopping for a wig for after the wedding. Now that’s ridiculous! Cover her hair with someone else’s hair, what’s the point?”

**Debbie’s mother:** “Our grandmother told me she couldn’t wait to get to America to take her wig off. She called it a *sheitel*. She threw it overboard as soon as she saw the Statue of Liberty.”

**Debbie’s aunt:** “I can’t imagine having to cover my head every day. Thank G-d, women have moved beyond that. Why go backwards?”

**Scott’s father:** “What really ticks me off is all those years of tuition down the drain. I sent him to MIT and now he wants to be a Rabbi or something, and maybe not even work – just ‘learn’ as he puts it.”

**Debbie’s uncle:** “What I don’t get is why they don’t get an apartment together already, and save some money, why wait, they’re engaged after all.”

**Debbie’s sister:** “Oh yeah, right, like they’d share an apartment before the wedding, they haven’t even kissed.”

**Debbie’s aunt:** “Who told you that? How could you marry someone you haven’t even kissed?”

**Scott’s sister:** “It’s not that Debbie is shy. Neither is Scott for that matter; it’s that there is a law about not touching until marriage, and they’re keeping it.”

**Debbie’s mother** (lamenting): “What really bothers me, is how much Debbie loves to sing, and that she’s no longer planning on doing that professionally. I just hope she doesn’t end up stuck in the kitchen with a pack of kids hanging off her skirts. She’s so talented, I'd hate to see her waste it all in the house.”

**Debbie’s father:** “I wouldn’t worry about that, if he’s planning on studying full time, she’ll *have* to work to support them.”

**Scott’s uncle:** “Why do they have to make life so difficult. He could get a high paying job as a nuclear physicist. I don’t get it. How could a scientist believe the Bible stories are true? He must have lost his mind. He certainly isn’t thinking like an educated man.”

**Scott’s father:** “If they think they are so religious, what about ‘honoring your parents’? That’s one of the big ten, isn’t it?”

**Debbie’s father:** “Quiet now, they just drove up.”

**Debbie’s mother:** “At least they’ll drive on this holiday. Can you believe they didn’t come for Rosh Hashanah because it was too far to walk?!”

**Scott’s mother:** “I know, they don’t drive on the Sabbath or on holidays, it’s so frustrating. I can’t imagine not driving when I need to go somewhere...”

# Debbie’s mother: “Here they come, remember to call them Shlomo and Devorah…”

**Scott’s father:** “I will not, I named him Scott because I like that name.”

*Meanwhile in the parked car, Shlomo and Devorah prepare themselves for entering the house*.

**Devorah:** “Are you sure we have to go in? It’s so hard being around my family.”

**Shlomo:** “I know, but it’s important. We need to honor our parents however we can while still sticking to the *halachah*.”

**Devorah:** “That’s what is so hard. My parents see my observance as a rebellion or abandonment. To them, I’m just doing something foolish, wasting my time.”

**Shlomo:** “I wish they could see that being more observant is not forsaking them, that we are actually embracing our family at the roots. Wouldn’t it be great if they could understand how connected we feel to our great-grandparents?”

**Devorah:** “It sure would. I wish my great-Bubby, Sarah Malka, was still with us. She would be so thrilled to know I plan to cover my hair as a married woman. She would understand why I made the dessert in my kitchen. I even made the *rugulach* from one of her recipes. My grandmother remembered it and gave it to me; she treated it like one of the family heirlooms.”

**Shlomo:** “Well I’d like my great-Zaydie, Moshe Yisroel, to be here tonight to stick up for me. He studied Talmud every day before work and carefully kept Shabbat. My father and grandfather held up his example when they were pushing me to study for my bar mitzvah. *Then* it was important to them. Why not now? It seems so hypocritical to me. ‘Just study enough to get through the bar mitzvah and then do what every other Jew does: forget it.’ Well I am not planning on forgetting it. I want to learn more and more. To me, Torah is even more complex and exciting than nuclear physics, I never want to stop learning.”

**Devorah:** “I so wish your father didn’t feel like your MIT education was wasted because you’re learning in yeshivah and becoming observant. If he only could see how much you value it and that you use what you have learned to understand Judaism better.”

**Shlomo:** “Isn’t it ironic that they think we are so far off the deep end, when we are just trying to live the same way our great-grandparents, and every generation before them, lived. I wish they could see that it is they who have gone off the deep end—into assimilation and a very secular worldview.”

**Devorah:** “I’m afraid we won’t get anywhere with that argument. Maybe over time, as they see us happily married, G-d willing, and living a good life, they will appreciate that this is a healthy path for us.”

**Shlomo:** “At least we’re not into some of the things our cousins are doing, like piercing our eyebrows and tongues, or barhopping and waking up next to a new face several times a week, or living on a commune. It just seems so weird that they’d almost be happier with us if we were.”

**Devorah:** “Well, even if we can’t make them happy, at least, we can be respectful.”

**Shlomo:** “Right, let’s go inside.”

**Chapter 2**

The Big Questions

Many questions come to mind when we learn that one of our children or a close friend or even a parent has decided to become more observant. Sometimes they tell us directly. Often we notice through changes in behavior. We wonder why they have made this decision, and if they really understand what it means. Some people feel dismayed as the ramifications of the change become more apparent. Some people wonder:

* Does their change into an observant Jew have anything to do with us?
* Do they expect us to change our ways and become like them?
* Are they risking their financial, emotional, and spiritual well-being?
* Are they joining a cult?
* Are they abandoning everything we enjoyed together?
* Is our relationship at risk?
* How can we grow our relationship when they are becoming so different?

One of the qualities of Judaism, which is a redeeming feature as well as a frustration, is that there are many answers to just about every question. And sometimes there are just more questions. In this chapter, we provide some possible short answers, and give you room to add more from other sources. Additional questions, answers, and more questions will also be presented in other chapters.

# Does their change into an observant Jew have anything to do with us?

Yes and no.Yes,in the sense that they want something different in their lives that they did not have when living with us or in socializing with us. No, it is not related to us. The changes are usually internally driven.

Let’s ask them what prompted their change. Usually the answer is many layered. When we ask, if we can **listen** without judgment or defense, they may feel safe enough to share deeper levels with us. Truly listening, with an ear to learning more about what makes that person into who they are, can also allow them room to explore their motives and gain new insight into themselves.

# Do they expect us to change our ways and become like them?

That is often a fond desire, but hardly ever an expectation. They are aware of how important desire is. They are still discovering how many changes are required in becoming observant. Of course, it would be great to have family and close companions also choose this path. Newly observant Jews are not out recruiting. They have enough on their plate dealing with the changes in their lives. They are very busy learning. Very often as they become better versed and more learned in their chosen life commitments, they become more accepting of other people’s choices. In the beginning of their change, there is often a zealous stage. They may seem more rigid, controlling, or defensive. This is a stage in the process. Usually, it will pass.

# Are they risking their financial, emotional, and spiritual well-being?

Risk goes along with change. We have a hard time remembering that risks can lead to better lives as well as harder lives.Differences in values show up. How are we defining well-being? Is our definition the same as theirs? Here is another place for deep conversation over time, without prejudgments.

There are wealthy religious Jews and poor religious Jews. Other factors besides observance are at play. They may make a choice to earn less in order to put more time into learning and teaching. They may struggle financially with larger families.

What is the trade-off for them? Is their spiritual well-being their highest value? We can learn and help them reflect by listening to them. See Stephen Covey, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, for more on listening.

# Are they joining a cult?

The cults that evoke fear in us have distinct characteristics. For example, members are required to cut off all ties with family and outside friends. The organization makes it difficult for members to communicate with people outside the cult. Members are often moved out of their home areas to isolate them. The organization requires increasing levels of commitment to the leaders. People questioning the leaders or authority are dealt with harshly, or shunned. Members are often asked to assign their financial resources over to the organization.

One of the things to remember about Judaism is the importance placed on questioning. Study is based on asking questions. Inquiry is expected and encouraged. The Torah is open and available to all Jews. There are no special or different versions of it. The words in every Torah are exactly the same.

Different groups within Judaism have different customs. When someone starts following customs quite different from the ones their parents follow, it can be disconcerting or even alarming. Of course the parents are concerned and want to know if their child is doing this of their own accord or is being pressured into it against their will. It may be hard to talk about it if both the parents and the child are feeling defensive about their own customs. In this case, it is wise to have a third party help with the discussion.

# Are they abandoning everything we enjoyed together?

This question prompts others. What did you really enjoy when you were together? Did you pretend to enjoy some things? What are the values underlying what you enjoyed doing together? Are you open to exploring other ways of enjoying time and growing together? What kinds of activities or ways of being would work for all of you?

As newly religious people observe more of the commandments, there are some things they will not do and other things they will do. This may mean there are things all of us used to do together which they will no longer do. Eating in non-kosher restaurants may be one. Going to movies, plays, or circuses may be others. Not driving or riding between sundown Friday and an hour past sundown Saturday could well be another.

As they learn more, they will understand more of the possible flexibility. Beginners in any field tend to be more exacting and careful because of desire and ignorance. As they become more knowledgeable and comfortable with what they are doing, they become better able to know where and what changes can be made while being true to their commitments. Talk with them about what would work for them and what works for everyone. There are often creative possibilities that will take care of all family members.

If we start out with an attitude of respect for what is important to them, we will often find ways to be and grow together. When families have someone with a physical handicap or food allergies, they usually find ways to accommodate. The observant are making spiritual and physical changes that are very important to them, changes that address their core values and commitments. These can be respected in the same way we would respect and work with medically required changes.

# Do we want to stay in contact or say “To heck with it”?

If the answer is “To heck with it,” what’s the point of bothering with this book? Give it to someone else.

If the answer is “Stay in contact,” read on. This book is full of ideas, stories, suggestions, and exciting and challenging possibilities. You may even want to give a copy to all your relatives.

\* \* \* \* \* \*

In review, for those who want to stay in contact: The goal is growing together in loving and respectful ways.

* The most important changes are internal ones. Be open to exploring these rather than getting stuck on or upset about the behavioral changes.
* Accepting a person as they are is a priceless gift to everyone.
* How WE behave, how open we are to learn and grow is OUR choice. It is not something they did to us. WE are in charge of and responsible for our attitudes and behaviors.
* There is a boomerang phenomenon: What we send out comes back to us. When we attack, we get attacked. When we defend, we get defense. What we give, we receive. What we receive, we give. When we accept, we are accepted. When we love, we are loved.
* If they seem more rigid, controlling or defensive, it is a stage in the process. We have found that if you hang in there and love them through it, **it will pass.**

Chapter 3

Turn the Kaleidoscope

Examining the same scene from different perspectives

**by Oralee**

A kaleidoscope is an engaging toy. It is also a tool for learning. As we turn the kaleidoscope, very different patterns or designs appear. Yet all the individual pieces are the same. The patterns change, but the elements are common in all the patterns. Imagine our life as a kaleidoscope. At any one moment, all the elements: people, emotions, ideas, and events stay the same. We look and see one design, but as we turn it, other designs are formed.

In this same way, we can create a design of judgmental disapproval and then turn the kaleidoscope toward a design of loving acceptance. The change takes place in how we view the same pieces. The pieces go together in different ways. The pieces do not have to be changed to get a new design. They just get arranged in different ways. What do we want to view? How do we want to live?

We are in charge of our perceptions and our reactions. This can be a difficult concept to accept when we want to blame others for how we feel about what is happening. Victor Frankl understood that his connection to meaning in his life could not be taken away from him. That was all he had. All else, his family, his book manuscript, his clothes, had been stripped from him in the concentration camp. It was his awareness that those who stayed in charge of the meaning of their lives and lived according to that realization were survivors. And more than surviving, he authored a book that has touched millions of people, *Man’s Search for Meaning*.

What do parents, grandparents, and families of *baalei teshuvah* have in common? They have loved and cared for their child. They have wanted the best for their child. When the child follows in the parents’ footsteps in values and lifestyle, the parents feel appreciated and understood. When the child changes course, usually the parents question the validity of the child’s choices. Sometimes the parents question their own life decisions. They have choices to make about how they will interact with their child and how they will interpret what is happening.

There are many ways to view their child’s behavior. There are many ways to react and to shape their own behavior. A kaleidoscope has many patterns. In this chapter, we will describe the view from two ends of a continuum of interaction. One end is judgmental disapproval and the other is loving acceptance. There are many patterns in between. People change and move around in their actions and beliefs. They may disapprove of one facet of their children’s life and approve of others.

They may ponder, “Was there something I could have done that would have made a difference?” or “Where did I go wrong?” They may feel their own lifestyle has been abandoned for a different, more difficult life.

They may be concerned about what others think about them. What are their friends saying or thinking or judging? Do they have to rethink their values and decisions? It is hard to change decisions already made. It is easy to feel defensive. Suddenly having to defend decisions and positions made long ago is taxing.

There is often a deep concern about the perceived difficulties their child will face as they take on practices not done in society at large. Will it isolate them? Perhaps they won’t get good jobs. Their friends will leave them. What about their grandchildren? What kind of choices will they have? Life could be very difficult for them. What will they know about mainstream culture?

There may be an aching for things as they were. There may be loneliness in the heart. The love for the child, the family members, and friends is still there, yet it feels less familiar. Uncertainty about the future of the relationships worries them. They may be concerned that their child doesn’t realize what they are doing to themselves and to all of the family. It is not just about them. The whole family is involved, whether they want to be or not.

The families of *baalei teshuvah* come from many Jewish backgrounds – Sephardic, Ashkanazic, Reform, Conservative, Modern Orthodox, secular, unaffiliated, and interfaith. If the *baal teshuvah* is a convert, the family may be religious or secular Christians, they may be affiliated with another religion, or unaffiliated with any religious background at all.

The following stories are based on true life experiences of people we know or have interviewed from some of these backgrounds. Identifying details have been changed to protect the privacy of the families whose stories illustrate this book.

These stories show different kaleidoscopic views of the same situation. People are rarely stuck in one story or another. Usually they move around inside each story and between the stories at different times in their lives and relationships. The contrast described in each story is to help the reader see the potential for inner change in each situation, and the different ways of viewing what life presents.

**There are two contrasting ways for the same parents to react to their observant child in the same set of circumstances: judgmental disapproval or loving acceptance.**

# Reform Jews:

# The judgmental disapproving view

Who do they think they are? We get so mad about their uppity attitude. Do they think we aren’t as good as they are because we don’t keep kosher? There is no need for that today. Those laws were given when Jews needed to be protected from bad food. Do they think eating kosher food makes them better Jews? They should remember how much we give to the Federation, the Jewish Community Center, Temple Beth Israel, and Hadassah. That is what makes a responsible Jew in today’s world. What we do with the money and other resources we have. What we eat has nothing to do with our commitment to the community and the world. They won’t even come over for dinner. Well, we don’t need to eat at their house either.

We want to celebrate our twenty-fifth wedding anniversary with both of our girls and their husbands on a cruise to the Bahamas. That won’t work for Becky now. We’re certainly not going on one of those kosher cruises. Why does she have to make life so difficult for our family? We’ll just go without her and let her hear about the great time we had. Maybe then she’ll rethink the whole kosher business.

# The loving accepting view

Now that Becky and Daniel are keeping kosher, it makes it trickier to have them over for dinner, but we want to keep celebrating family occasions together. We could get paper plates and plastic ware and make the whole thing into a winter picnic. They could bring the cooked food, and we can get the vegetables and fruit and find a kosher dessert in the freezer section. Maybe they can help us plan the menu to be sure it will work for them. It can be a creative adventure. We’re glad we don’t keep kosher, but we can work something out with them so that we can share some family meals together.

How can we celebrate our twenty-fifth wedding anniversary together as a family? Maybe there are kosher cruises we could all go on. Or maybe we can find a resort that serves kosher food. We could all go on Sunday, and they could leave early to be back home before Shabbat begins. The rest of us could stay through the weekend. We know we can work it out in a way that takes care of all of us. We don’t really understand why they decided to be so observant, but we can see how committed they are. Something is clearly drawing them to it. Challenging though it may be for us, it is certainly way better than some of the difficulties our friends are facing with their children. They are a loving, caring, and committed couple. That is worth a lot.

# Conservative Jews:

# The judgmental disapproving view

David won’t pray in our synagogue because we don’t separate the women from the men. That’s an Old World practice from when women weren’t thought of as equals. We’re so grateful that we can sit together for services. The women don’t have to sit in the balcony or behind a screen at Neveh Shalom. We can’t imagine what it must be like for Hannah to have to go to a different section because she can’t pray with her new husband. Join the twenty-first century! Men and women belong together.

We go to Neveh Shalom because we like the Rabbi. He’s an excellent speaker, very well read, knowledgeable about politics, and very committed to Israel. David won’t even go on Friday night because we live on the other side of town. Of course, it was fine for his bar mitzvah, but now that he is more religious, he won’t drive on the Sabbath. He doesn’t get that being there is important to us. Everyone in the congregation drives on the Sabbath to get there. We can’t all buy houses within walking distance. That’s ridiculous. We are certainly not going to drive to his synagogue. We don’t like the rabbi or the services.

Eating out after services on Saturday morning is a special time for us to be with each other. We have our favorite restaurants. It’s our weekend date. We don’t have to cook or clean up at home and can spend time talking to each other. Our friends are busy with their own lives. Hannah spends all day Friday cooking for guests on the Sabbath. What is she going to do when they have children? She won’t have the energy for it then.

# The loving accepting view

Little did we know at David’s bar mitzvah that as a young married man he would be going to a different synagogue across town, the Orthodox one. Our rabbi keeps asking about him. We wish David and Hannah would come to Neveh Shalom for one of the holidays so we could be together as a family again. It’s exciting, though, to see him so engrossed in the study of the very texts he struggled with in Sunday school. He has an understanding of Rashi and the Rambam and other commentaries that amazes us. We like to hear him expand on the parashah of the week.

We have gone to his shul a couple of times. We either have to spend the night at their house or park our car blocks away. Lisa sits with Hannah in the women’s section. Hannah has a very different understanding about the importance of separating the women and the men. It’s not what we grew up with, but we feel it is important to share some services together, so we sit with our children.

It’s interesting for us to see what a tight-knit community they have. Everyone lives within walking distance of the shul and each other. David and Hannah always have guests for Sabbath lunch. We can see they are happy and very involved in the community. We realize they are living the kind of life we would want for them in broad values. The particulars are different, but who knows how long they will stick it out. Meanwhile, we love them and appreciate their earnestness.

# Secular Jews:

# The judgmental disapproving view

My great-grandparents were religious Jews in the old country; one in Russia and one in Germany. Life was very difficult for them. There is no way I am interested in their lifestyle. They had so little choice about their lives. It was dictated for them – who they would marry, where they would live, what they would do. They were so superstitious about life. Now my son says he wants to be religious. He likes hearing about the old country. If you ask me, he is romanticizing that time and their life. He doesn’t get it. He has had so much handed to him. Maybe this is his way of rebelling. My father rebelled by leaving the synagogue life, and my son is rebelling by entering it. Some irony. He doesn’t know the good life is what he has. He can be a good human being without having to be religious. I have certainly given my share and more to charities, mainly Jewish ones. I treat people decently. Doesn’t he see this? Why take on so many things that are counter cultural. We live in America in the twenty-first century; act like it.

# The loving accepting view

My great-grandparents were religious Jews in the old country; one in Russia and one in Germany. Life was very difficult for them. I have often wondered what was good. Why did they stay there in such difficult times? There must have been something important to them. I wonder if my son is discovering what I never knew. Perhaps there is something about being part of a community and having rules to follow that gives you something. I’ll never know. It is not the life I chose. I live in America now. We live in different times and a very different place. We have opportunities here that past generations never had. I don’t want to throw them away. Still, I wonder if my son is finding something of value. Maybe I should let him tell me about it. He does seem excited and eager about what he is learning. And learning is good. He won’t stay where he is now. Learning changes things. I’ll be patient.

# Secular Christians:

# The judgmental disapproving view

Religion is just not important in order to live a good life. A person can be moral without having to believe in G-d. Why would our daughter want to take on Orthodox Judaism and live such a restricted life, with so many rules that make no sense for living in today’s world? Not only does it not make sense, it makes it hard for family get-togethers. The rest of the family is always having to bend to the rules of her Orthodoxy. No gatherings on Friday night or Saturday. No meetings in churches or restaurants. Food is always an issue. The Orthodox grandkids can’t do the kinds of activities that the other grandkids can do. It’s a pain in the neck. How will the Orthodox kids ever learn about the real world? How will they make their way as adults with such a limited background? What if they don’t want to keep such a restrictive lifestyle? What will she do when they rebel? What kind of education will they get? They can’t really take part in our life. It is such a shame.

# The loving accepting view

We were raised to be open, loving, and accepting of all kinds of people. We didn’t have much connection with Jews, especially not Orthodox Jews. When our daughter converted to Judaism, we saw it as an opportunity to learn more about another way of living an ethnically rich life. It is fascinating to learn about the traditions and religious practices of the Jews. Our life is truly enhanced when we enter theirs. Our thinking has been expanded by the reading and learning we are doing. We feel a deep connection to and love for the Jews through our life experiences with our children and grandchildren. Sometimes we are frustrated by the differences and prohibitions, by things we can’t do with our grandchildren. But we see the incredible value of their growing up with weekly and yearly rituals, and with the family and community bonds that are built around the religious practices. We feel they have greater inner stability, and are safer in the world because of their community connections and the continuity of their religious traditions and practices. They have a meaningful life. We are thankful our daughter is giving this to her children.

# Religious Christians:

# The judgmental disapproving view

We cannot understand how our son could have left our faith and joined another one. It is very hurtful that he joined Judaism. It seems like a step backwards, like going to the time before Jesus. He doesn’t seem to understand that Jesus was a Jew, and he changed the religion because G-d asked him to. G-d had new ideas, starting with Jesus. Why would anyone want to go backwards and defy G-d? We pray for our son every day, and have asked all our Sunday school groups to do so as well. We all pray that he will return to the faith that will save his soul. We don’t want our behavior to condone anything he is doing in Judaism. That is why we don’t go to the synagogue or celebrate any of the Jewish holidays with him. We hope he doesn’t have children, but if he does, we will pray for them too.

# The loving accepting view

How fascinating that our son has converted and is immersing himself in Judaism. We will all learn more about the life and times of Jesus through studying Judaism with him. Perhaps this will be a very important stage in our son’s life. He will probably become more religious. We like seeing him take religion seriously and live his life with religious principles. Judaism is, after all, the foundation of Christianity. We are very thankful that this is what he chose and not some other religion that is not related to us in any way. Going to his synagogue and participating in the Jewish holidays will enrich our lives. We are willing to go along with his rules because he is so important to us. We love him deeply and do not want this to separate us. We hope that through our love and his study, he will come to respect the Jewish foundation of Christianity and then return to our faith. Until then, our family can come closer by appreciating and sharing his new spiritual path with him while we keep our own faith.

Chapter 4

The Bigger Questions

The value and gifts of changing perspective

**by Oralee**

**Asking these questions can help us turn the kaleidoscope:**

* + Is **our** lifestyle more important to us than peace and openness in the family, or making changes to include the newly observant family member in our lives?
	+ What changes would we have to make to stay connected?
	+ What is the impact of their decision on our resources?
	+ How much room do we have for our children to ask questions and reach different conclusions from the ones we have accepted for ourselves?
	+ In the end, what really counts for us?

**Is our lifestyle more important to us than including the newly observant family member in our lives?**

What is peace/wholeness/shalom within a family?

It means being conscious of the deep love that connects us as human beings through being family. Families give us connections we otherwise might not have, because of the differences in lifestyle and philosophies. We usually don’t choose family members, or our extended families. We do choose a marriage partner, and then that person comes with a family we didn’t specifically choose. We usually choose friends because of similarities. In our families we confront differences. The family tie gives us an arena within which to face and work with the struggles that arise.

Differences of opinion, approaches, and even certain values don’t have to result in conflict. They can be held with respect for one another, while maintaining loving connections that flow underneath the differences. This does not mean avoiding discussion or knowledge of these differences. It does mean valuing an exposure to different ways of living and being.

Other related questions are: What does “included” mean? Can they be included in our lives without our changing anything?

The answers to these questions depend on our family traditions and expectations. Do we celebrate birthdays and holidays together in one of our homes? Do we go to restaurants, hotels, or resorts to celebrate? Do our children and friends stay at our house when they are visiting? Do we travel with our family? What are the things we do, or have done, together?

Is keeping kosher and keeping the Sabbath part of our lifestyle? Is our practice of kosher shopping, cooking, and eating different from the expectations of the newly observant? Do we drive, shop, or work on the Sabbath? Do we use computers, watch TV, listen to radios, or play music on the Sabbath?

Do we shake hands with men and women? Do we hug people we know? What kind of clothes do we like to wear? What kind of vacations do we take as a family? What kinds of entertainment and sports do we like?

When someone close to us changes what is acceptable in his or her life, we have questions about why. It might also make us question what we do, or defend what we do.

Feeling defensive about our lifestyle and our choices is a big obstacle to maintaining close connections. When people feel defensive, communication often heats up to attacking others, or it shuts down. Usually when someone verbally attacks another person, the attacker feels defensive about some aspect of himself or herself. This may be unconscious and unrecognized by the attacker. When people are attacking or defending positions or other people, it is very difficult for any of those involved to feel the loving connections that may be there.

Some families think that avoiding talking about possible areas of conflict avoids the conflict. In my experience with people, it does not. In the short term, it may seem like people are getting along with each other. However, in the lives of my clients and friends, as well as my own experience, the conflict that rests just below the surface often comes out in sarcastic remarks, teasing, or gossip about others. It may erupt during a time of crisis, an illness, a death, an accident, or even in joyful family gatherings like weddings or reunions. Usually, families with unspoken conflict find that their gatherings are very stressful. It takes a lot of energy to keep the conflict underground. When it erupts and comes out into the open, it can be very damaging to the whole family.

# What kinds of changes would we have to make to stay connected?

## Change? Me? Oy Vey!!

We get so comfortable with how we live and what we do. Is change threatening or exciting? Of course, it can be both, usually at different times. We usually need some kind of motivation to change. What motivates one of us may not motivate another. My grandchildren have taught me that, especially about household chores. Wanting clear floor and bed space motivates me to hang up and put away clothes. The promise of a trip to Starbucks might motivate them to hang up clothes, but clear floor or bed space means nothing.

What motivates us? What makes it worth it? What is our capacity for change? As we go through life, these questions confront us over and over. What changes did we make when we married? When our spouse was ill? When we left a job or a city?

Change is intrinsic to life. We have a head start if love for our children and a desire for shalom*,* wholeness, in the family is what motivates us. We can make changes in our environment and our attitudes. These changes can help support better connections within the family. Part II offers very specific suggestions for these kinds of changes.

The most helpful changes are internal ones. These are often the hardest to make. We can easily see what needs changing in others. If only **they** would listen to what we are telling them. If only **they** would stop being so argumentative. If **they** would pay more attention to their children, save their money, clean up their house, and on it goes. It is very hard to accept that we cannot change these things. It’s like talking louder to someone who doesn’t know our language, assuming that somehow volume will make up for lack of comprehension. In that same way, we may keep harping on changes we want others to make, thinking that our insistence will effect the change.

When I pay attention to what annoys me about my children’s or grandchildren’s behavior, I often find it is something I also do that I wish I didn’t. It is hard to admit this to myself, let alone anyone else. I usually don’t get it when it is happening. When I reflect on the times I was upset at others and look at myself honestly, I see ways I have done a variation on the same theme. After a few times of this happening, I develop more compassion for them, and hopefully for myself.

Sometimes we get irritated about rooms that do not match our idea of perfection. Looking in a child’s room might spark this. Being in someone else’s kitchen and seeing messes and dirty dishes can spark this. I used to have a very difficult time when my daughter’s kitchen was a mess from end to end. Every counter was full of dishes, food that was just left out by whoever used it, papers, and bags. Perhaps you can imagine it. My daughter loves a clean kitchen, but the flow of family through the room changes it in minutes. I used to spend my time cleaning it up only to find a mess moments later.

It’s easier to change our attitude when we “change our altitude.” On one visit, I took a higher view of my daughter’s kitchen. I realized she could cook a whole dinner and bake bread right over the top of the mess. I also realized if she cleaned it first, she wouldn’t have the time to bake the bread or cookies. I appreciated her talent in a new way. I saw that to function in her kitchen given the way things happened in the house, she needed that skill, and she had it. Gradually, on successive visits, I was less upset by the kitchen. I learned to walk through without stopping to tidy it. I was more purposeful when I did work on the kitchen, and I felt less annoyed by it. The kitchen didn’t change. **I did.** I had a new view. And I’m thankful.

Defensiveness, guilt, shame, the expectation of perfection, anger, feeling judged or judging, and fear are all obstacles to maintaining loving connections **with ourselves** as well as others.

# What is the impact of their decision on our resources?

This may be a strong underlying question and fear. If we are connected to our children and friends, there is always an impact on our resources. It affects our time, energy, and money, no matter what decisions they make. It seems so much harder when their values are not aligned with our own. We might resent giving to them, especially if we don’t agree with how they are using, or “wasting,” their resources.

We need to be flexible over the years as all of our circumstances change. Giving and receiving are vital aspects of good relationships. We need to both give and receive in the areas of emotional and intellectual support, gifts, financial help, and time and energy with grandchildren. We can be creative in finding ways to receive from our children, as well developing a variety of ways to give to them. Accepting who they are is a priceless gift to them. Their acceptance of who we are is a priceless gift to us.

**How much room do we have for others, especially our children, to ask questions and reach different conclusions from the ones we have accepted for ourselves?**

David and Rebecca have three sons. One is quite religious, one took over the family business and studies weekly with a rabbi, and the other has no interest in religion. When the third one married a French woman who also had no interest in religion, the rest of the family was upset. They felt they were losing their son. They wondered if they should even go to the wedding. It felt so foreign to them.

After some soul searching about what they really wanted for their family, they decided to go. He was their son; they loved him. At the wedding, friends spoke about the couple with such pleasure and joy and respect. David and Rebecca and the brothers learned new things about the groom. They saw how his friends valued him, and how he helped them. They could feel the love in the room. They stayed open to him and his new wife. There were things they felt they could learn about them and from them. Their openness paid off. They also knew their son would continue to grow and change in his own life. Feeling the love from his family meant a great deal to him. This is a story with many more chapters to be written. The theme will be growth through acceptance.

The religious and political views of one of my relatives were at the opposite end of the spectrum from mine. We began a heated discussion one day, and I felt myself becoming defensive and emotional. I caught it and made an internal decision to listen deeply and learn what I could about this person as well as their view of the difficult issue. I do not expose myself to this kind of thinking among my friends, I realized. Perhaps I could risk learning something new.

By the end of the conversation, I had been able to take in much more of the information, because I wasn’t blocking it with my defensive responses. I later realized that, while I did not change my mind about how I felt on the issue, **I** **had** **changed**. I felt a more loving connection with the person; I realized our differences didn’t have to separate us. I had a better understanding of why people found that position attractive. I had more compassion for others with that view. I felt lighter and yet enlarged. I could hold more options and hopefully see new possibilities.

# In the end, what really counts for us?

One way to get in touch with your deeper values and concerns is to spend some time thinking and writing about: How do you want to feel on your deathbed? What is important to you? Who do you want to have around you?

What do you want your spouse and each of your children to say about you at your funeral? Your closest friends? **Write the talk for them.** As you think through what you would like each one of them to say, you become very conscious of the individual relationships and what is important in each one. This is different from a general “good person” talk about you.

What are you doing in your life now to live into what is really important in the end?

 The story is told that before his death, Rabbi Zushia said, "In the coming world, G-d will not ask me: 'Why were you not Moses? Why were you not David? Why were you not Abraham?' No. In the world to come, G-d will ask me: 'Why were you not Zushia?'"

Chapter 5

**The Phases of the Newly Observant**

A general look at the developmental stages of the *baal teshuvah*

**by Aliza**

I have spent over thirty years in the world of *baalei teshuvah*, as both an emerging *baal teshuvah* myself, and as an educator and guide for hundreds of other *baalei teshuvah*. Over the years, I have identified several stages and general commonalities in the process of becoming a *baal teshuvah.* Identifying these stages helps us understand the process of development of the *baal teshuvah*, but it must be understood that each person is individual, and each experience as unique as the person. Some will linger in a particular stage, while others will skip it completely. Some will pass through each one in a linear fashion, while others will move back and forth through the stages, perhaps several times. The following is meant to be a general guide to help parents and friends, and even the *baalei teshuvah* themselves, understand what might be coming next.

## Phase One: The Beginning

There are many reasons why people choose to pursue a different pathway in life. A desire for meaning, a search for truth, a yearning for roots, a sense that “something is missing” or that “there must be more to life than this,” a wish for community, or a need for structure can all be stimuli to begin the *baal teshuvah* journey. Sometimes the search is preceded by a trauma, sometimes by a romance, sometimes it is a slow evolution of ideas that have been brewing for years, and sometimes it is a jump into the exciting and alluring unknown.

The first phase is characterized by curiosity and exploration. This phase may have been preceded by curiosity and exploration into other religious or spiritual pathways, so it may not be phase one of a specific person’s spiritual search, but I am calling it phase one for our purposes, with the understanding that a prerequisite to phase one is the choice of a Jewish pathway.

During this phase, they would likely read books, research on the Internet, ask questions, attend classes, seek a teacher, and possibly take a short trip to Israel. The goal of this phase is to learn enough to confirm the choice of a Jewish pathway.

**Phase Two: Wonder and Awe**

In this phase, the person has learned enough to be in awe of all there is to know. They marvel at the vastness and wonder at the depth. Often instead of their curiosity being sated by previous study, it becomes even more voracious. This phase is often characterized by a single-mindedness in seeking information and educational experiences. It can be very intense for some, and it may be a little trying for those living in their environment.

**Phase Three: Trepidation and the Beginnings of Observance**

Taking on some of the Jewish practices may have already begun slowly in phase one, or more quickly in phase two. It is characterized by the wary tasting of mitzvah and observance. A person may begin by eschewing pork or shellfish, or by adding other observances of kashrut, by increasing attendance at the synagogue, by instituting a regular prayer practice, by dressing differently, by regularly attending a Shabbat meal, by tithing their earnings, or by observing any number of other mitzvot.

The trepidation comes from two main sources. The first is internal: “Do I really want to commit to this? What will my life be like if I take this on? What if I take it on and can’t keep it up?” The second is external: “What will my friends think of me? How will this impact my work/studies? What will my employer/professors/parents think? What if I make a big deal over this and then find I can’t keep it up?”

It takes a lot of courage to make a change, especially in the face of unchanging, or even disapproving, friends and family. Even when we may feel that the *baal teshuvah’s* practices are unnecessary, or even foolish, we can admire the courage and character necessary to take on and maintain those practices.

**Phase Four: Accelerated Acceptance and Incorporation of Jewish Practice**

In this phase, the new *baal teshuvah* seems to be adding new practices almost as fast as they learn about them. Of course, the pace is different for each individual. For some, “total” acceptance and integration of observance takes years. For others, it can be a matter of months, especially for those who are participating in a school experience in Israel.

For the *baal teshuvah,* there is often a feeling of exhilaration during this phase. It is exciting, almost intoxicating, to constantly learn and incorporate newness into one’s life. This is true for the sports enthusiast, the mountain climber, and the scientist, as well. Part of the human experience is the desire to move into the unknown and take charge of it. This part of human nature is uniquely nourished during this phase of exploring and taking on of “new” mitzvot.

In addition, when *baalei teshuvah* are attaching themselves to an observant community, they often experience a very high approval rating from that community during this process. Some community members see it as the fruit of their educational efforts—everyone likes to see their seeds blossom. Others feel an affirmation of their own choices when someone “new” enters the fold. And still others are excited by their belief that the world comes that much closer to its ultimate purpose when another Jewish soul behaves in congruence with its mission. Many *baalei teshuvah* are encouraged and buoyed by the applause and approval they receive throughout this phase.

**Variations on Phase Four:**

While this phase is characterized by an accelerated and, most often, unabated taking on of new practices and observances, it may have some distinct variations:

**Variation A: Naïve Embracing, Submission, and Over-submission**

For some, phase four can be like a whirlwind. It can happen quickly, sometimes a bit too quickly. It is during this phase that family members may feel like their loved one is part of a cult. They may see what looks like a blind following of a charismatic teacher and see their loved one changing dramatically almost overnight.

In some of these cases there is a naiveté that interacts with an individual’s emotional needs, which can lead to a submission to Jewish law, and even to an over-submission. This can be exacerbated and accelerated by the accolades the new *baal teshuvah* is receiving from their new friends or community, and by the emotional holes those accolades may be filling.

The antidote to this sometimes worrisome phase is education. The more the newly observant learn, the more they develop the intellectual connection to what they learn, and the more their emotions can be tempered and balanced. Emotions can catapult a person into growth, but only knowledge, perseverance, and commitment can sustain it. Lack of appropriate education will likely lead to inappropriate or rigid observance. In time, increased education will most often lead to a healthy balance.

**Variation B: Missionary, Educator, and Enforcer**

During phase four, some move from excitement to zealotry. This variation can be quite annoying for those who have to live through it. The new *baal teshuvah* can begin proselytizing friends and family members. They can be quite passionate about the need for you to change your life. They can become preachy, constantly offering G-d’s point of view about everything from politics to what is in your grocery cart. Often when manifesting this stage, they are undereducated and don’t know enough to share such opinions, even if G-d actually did “feel” that way.

Or they can so admire their teachers, and so desire to be like them, that they fool themselves and believe that they are actually emulating them by (prematurely) taking on the role of educator. Every conversation can be seen as an opportunity to educate. Every encounter is a chance to not only show what they know but to convey the ultimate truth of the universe.

Perhaps most annoying of these three related variations is the enforcer. This usually short-lived phase sometimes occurs when the new *baal teshuvah* learns about the mitzvah of rebuke, *tochachah*. In the perfect Torah-based society, there are no police. Everyone is accountable to G-d and usually takes their responsibility seriously. For those who fall down on the job, it is the duty of everyone to prop them up, in fulfillment of the dictate that “all Jews are responsible one for another.” This propping up can mean reminding a neighbor of the correct law, or its application, correcting someone when they are wrong or, in rare cases, preventing someone from transgressing by force. Only a fraction of these laws can be kept today, and the ways that they are kept are few and require caution. Until a new student learns the nuances of adherence to these laws in his or her community, they can make a lot of imprudent and foolish mistakes.

The paths of Torah are pleasant. If the *baal teshuvah* is not behaving pleasantly, they need to learn and absorb more. The antidote to all of the above variations is time, maturity, and more education.

A conversation with the new *baal teshuvah’s* rabbi or teacher may also be helpful. If a conversation with your child’s rabbi is not productive, seek another Orthodox rabbi with whom you can feel a sense of rapport.  An Orthodox rabbi or *rebbetzin* familiar with *baalei teshuvah* can give you an important perspective. See Chapter 15, The Rabbi and Teacher as Ally, for more on this.

**Variation C: Overwhelm**

As explained, phase four may bring about a rush of excitement and a quickened pace of adding new observances. In some people, this leads to feeling overwhelmed. While everyone must set their own pace, feeling overwhelmed is a sure sign that the pace is too fast. While they may feel emotionally ready or intellectually convinced that a Torah life is the best choice for them, it still takes time to make the changes. New practices need to be introduced at a pace the individual can digest and absorb.

When counseling people who want to speed things up, or who are unsure of the pace they should set, I share with them the advice that one of my teachers, Tehila Jaeger, shared with me. “You should be somewhere between comfortable and overwhelmed. If you are totally comfortable, you can probably push yourself a little harder. If you are overwhelmed, you need to slow down a little bit. Take baby steps.”

**Phase Five: Plateau**

For the average *baal teshuvah* (as if there could be such a thing) phase five creeps up on them. The rush of conquering new territory dissipates; the hands that had been applauding them so wildly begin to silence. They may feel that Judaism has lost some of its fun. Often they may stumble blindly in this phase, not even knowing that they are going through a normal part of the process.

Phase five is plateau. After what is usually several years in phase four, the *baal teshuvah* has become accustomed to feeling a sense of excitement in mitzvah observance. Life is often very rosy when everything is new and fresh. As the new *baal teshuvah* becomes an acclimated *baal teshuvah*, and life begins to settle into more of a normal routine, albeit a new normal, it can become a little more difficult. The daily, weekly, and yearly practice can sometimes feel like a grind.

The same community members who offered so much encouragement in the beginning phases now expect the *baal teshuvah* to be able to handle everything on their own. They expect them to tow the community line and integrate, often expecting the experienced *baal teshuvah* to take on the community’s behaviors and attitudes. The community members often forget, or never realize, that the *baal teshuvah* can never totally be like them, because they have a different background.

Since this phase usually happens after several years, it is often accompanied by a relaxation of some stringency in Jewish practice. Some confuse this relaxation with “backsliding,” but usually it is the result of increased Jewish education and exposure to varied practices that still fall within the realm of Orthodoxy. Finally, the *baal teshuvah* is ready to make some educated decisions about which practices they want to make permanent and which practices may be customs that they choose not to keep.

This is the time of settling, where one’s personality in relationship to one’s education and experience emerges more fully. For many, this is the litmus test. Will they be able to carry some of that newness and excitement into the routine of regular Jewish life? Will there be a freshness in their practice? Do they even want that? What will they look like as they become “normal”?

Hopefully, if you managed to stay connected during the earlier stages, this is where your relationship can become even stronger. Your child or friend can emerge more pleasant and refined, and more at home with themselves and confident within Judaism.

**Phase Six: Facing Disillusionment**

Not everyone experiences disillusionment, but for some *baalei teshuvah*, this is a watershed stage. It turns out that people are people in every group, even among Orthodox Jews. This discovery can be particularly painful for a *baal teshuvah.*

Many *baalei teshuvah* are idealistic, thoughtful, careful, and tenacious. They often possess these qualities in greater quantity than the population at large, and it is often because of these qualities that they became observant in the first place. Also, people often gravitate to those with similar qualities for friendships and relationships. So, many *baalei teshuvah* live in a more idealistic, thoughtful, kinder, friendlier world. It can be particularly jarring, therefore, when an observant Jew behaves contrary to Torah ideals, and desecrates the Name of G-d and the reputation of the Jewish people. When this happens, disillusionment may occur.

There are as many responses to disillusionment as there are causes. The following are five common responses:

Some people struggle to maintain observant practices, or even let go.

Some people remain observant and become bitter.

Some people remain observant, but their practice becomes robotic, devoid of feeling but anchored by responsibility.

Some people remain observant and lose the idealistic hopefulness of the *baal teshuvah.*

Some people remain observant and become stronger. They use the experience to learn more about Jews, Judaism, and themselves, and make a commitment to work harder to bring both themselves and the world to perfection.

**The Final Phase: Total Blending**

I am reminded of the scene in the movie *My Cousin Vinny*,where Vinny and his girlfriend get out of his car in the sleepy southern town, wearing full leather outfits and fashionable dark sunglasses. He tells her to try and fit in. She looks him up and down, looks at the surroundings, and says sarcastically, “Yeah, *you* blend!”

If you know the scene, you know what I mean. *Baalei teshuvah* can never truly blend. Sure, they can dress the part, and they can learn the lingo, and they can set up their homes to reflect their education and values. They can send their kids to religious schools, they can carefully keep TV out of their homes and lives, they can skip movies and other forms of not-so-kosher entertainment, and they can learn Torah. But, at some point in their lives, they still saw *My Cousin Vinny,* or something like it.And probably not one thing like it, probably a lot of other things too. And all of those scenes, and all of that language, and all of that music is still somewhere in their heads.

My kids always wonder how I know all the songs they play in the supermarket (the oldies). They never heard them in our home and at that time, the only music we listened to as a family was classical and Jewish. I listened to them in high school, of course. They were part of my life; I was glued to Casey’s Coast to Coast Count Down of the Top 40 every week. I stopped listening to that at sixteen, but it’s still in my head today.

And *baalei teshuvah* have different families: non-observant parents, non-Jewish cousins, *Zaydies* who are Grandpas, “family” customs that come from rabbis and teachers instead of the family. Their families don’t converge on them for Passover, they send Chanukahcards instead of Rosh Hashanah cards, and they talk about politics in Israel instead of the holiness of the Land of Israel. The list goes on and on.

And that history leads to differences. *Baalei teshuvah* may want their kids to have a little stronger secular education than is taught in religious schools, they may feel differently about punishments, and they may do unusual things, like take their kids camping or have pets. So, try as they might, they will never fully blend. Their kids may, if they want to. And, if they are successful in passing their values on to the next generation, the grandchildren will blend seamlessly. The final phase of total blending takes three generations.

**Part II**

**How to Accommodate and/or Live with an Observant Jew**

Concepts, Practical Tips, and Reflections

Introduction to Part II

**Aliza: They're Always Calling a Rabbi!**

When a person decides to become Torah observant, they are entering a world that is guided by halachah, Jewish law. As explained in the Introduction to NLE Morasha Syllabus’s System of Jewish Law, the Torah offers a way of life guided by Divine law, grounded in the national revelation of the mitzvot (commandments) at Mount Sinai. The Torah’s laws are elucidated by the Mishnah, Talmud, and rabbinic commentaries and have been transmitted from generation to generation throughout the ages. Scholars in each generation apply Talmudic and rabbinic principles to the unique technological developments and sociological circumstances of their era, ruling on the halachah as it pertains to all nuances of life.

Many of us may become aware of halachah from life cycle events – through interactions with rabbis and observant Jews during a brit milah (circumcision ceremony), bat and bar mitzvah, weddings, and funerals. And we may think that, aside from additional customs related to commemorating Jewish festivals, these events demonstrate the full extent of Jewish law. However, what might be less known is that halachah is the profound expression of our relationship with an infinite God, and as such permeates every aspect of life.

The more I learned, the more I realized how vast and growing is the halachic literature. I also saw that because of the breadth, depth, and complexity of halachah, the Jewish community, even the most scholarly, rely on rabbinic guidance in all areas of life. I saw that families and individuals regularly seek rabbis for their advice and halachic direction for non-mundane halachic questions. And I also noticed that since Jewish law is so extensive, rabbis develop expertise in different fields, so it is common to consult for example, one rabbi for questions arising relating to eating Kosher food, a second rabbi for business law, and a third rabbi relating to family matters.

 *Since each ba’al teshuvah’s situation is unique, it is of the utmost importance that they consult with a rabbinic authority who is familiar with and sensitive to the needs and experiences of ba’alei teshuvah in order to find out how to correctly observe halachah with parents, family, and friends who do not embrace halachah. Different rabbis have different areas of expertise, and the ba’al teshuvah might find themselves consulting one rabbi concerning how to keep Shabbat or kashrut in a non-observant home, and a different rabbi concerning how to deal with other areas of their lives. This is perfectly okay to do, and is not considered “shopping” for different opinions.*

Chapter 6

Shabbat/Shabbos–The Sabbath

Oralee’s Personal Reflections on the Sabbath

My first taste of keeping the Sabbath was while visiting Aliza in Israel in 1981. She had spent her high school junior year in a seminary in Jerusalem and wanted to travel in Europe. When she had told me she wanted to return to Israel for the following school year, I felt I should go to Israel to visit her school and see her in that setting. Since I did not want her to travel in Europe alone, I joined her. For the two of us, keeping the Sabbath on that trip meant that before sundown on Friday we had to be wherever we would be staying, and we could not travel on Saturday other than on foot. Aliza read her prayer book every day, including the Sabbath. She did not write on the Sabbath. She ate only kosher food, and she did not cook anything on the Sabbath. We had to plan the trip with this in mind. It was a clear and absolute requirement. While it was a challenge at times, it was one we met. I was impressed with how committed Aliza was about keeping the Sabbath. There was no shifting it to make life more convenient for us as travelers. The Sabbath had priority.

This is something I have experienced in her home, and on travels with her family, over the years. The Sabbath is an absolute priority. One year, I helped her family move from an apartment to their house in Long Beach. The twins were a year old, the other two children were four and five. We worked very hard to get the boxes packed and moved to the new house before the Sabbath began. We barely made it. Every room in the house was full of boxes. I couldn’t imagine that the whole Sabbath day she would not open or unpack at least some of the boxes, which had things she needed to make her life easier with the children. My fingers were itching to get busy with unpacking and moving in. No way! It was the Sabbath.

Families in the community invited us for Friday supper and Saturday lunch. We took the children to the park on Saturday afternoon, took naps, and didn’t touch a box until the Sabbath ended an hour after sundown. I was very impressed by her commitment.

Living in a Jewish community that keeps the Sabbath definitely gives support to that religious commitment. I learned much in the Long Beach, New York, Jewish community, especially from those attending the Sephardic Shul. The whole community revolves around the Sabbath. The household rhythms are set by the Sabbath. Guests are invited for the meals, or if they live out of walking distance, they are invited to stay overnight and for the whole of the Sabbath. Orthodox homes have large dining rooms and often extra beds to accommodate overnight guests.

Thursday and especially Friday are busy days for cleaning the house, baking bread (challah), and cooking all the food for Friday night and Saturday, being sure the Sabbath clothes are clean and ready, and taking showers before the cutoff time of candle lighting. The flurry of activity and tension mounts right up to that amazing time, eighteen minutes before sunset. Then it is as if there is a big exhale throughout the house, and the women gather at the candlesticks to light the candles and say a blessing to usher in the Sabbath. A tangible sense of peace fills the house. For the next twenty-five hours, there are no phone calls, no e-mails, no radio or television, no driving, no cooking. Life shifts to Sabbath mode. There is wonderful food on beautifully set tables, people in their Sabbath clothes, time to visit with friends and guests, walking to the synagogue, time for reading, afternoon naps, games with the children, and people in the community dropping in to visit. The Sabbath ends with a ritual called Havdalah, which separates it from the rest of the week.

After years of experiencing this rhythm whenever I visited the Bulows, I wanted some of it in my own life back home. But I found it very difficult to create without the structure and commandments of the Sabbath. I tried making a Sabbath one day a month and different days of the week. But I didn’t have a community to support this. Finally, I realized that Sunday was enough of a remnant of a day off in the general culture that perhaps I could create a Sabbath structure for myself on Sundays.

 For me, the day is for being in a worshipping community, visiting with friends, reading spiritual books (and often the Sunday paper), napping, relaxing, and being in nature. I do not go shopping. I turn my computer off Saturday night and turn it on Monday morning. I do not attend to my daily work, meet clients, or do work-related writing. I experience spaciousness for being with people and being with myself. Since I am a “doer,” I constantly face temptations to put other things into the day. The Sabbath for me is about “being.” It is about having time to exhale. It is about connecting with the Holy by slowing down and listening.

As our culture becomes more secular, people often hunger for ritual, which is now largely absent from our lives. And yet this practice of slowing down, of totally shifting our lives for one day each week seems to be extraordinarily hard to do. It helps me appreciate the structure provided by the Sabbath in the observant Jewish life, and the support provided by the community in keeping it.

**What Is Shabbat?**

**by Aliza**

The observance of the Sabbath is a central tenet in Judaism. In fact, it is so central that until about two hundred years ago, the measure of connection a person had with Judaism was defined by its observance. Before labels like Reform, Conservative, and Orthodox were common, or even invented, one was either a *shomer* *Shabbat*, Sabbath observer, or not.

The Sabbath is the seventh day of the week. According to the Torah, G-d created the world in six days and “rested” on the seventh (Gen. 2:1-3). Of course, it’s not possible that G-d was tired, so the word “rested” is understood on a deeper level. It means He stopped what He was doing and ceased being active in the way that He was during the six days of creation.

Jews are asked to emulate G-d as much as they can. Whether through modeling His qualities, such as mercy, justice, tolerance, kindness, patience, holiness, and truth, or His behaviors, such as distributing resources, feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, and burying the dead, the Torah and rabbinic writings are replete with directives and methods of how to shape the human self in the image of G-d.

One of these ways is by refraining from “work,” or *melachah*, specific creative activity, on the Sabbath. This applies to the individual, as well as to all who are within the individual’s sphere of influence. A Sabbath observer may not engage in work even indirectly by directing, requesting, or intimating a task to another. (There are some rare exceptions to this rule, check with your rabbi for specifics.)

The fourth of the Ten Commandments as listed in Exodus is:

“Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days shall you labor and do all your work; but the seventh day is a Sabbath to Hashem, your G-d. You shall not do any work: you, your son, your daughter, your manservant, your maidservant, your animal, and your convert within your gates, for in six days Hashem made the heavens and the earth, the sea and all that is in them, and He rested on the seventh day; therefore Hashem blessed the Sabbath day, and hallowed it” (Ex. 20:8-11).

The eternal and covenantal nature of Sabbath observance, as well as the severity of desecrating it, is emphasized a few chapters later:

“And Hashem spoke to Moses, saying: Speak to the Children of Israel, saying, ‘You shall surely keep My Sabbaths, for it is a sign between Me and you throughout your generations; that you may know that I am Hashem, Who sanctifies you. You shall keep the Sabbath, for it is holy to you; whoever profanes it shall surely be put to death, for whoever does any work on it, that soul shall be cut off from among his people. Six days may work be done; but the seventh is the Sabbath of rest, holy to Hashem; whoever does any work on the Sabbath day, he shall surely be put to death. The Children of Israel shall safeguard the Sabbath, to make the Sabbath a perpetual covenant throughout their generations. It is a sign between Me and the Children of Israel forever that in six days Hashem made the heavens and the earth, and on the seventh day He rested and was refreshed” (Ex. 31:12-17).

If the Sabbath is an eternal covenant, if it is a sign of the relationship between a Jew and G-d, if a Jew may be cut off from his people, or possibly face the death penalty, for (intentionally) violating it, there must be specific definition and specific means of “keeping the Sabbath.” Similarly, there must be specific activities that define “desecrating the Sabbath” by engaging in prohibited "work." The Torah does not directly mention any of these activities or prohibitions, except for 1) “You shall kindle no fire throughout your settlements on the Sabbath day” (Ex. 35:3) and 2) not carrying outside from a public area to a private domain or vice versa (*Bamidbar* 15:33). Moreover, the Torah does not overtly command positive mitzvot of Shabbat such as lighting Shabbat candles or reciting Kiddush.

**How Do We Observe Shabbat?**

Jewish tradition teaches that the Torah G-d gave on Mount Sinai was given in two parts: the Written Torah, what we call the Pentateuch or the Five Books of Moses, and the Oral Torah. The Oral Torah contains all the definitions, distinctions, and additional information necessary to properly observe the laws in the Written Torah. It was given at the same time as the written law (similar to how a doctor might hand over a written prescription and deliver oral instructions about the medication at the same time), and passed down orally until shortly after the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE.

After the destruction, and with the dispersion that followed, it became clear that the integrity of the oral transmission process was in jeopardy. So Rabbi Judah the Prince (Yehudah HaNasi) took it upon himself to compile the tradition in written form. His work is called the Mishnah. Shortly after the Mishnah was completed, in about 300 CE, work began on a compellation of writing that would flesh out the Mishnah and further elucidate its concepts and legal rulings. This work is called the Gemara. Today the two works are printed together and are called the Talmud. It is in the Talmud that we find the definition of how to observe the Sabbath and avoid its desecration.

The Talmud derives the definition of Sabbath restrictions from the juxtaposition of the Torah’s detailed instruction of how to build the Tabernacle in the desert (partially found in Ex. 31:1-11) with the second quote above about the importance of Sabbath observance (Ex: 31:12-17). The Talmud teaches that the uninterrupted proximity of the two texts teaches not only that the work on the Tabernacle must be stopped for the Sabbath, but also that the concept of “stopping on the Sabbath” is *defined* by refraining from thirty-nine types of work used in building the Tabernacle.

Any of those thirty-nine major categories of activities, as well as those related by shared principle or purpose, are forbidden on the Sabbath. In addition, there are some further restrictions that have been legislated to protect both the observance and the nature of the Sabbath. Moving tools (and even touching items that could cause movement) or other implements that can be used for any of the above activities (such as pens, light bulbs, needles etc.) is forbidden, as well as engaging in business, traveling, and participating in any other weekday task that would interfere with the spirit of the Sabbath. (See Appendix A for the list of the thirty-nine categories of prohibited work.)

Clearly, all these fine details create a lot of “don’ts” on the Sabbath. It can feel very exacting and demanding, and it is, but its effect is unparalleled. Without these restrictions, it is almost impossible to “give yourself permission” to completely withdraw and relax. In today’s world of ever-increasing pace, information overload, and connection through technology that invades every corner of what used to be our quiet spaces, it is easier to appreciate the wisdom of a regularly timed fully unplugged day.

But Shabbat is much more than a list of “don’ts.” There are lots of lovely “dos” as well. Each of these two groups of laws serves a different purpose. The “don’ts” of the Sabbath have the effect of pushing away the mundane, the weekday tasks, the “shoulds,” and the everyday routine. The “don’ts” create space; then there is room for the “dos” to fill that space.

The Sabbath day begins at least eighteen minutes before sunset with the lighting of two (or more) Sabbath candles. Usually the candles are lit by the woman of the household, who fulfills this obligation for all its members, but if a man lives alone he would light for himself. Immediately after candle lighting is a special time for prayer and reflection.

Following the evening prayers, there is the first of three required meals. The meal is preceded by the singing of the hymns *Shalom Aleichem* and *Eishet Chayil*, A Woman of Valor*.* Then Kiddush is recited. This is a blessing made over a cup of wine or grape juice in order to sanctify Shabbat. Afterward, the participants of the meal do a ritual hand washing, and the leader of the meal makes “*hamotzie*,” the blessing over two loaves of bread (challah) that introduces the meal.

In many families, the children are blessed by the parents before Kiddush. The meal is festive in nature, with singing and the sharing of thoughts and stories about the weekly Torah portion or other uplifting topics, and is concluded with the Grace after Meals or *bentching*.

The next morning, after synagogue services (or privately offered prayer), the second meal is eaten. It too opens with Kiddush*,* ritual hand washing, and the blessing over two loaves of bread, and is concluded with *bentching*. In many homes, a nap follows the meal. While this is relished, it is optional. The third meal follows the afternoon prayer service. It is less formal, and often lighter, than the first two meals. There is no opening prayer over wine, but there is still the hand washing and blessing over bread, as well as the concluding Grace. The day is ended with a short ceremony called Havdalah*,* which includes a blessing over wine, spices, and a candle with multiple wicks.

(See <http://www.aish.com/sh/ht/as/48971556.html> on Aish.com for a video on how to do this ceremony.)

Making Room in Your Life for the Sabbath Observer

by Oralee

**In My Home**

When Aliza returned from Israel as an observant Jew, I made some space for her in my kitchen to keep her kosher “stuff.” When she visited, she handled what she needed to do within my home, and I gave her the space to do it. Other than being a bit curious, I was not involved in her practices. We each had our own lives and lived in what seemed like parallel universes.

After she married, we kept a box of kosher dishes and kitchen items in storage, ready for her visits. She handled her own cooking and made meals for us as well as her husband. We bought some of the ingredients she needed, and she brought some, especially kosher meat, with her from New York.

We were all at the growing edge of this new existence. We tried out ways to make it work for all of us. There were some tough spots about not driving or using electricity on the Sabbath. The rest of us felt constrictions and grumbled a bit. It took several visits to loosen up and accept the reality of the difference in our lives. We grumbled less and less.

**In Aliza’s Home**

Especially in the beginning of my experience of Sabbath in Aliza’s home, I was overwhelmed by the details. Some of them seemed so petty to me. How could they possibly make a difference? I was viewing the Sabbath from the details. When I was able to make the switch to viewing the Sabbath from the larger picture of what it means in the rhythm of life, then I realized that the details were merely the supporting pieces and not the main thing.

This shift came gradually for me, and only with ongoing experience. I was in the Bulow’s New York home for four to twelve Sabbaths a year, for sixteen years. When the children were old enough to visit me on their own, we would keep the Sabbath together in my home or wherever we traveled. Experiencing the Sabbath in their home prepared me to be able to keep it with my grandchildren.

**Back in My Home**

When my granddaughter came to live with me for a year of homeschooling, I got very serious about my readiness to keep kosher and keep the Sabbath. My box of kosher dishes and utensils expanded to include cookware and electrical appliances. I had come a long way from the days of Aliza’s return from Israel. Now when my grandchildren stay with me, I like to remember that all the details help make the Sabbath a different kind of day. They remind us to set the day apart from the rest of the week.

See Appendix B for a list of what I do to prepare for and observe the Sabbath with my grandchildren.

## To learn more about the Sabbath visit Aish.com or Torah.org

## A good reference book is Gateway to Judaism, by Rabbi Mordechai Becher

Chapter 7

Kosher Food – Kashrut

**by Aliza**

The word “kosher” means fit or proper. Judaism has many requirements pertaining to food and its preparation; when food meets these conditions, it is deemed “kosher.” A kitchen that is used for the *sole* preparation of foods that meet these standards is called a “kosher kitchen.” The practice of eating only kosher food is referred to as “keeping kosher.” The set of laws pertaining to kosher food is called *kashrus* or kashrut.

**Keeping Body and Soul Together: A Reason for Kashrut**

Every mitzvahis a pathway to a spiritual end. Judaism sees human beings as a blend of the physical and the spiritual: a spiritual soul housed in a physical body, the body being temporal, and the soul being eternal. If the soul will exist eternally, what then is the point of this relatively short sojourn in the physical realm?

The soul is here to transform itself, but a soul cannot accomplish that task unaided. It must have a tool with which to work and an arena within which to function. The body, with all its drives and needs, is the tool. The world, with all its choices, blessings, and difficulties, is the arena.

How, then, should the body behave in order for the soul to become transformed? This is where the system of mitzvot comes into play. There are two types of mitzvot: dos and don’ts. The “dos,” the positive commandments, are guidelines for what to do to best enhance soul growth. The “don’ts,” the prohibitions, are warnings about what to stay away from to prevent soul diminishment.

Of course, there is a lot more to say about this topic, but this is the basic paradigm: The soul is here to grow close to G-d; the body is here to help the soul grow. Since we have been given free will, we can choose to grow close or distant, but we cannot choose **not** to grow.

It might be easier to see this concept in the context of food. The body is affected by what we eat. We can choose to eat a lot or a little, healthfully or not so, or even to eat nothing at all. Each of these choices will affect the body. Even if we choose not to choose, and even if we are not aware of choices, or even if we have no choice, what we eat still affects the body.

Similarly, Judaism believes that what we do affects the soul, for better or for worse, a lot or a little, instantly or over time. There is no inconsequential action.

Kashrut fits into this paradigm in two different ways. First, it is a system of behavior, full of mitzvot, that we encounter several times a day, as often as we eat. Because we eat so often, kashrut keeps the body engaged in frequent actions that strengthens the soul’s connection to God. And, as it is a system that includes both “dos” and “don’ts,” it also helps prevent the diminishment of the soul.

But kashrut is more than that. What we eat actually becomes our body. The food we take in is transformed into the very body that is partnering with our soul, as well as into the energy that fuels that body and its ability to act. In a way, the food we eat becomes the physical stuff of the actions we do. If we are trying to act in a way that connects us to G-d, we need food that facilitates that end. Nourishment with kosher food lays the physical foundation for spiritually directed behavior.

Food is also a force of connection. It helps create bonds between those who share it. This is one reason why there are so many meals on the Sabbath and Festivals; they help unite and bond families and communities. But even more than that, food bonds body and soul.

What happens if you skip breakfast? How do you feel? What about lunch too? Now how do you feel? Sometime in the midafternoon, if not sooner, you may become easily distracted, have difficulty thinking or paying attention, or even feeling like you’d like to pay attention. If you continue to go without food, you may feel faint at some point, your muscles will likely weaken, and you’ll feel like sleeping. The bonds of the soul are slowly weakening; it is starting to loosen itself from its bodily home.

All it takes is a few more days of no food, depending on the person, and the bonds of the soul will fall away completely, allowing the soul to slip out of the body. When the soul leaves the body, the body experiences death. It is the soul that animates the body.

When we sleep, the bonds of our soul are also loosened. This is one reason why we do not have full control over our body during sleep. And often it takes a little while after awakening for the soul to have full reign over the body again, which is one reason why some people are a bit woozy after awakening. For many, eating something aids the wake-up process. This is because food bonds body to soul. Eating brings them together.

If food is the “thread” that sews body and soul together, and if the body/soul partnership is so important, it makes sense that there should be special food to form this bond. Kosher food not only keeps body and soul together, it also helps direct the body to achieve its goal of facilitating the journey of the soul. (See further,  Ramchal, Mesilat Yesharim 12:26-28.)

See Appendix C for detailed specifics on kosher food – what is and is not kosher, and how to know – and preparation of food.

**Passover**

The holiday of Passover has complex *kashrut* requirements in addition to the regular laws kept all year. This huge body of Jewish law, in addition to the deep religious significance of the Seder, can make it very difficult for families on multiple religious levels to share a Seder together. It may be easier to have a family dinner the night before Passover or to share a non-Seder family meal at the home of the most stringently observant during the intermediate days of the festival. The diversity of desires as to how to conduct the Passover Seder may be too wide to satisfy all participants with one meal. It may be best to create separate meals that allow for the different levels of kashrut of the participants, as well as their varied interest in participation in the Seder rituals.

Helpful book: *Passover Survival Kit*, by Rabbi Shimon Apisdorf.

**Restaurants**

Not surprisingly, as with other things Jewish, there are different opinions as to which restaurants are kosher enough. Kosher restaurants have a displayed certificate, and some Jews will hold by the organization that issues it, and others will not. Most kosher restaurants in America have pretty reliable supervision. Israel, however, is a whole different story. It is best to check with a rabbi about which certifications are acceptable.

In cities with large Jewish populations there are often several kosher restaurants to choose from. In medium sized Jewish cities there may be one or two. In cities with smaller populations there are often none.

 Beginners at keeping kosher often pass through many stages. They may begin by cutting pork and shellfish out of their diets. They then move on to eating only kosher meat products, but still eat dairy and vegetarian foods in restaurants and in the homes of others. They may then stop eating both meat and dairy out of the home, eating only *parve* foods cooked elsewhere. Finally, they begin to eat exclusively kosher both in and out of their homes. Some skip the stages concept and jump right in with two feet.

For someone who keeps exclusively kosher, there is hardly anything that can be eaten in a non-kosher restaurant. A cold drink may be the extent of the possible menu. Some Jews are okay with having a drink while their friends or family eat whatever they want; some are not. Some feel uncomfortable watching other Jews eat foods proscribed by the Torah. Others worry about the prohibition of setting a bad example by being an obviously observant Jew entering a non-kosher eatery. This prohibition is called *ma’aris* *ayin* and can be a significant problem in areas heavily populated by Jews, especially where there are kosher restaurants.

Over the years, I have seen several families drift apart, or even split apart, as grandparents pushed, tricked, or pressured their grandchildren to go against the rules and teachings of their newly observant parents. While a grandparent may feel they “won” in the short term, it is not successful as a strategy for long term connections. The grandchildren often grow to distrust the grandparents and feel more distant from them.

Helpful book: *Kosher for the Clueless but Curious*, by Rabbi Shimon Apisdorf

Eating and Traveling with Observant Grandchildren (by Oralee)

Staying connected to my family and to my grandchildren is a major commitment in my life. Having a loving relationship with them outweighs any inconveniences or changes I need to make in my lifestyle. For me, the most important aspect of traveling with my observant grandchildren, or having them visit in my home, is the powerful underpinning of my complete respect for their observance. I start out with a total commitment to support them in their Judaism. **I follow their dietary laws as if their life depends on it. I honor their Sabbath as if their life depends on it.**

**This level of commitment actually makes things easier for me**. What to do and what not to do is very clear. I don’t have to think about taking short cuts, or what I will follow and what I will not follow. There is no ambiguity. There is no question: “To do, or not to do?” The answer is “Yes” to what is called for and “No” to what is prohibited. I need a high level of consciousness to keep track of all that needs to happen, but the direction is clear. One of the side benefits for me is keeping my brain active, engaged, and exercised.

Spending time in my daughter’s home and learning from her family and her practices has made keeping the laws of kashrut for her family possible for me. It is hard for me to imagine someone trying to handle the kosher requirements without some “on the job training.” I have found I cannot depend on the children to know or remember the laws. They live in an environment where it is taken care of for them. When they are younger, they are so used to their home kosher environment, it hardly occurs to them that there is a whole world out there that does not eat the way they do. As they have grown and traveled more, both Aliza and I have made it a point to teach them how to handle food in non-kosher environments. This is especially important for them, since one side of their family is not Jewish, and some of the Jewish relatives do not keep kosher, or do not keep it in the way their mother does.

Even very young children may be aware of which candy is kosher and which is not. My own grandchildren never begged for candy if they were told it was not kosher. That amazed me. Sometimes we would look at every kind of candy at the counter and find none that was kosher. They were disappointed, but they never asked to have one anyway. Usually there are quite a few choices that are kosher. Those they beg for.

Snacks and drinks are the easiest kosher “food” to find traveling across country. All the mini-marts connected to gas stations have snacks, chips, cookies, and ice creams that are kosher. When you learn which kosher symbols, *hechsherim,* are acceptable for your family, the children can help you look for them. Sometimes it is like a treasure hunt.

One of the things that is important to know is how long the kids (and adults) need to wait after eating meat before they can have dairy foods. The general rule is to wait six hours. What does a person need to do after eating dairy foods before eating meat? Although some may wait one-half hour, usually, there is no required waiting time unless they have eaten hard cheese which requires a six hour wait. Before eating meat, they should eat or drink a food that is neither meat nor dairy, rinse their mouth and then wash their hands. This is handy knowledge. On one hot summer trip, the children didn’t want to have a meat meal because they wanted ice cream. So we had ice cream first. I told them we could have ice cream for dinner and chicken for dessert. They loved that.

**Tips for Restaurant Meals and Supermarket Shopping (by Oralee)**

It is helpful to know how to prepare vegetables and fruits for eating to ensure there are no bugs or insects on the fruit. On one trip, I had my ten-year-old grandson and one of his Orthodox friends with me. I took the boys to the breakfast buffet at the hotel. There were strawberries on the fruit table which the boys wanted. I asked the waitress to bring us two large paper cups with water and no ice. In one cup we added a few drops of liquid soap. (I carry a small bottle of kosher dish soap with me.)

We washed the strawberries in one cup (you have to be sure there are no tiny insects on them – well, large bugs aren’t kosher either) and rinsed them in the other and set them on the paper plates the waitress gave us. I took a knife for food that is neither dairy nor meat (*parve)* with me to cut fruit and vegetables. I peeled the oranges and cut the apples onto their plates.

Some of the boxes of cereal were kosher. The boys picked the one they wanted. We ordered two small cartons of milk for the cereal, and I asked for plastic spoons. The boys ate the cereals out of the boxes. Sometimes I have the boys use the milk carton as a bowl. They open it all the way at the top and pour some cereal out of their box into the milk carton. They eat that with a plastic spoon and add more cereal as there is more room in the carton. I asked to see the packages that the English muffins, blueberry muffins, and bagels came in. We looked for the kosher symbols. One time they were all kosher, but this time they were not. Otis Spunkmeyer muffins were wrapped separately and were kosher.

During our travels, I sometimes want to take care of myself by being served and eating in a restaurant. When a kosher restaurant is not available, I choose a restaurant I would like. I tell my grandchildren this is a way they can help take care of me – by being with me while I have food I like, even though they cannot eat it.

When we walk into the restaurant, I look for a table closer to the kitchen. I explain to the waitress that I am traveling with my grandchild who is on a special kosher diet. Will she please help me work things out so we can eat here? I have always gotten cooperation, and sometimes they go out of their way to help me. The grandchildren can eat **cold** kosher food on clean restaurant dishes. Ask for whole fruit – bananas, apples, grapefruit, oranges. You can cut it with your kosher knife. You know how your knife has been used.

In my restaurant/picnic tote bag, I carry: paper plates and bowls, plastic spoons, forks and knives, a parve paring knife, a tiny bottle of kosher dish soap, a salt shaker, a carton of Tradition instant noodle soup, to which you add hot water (you can ask the waitress for hot water in a paper cup to add to it), and snack foods from the last stop.

During outdoor picnics with food from supermarkets, you decide whether to have a meat or dairy meal. I carry three knives with me and color-code them to remember. Red is for meat, blue for dairy, and green for parve – used for fruits and vegetables. That is a very common color code for many Jewish cooks. (Never make assumptions in someone’s home without checking what their system is. I was in one home that used the opposite colors for dairy and meat.)

Many supermarkets have kosher sections. You will also find kosher food throughout the supermarket. Some have bagels and English muffins in the bread section that are kosher. It is very difficult to find loaves of bread that are kosher in a regular supermarket. Tillamook Cheese Company makes one kind of cheddar cheese which is kosher. It is marketed to vegetarians as well, so you can ask for it by describing it as vegetarian. You can easily get kosher cream cheese, yogurt, cottage cheese, and puddings in the dairy section. Kosher cereals, cookies, crackers, chips, and snack foods are easy to find in the appropriate sections. There are also fruit juices with kosher labels. Beware of any red drinks unless you are sure they are kosher. It is very important that grape juice be kosher.

Many kosher foods are available in both specialty stores, standard supermarkets, and convenience/gas mart stores. Enjoy the treasure hunt.

**Tips for Having Kosher-eating Guests in a Non-kosher Home (by Oralee)**

For many people this may be a very difficult thing. Jews who keep kosher may be very uncomfortable accepting any food or drink in a non-kosher home. The host may be clueless about kosher food and could easily feel offended or judged by even polite refusals of what is offered.

Providing food for family and guests is such an important part of hospitality in every culture. Having company that cannot eat what you cook or prepare can be painful. It is hard to live with “I can eat in your home, but you can’t eat in mine.” How can we balance the giving and receiving? There is not a readymade answer for this.

Sometimes speaking about it helps. When both guests and hosts acknowledge the difficulties and accept the discomfort, there is a shared experience. Sometimes humor helps. Sometimes remembering or stating the larger purpose of the visit helps. If you talk it out before the visit, those who keep kosher can offer to bring something all of you can eat, or suggest something the host can safely serve. Knowing the expectations and requirements ahead of time makes a big difference and allows the host to prepare for the guests.

In my home, if the guests are there for a meal or two, the **easiest** way to handle it is to serve only uncooked or cold kosher food on paper plates or bowls, with plastic utensils. It is easy to feed children by providing kosher breakfast cereal and milk. Most children will eat this any time of the day. Fresh fruit, vegetables with a kosher dressing, and kosher bagels with kosher cream cheese also work. It is now easy to get packaged kosher food, especially cookies and baked goods. Keep the package so the guests can check the kosher symbol.

Longer visits, when I want to cook food, require a much greater commitment. When my grandchildren visit me, I set up a kosher area in my kitchen where I keep all their dairy and meat dishes, cookware, utensils, dishpans, scrubbers, and cutting boards. I self-clean the oven with some baking pans in it, to make the oven and the pans kosher. I set out their dairy toaster oven and blender. When they leave, all of this is boxed and stored until their next visit.

A dairy toaster oven is a big help. We can bake potatoes, cook small kosher pizzas, make melted kosher cheese bagels, and toast any kosher rolls, muffins, or bread. We do NOT cook or heat any meat in it.

I make the electric stove burners kosher by turning them on high to get red hot, and then turn them off. Gas burners are okay as is. When I cook, I have the children turn on the burners or take part in making the food, so the food will meet their kosher requirements. It is a good idea to check with your *baal teshuvah* relative or friend to see how they observe the laws about who may cook the food.

I make a microwave safe for kosher food by cleaning it out thoroughly and “cooking” a full bowl of water in it for ten minutes on high. The inside gets very steamy. After I wipe it out, I can use it for either meat **or** dairy food, but not both. If I am switching from dairy to meat, or vice versa, I need to go through the above procedure again. I use this method when we make kosher popcorn in microwave bags. Many of the brands on the market today are kosher. (If you are in a place where you cannot heat a bowl of water in the microwave for ten minutes, you can double wrap the kosher food in two plastic bags and heat it.)

I have learned a lot about kosher requirements by being inquisitive in my daughter’s and other Jewish kosher kitchens. If you don’t have this background, you need to be very careful. Actually, even with this background, you need to be careful.

**Ask your kosher relative or friend or their rabbi** to tell you exactly what they would like you to do in order to feed them or their children. This is so important, because different families have different standards. When I went to Israel to be with Aliza, she asked me to bring canned tuna with an OU certification on it. I couldn’t find any, so I asked the conservative rabbi where I could get it. He told me all tuna is kosher and I shouldn’t worry about it. So I took many cans of tuna without a kosher symbol. Aliza was not willing to eat them. This was a big disappointment for me and a learning experience. I ate the tuna I brought, and she bought canned tuna in Israel.

There are so many customs and emotions concerning food. There are health concerns and special diets for all kinds of reasons. We accommodate people’s health needs, and we understand cultural differences and food preferences. If we can treat the information and needs for kosher food in this way, we can avoid being judgmental and much conflict. You can get help from **their** rabbi and books on keeping kosher that they recommend. There is now a lot of information on the Internet. You could check some sites together.

Chapter 8

Jewish Dress

**by Aliza**

The way people dress sends strong messages about what is important to them. It can signify identification with a particular culture or specific group, the rejection of a culture, or even the simultaneous embracing of one group and the rejection of another. It can also signify the level of respect they have for a person, event, or situation, or for themselves.

Jewish dress fits all of the above scenarios. There are special garments, certain styles, general modalities, and philosophic underpinnings that are particular to the various Jewish modes of dress.

**Yarmulke and Tzitzit**

Two garments are common to almost all observant men. The first is the skullcap, *yarmulke*, or *kippah* as it is known in Hebrew. It is usually made out of velvet, leather, satin, or crocheted cotton thread. It can be plain, black, colored, trimmed or decorated, or have intricate designs incorporated into the crochet work. For those conscious of the delineations, the type of yarmulke worn is an identifying sign. It places the wearer squarely within, or slightly on the fringes of, the Jewish group with which they associate. Jewish men are required to wear a yarmulke when eating, studying Torah, and praying, and the common accepted practice is to wear one at all other possible times as well. The yarmulke is removed when swimming, showering, and perhaps for a rough game of sports, as well.

The word *yarmulke*, pronounced yamaka, is used in Yiddish as well as in English but the etymology is Aramaic. It is a contraction of two words: *yoreh*, meaning awe and fear, and *malka*, which in Aramaic means majesty or heaven. Wearing a *yarmulke* is a sign of awe/fear of heaven. It is placed over the brain, something highly valued in Jewish society, to indicate that there are things beyond its grasp. The deeper meaning of placing a *yarmulke* on the head is that there is a realm to which we are subject that exceeds and eludes human understanding. (See further Talmud Bavli, Kedushin 31a and Shabbat 156b.)

The second garment is the tzitzit (also pronounced *tzitzis*), also known as the *tallit katan* (or *tallis katan*). It is worn by men in fulfillment of the verses to “make tzitzit for yourselves on the corners of your garments throughout the generations, and put a thread of blue in the fringe of each corner. And it shall be to you as tzitzit, that you may look upon it and remember all the commandments of Hashem and do them” (Num. 15:37-39). The law is understood to be a positive time-bound commandment, a category from which women are generally exempt. Today, some wear a thread of blue in their fringes and many do not, as it is not clear if we are currently in possession of the correct formula for making the necessary blue dye for that thread.

Tzitzit are typically worn over an undershirt and under the outer shirt. The garment itself is preferably made of natural fiber, wool or cotton, and the fringes are always wool. They come in different sizes and styles, and there are different ways of showing, or hiding, the actual fringes. This too can be used to show identity with a particular philosophy or group.

**Black and White**

Many men dress in black and white as a means of proclaiming identity with a specific subset of religious Jews, the Yeshivah or Yeshivish world. It is the current dress code of the group, and it does not have a specific basis in the Torah. Usually this means black, or very dark, dress pants and a white button-down shirt. Some wear a tie, others specifically do not. Many wear a hat and jacket, especially for prayer and other formal situations. In these circles, the hat is considered the completion of the dignified look of a man who is serious about Torah observance, and in contrast to American culture, it is put on, rather than removed, as a sign of respect.

**Chassidic Garb**

Men in the Chassidic groups dress in a manner based on a stylized version of the fashions of sixteenth century Polish nobility. Their dress code serves both to distinguish themselves from non-Jewish society and to identify with Chassidic groups in general, and with their specific group in particular. There are many specific details of the mode of dress that depend on the particular Chassidic group. These may include: the cut and length of coat, the type of belt, the style of tzitzit, the type of hat, the type of socks, and whether their pants are tucked into, or worn over, the socks. Some of the underlying ideas behind the entire outfit are a) to look like nobility, as befits an emissary of G-d, b) to look dignified and at their best when standing before G-d, the King of kings, on a regular basis, and c) to look distinct from non-Jewish society.

**Women**

There are several identifying features in the dress of Observant Jewish women. This can vary from group to group and as interpretations (and observance) of Jewish law differ, but in general, there are certain commonalities. Unlike men, women do not have ritual garments that they must wear, but Jewish law and custom has a lot to say about what they do wear. In general, the mode of dress of observant women should be “attractive, but not attracting.”

Most observant women wear skirts without slits that cover the knees, sleeves that reach to the elbow or beyond, and necklines above the collar bone. Many also wear socks or stockings. Form-fitting cuts and flashy colors are usually avoided. Married women cover their hair with a hat, scarf, or wig (called a *sheitel*), and single girls often wear their hair tied back in pony tails or braids, or cut in shorter styles. For reasons explained more fully below, dressing in accordance with Jewish law is often seen as the hallmark of the Jewish woman, and most will feel quite strongly about their practices.

For women, as well as for men, there are ways to dress that are associated with a particular group or philosophy, but for women the differences are much more subtle. It is necessary to be more familiar with the groups and their nuances to be able to associate a mode of dress with a particular group within the Orthodox spectrum.

**Modesty**

A word often associated with the way Jewish women dress is “modesty.” It is the common translation of the word “*tzniut”* or *“tznius*” (pronounced tznee-oot or tznee-is), but it is not a translation that does justice to the concept the Hebrew word represents. Modesty: modest dress, comportment, and demeanor, is only a small part of the much greater concept of *tzniut*.

**Tzniut**

*Tzniut* is a vital tool for a woman in accomplishing Jewish ideals and attaining spiritual heights. It is a constant imperative that encompasses every activity and every aspect of life. It helps clear one’s spiritual and life path of superfluous debris, and offers a pathway to balance, as well as the ability to focus on issues that are of central importance.

My definition of *tzniut* is “the practice through which we lower the voice of the physical so that we can hear the voice of the spiritual.” *Tzniut* is the focus on innerness, or, in a deeper sense, on the soul and its journey. *Tzniut* manifests itself in the way a woman carries herself, speaks, dresses, and behaves.

Human beings are a unique blend of the physical and the spiritual, a body and a soul, together in one creature. Our soul, however, is the essence of who we are. Often in our daily lives, we operate without the consciousness of our soul. Sometimes we feel the presence of our souls more keenly when we have a “spiritual experience.”

Our Sages teach that the soul exists before the body is formed and will continue to exist after the body dies. With this in mind, we can say that, actually, we are spiritual beings, and that during our sojourn in this world “we are spiritual beings having a physical experience.”

The fact that we are comprised of an elevated, spiritual soul requires us to take steps to provide for our soul’s needs by engaging in spiritual activities. The body is an implement, a tool to be used in service of the soul. Like any tool, it can be used for good or for bad. The challenge of the body is its relentless pull toward the physical. We may find ourselves confused by the question of who our true “self” is. One source of our confusion is the message bombarded at us by society, “You’re a body!”

 While the body’s inclination is to indulge in physical pleasures, the body is not the source of these negative drives. It is the *yetzer hara* (negative inclination) that prods a person to engage in unproductive, even destructive behavior. The body itself is an integral part of the human being, and G-d intended that it would work in tandem with the soul to enable each person reach his ultimate purpose.

In order for the soul to journey, a person exercises his free will to engage in volitional acts through which it incorporates into itself goodness, positivity, and perfection, or the opposite. Alone, a soul cannot act on its choices. The body serves as a tool to express the will of the soul. The body allows the soul to affect its physical experience and environment, thereby either creating or cutting off further pathways for spiritual growth. It is through the connection with the physical that the soul can “grow” or, sadly, “shrivel.”

Anyone who has eaten an extra piece of chocolate cake, or hit the snooze button on the alarm clock when a full day awaits, can recognize when the *yetzer hara* has appealed to the body. The body can be drawn to tastes, experiences, and activities that do not forward the journey of the soul; it can even be drawn to activities that will thwart the soul’s journey. Sometimes we feel the conflict between body and soul; other times we hear the voice of the body so loudly that we’re not even aware that the soul objects.

For many reasons, the voice of the body is usually easy to hear, while the voice of the soul speaks more softly. If the purpose of our physical experience is to “grow the soul,” it makes sense that Judaism would seek ways to enhance the voice of the soul and to optimize its ability to direct the actions of the body. *Tzniut* is a primary key to accomplishing that goal.

As with every important principle in Judaism, there is *halachah* that defines and supports the practice of *tzniut.* In addition, there is the spirit of keeping *tzniut* that cannot be legislated. It must be inculcated and integrated through years of observing role models, as well by implementing its practice.

One of the channels through which the value of *tzniut* is expressed is in the clothing of the observant Jew. While they do not apply exclusively to women, the laws of *tzniut* do have a strong focus on female dress. In many societies, women are more easily objectified and are often assigned value based on their looks. Women in particular need to be more careful in protecting their humanity and in directing themselves and others to consider and value their inner, rather than their outer, selves. The goal, therefore, of “modest” dressing is to direct the focus away from the physical container and toward the inner essence. The identifying features of “modest dress,” such as skirts, longer sleeve length, and higher necklines, are all practical expressions of the greater concept of *tzniut*.

Oralee’s Reflections on Jewish Dress

As Aliza and my granddaughters became more modest in their dress, I also became more aware of the impact of clothing. I found myself shocked by the scantiness and seductive quality of many of the styles, especially for teenage girls. I was glad my granddaughters were not wearing that kind of clothing.

I began to pay attention to my own clothing and make careful choices about the clothes I took for visits in the Jewish community in New York, and later in Colorado. My desire was to honor the sensibilities of my family and the Orthodox community. While I wear jeans and slacks at home in Oregon, I do not wear them on my visits. I shop for modest clothes – skirts below the knees with no slits, sleeves below the elbow, and necklines above the collar bone. Over the years, my wardrobe has changed to include more modest clothes even for my home base. In Oregon, I live in a cultural climate of women wearing pants. At many gatherings, I am the only woman wearing a skirt or dress. I enjoy the feminine grace of a flowing skirt. I realized that the requirements for modesty of dress are also more flattering to mature women. It allows the face and hands to be a woman’s expressive features.

I usually don’t cover my hair, although I sometimes wear a hat to the synagogue, or to more formal occasions in the Jewish community. Generally however, the dressier is the occasion, the fewer hats are worn, because the women are wearing their best wigs. On these occasions, I am usually the only woman with white hair that is not covered by a wig.**Chapter 9**

Touching and Dating

**by Aliza**

**Traditional Jewish Dating (Shidduch Dating)**

Dating practice in most Western countries today is a world apart from that of many Orthodox Jews. Whereas Western teens may regularly hang out with friends of both genders, gravitate toward one, and designate him or her as a boyfriend or girlfriend, Orthodox teens function in largely gender-separate worlds. Whereas young adults in most high schools and colleges will typically experience multiple sexual partners by graduation, Orthodox youth are enjoined to not even touch a member of the opposite sex, other than immediate family members, until marriage. Whereas flirtation begins in middle school in much of the world, this is not the case with young Orthodox adults.

# In Orthodox circles, dating is commenced only when an individual feels he or she is ready to marry. Dating within a Jewish framework refers to the active search for a soul mate, another person with whom to build a life and a family. Judaism maintains that there is a broad qualitative difference between a relationship with commitment and one that is not. Judaism offers a compelling and invigorating model – one based on seeking and marrying one’s *ezer k’negdo* (soul mate). In this sense, Jewish marriage is unique; it builds an eternal soul connection between two partners.

As the individual prepares for dating, he or she would, in consultation with their parents and teachers, consider the type of home they wish to build, the type of future they wish to create, and the qualities necessary in a potential partner in this life-long venture. The dating process is the means by which to vet potential candidates and find the best possible mate for life. It is a very purposeful and directed process. It can begin with a clear head and thoughtful calculations, but romance quickly blossoms when the right partner is found.

In order to weed out unsuitable candidates, there is usually some pre-date vetting done by parents or teachers on behalf of the potential bride or groom. Many eligible singles create what is now called a “*shidduch* resume.” *Shidduch* means “match,” and is most often used in reference to matching two people for marriage. A *shidduch* resume would typically include: contact information of the parent or teacher doing the vetting, a paragraph describing the personality of the individual seeking a mate, a paragraph describing what qualities they are looking for in their match, a brief history of their schooling and employment, possibly a description of their family, and a list of references. See Appendix D for two samples.

In the Orthodox world, parents proactively search and evaluate the suitability of candidates, and represent their child to others in the process. For the newly observant, this can be a challenge, since their parents may not be familiar or comfortable with the system. In cases like these, a rabbi, rebbitzen or teacher, or sometimes even the *baal teshuvah* themselves will do the checking and phone calling that precedes a date.

After a candidate has been chosen and “checked out,” a formal dating system ensues. A third party is usually engaged as a go-between, so that emotions and embarrassment may be spared and direction may be given to both parties. The go-between, sometimes referred to as a *shadchan*, or matchmaker (even if they did not actually suggest the match), will communicate directly with both the girl and the boy to set up a first date.

On the first date, the couple usually wear formal, dressy clothes and often meet in a fancy hotel lobby, nicer coffee shop, or other indoor, public location conducive to talking. The goal of the date is to see whether they enjoy each other’s company. It might last about two hours, after which the couple parts and reports back to the *shadchan*. No evaluation of the meeting is given to the other party.

The *shadchan* will listen to both sides, encourage, coach, and then deliver the news to the other. Sometimes the news is that “there is not continued interest,” often with some type of explanation that may help the person the next time they date. Often the news is “they had a nice time and would like to meet again.” A second date is then set up.

The level of dressiness and the type of date will be agreed upon through the *shadchan*, and the couple will meet again at an appointed place. This time, they might engage in an activity which allows the couple to interact in an enjoyable way, while still having the opportunity to converse. For example, the couple might go to a miniature golf course, a walk through the zoo, or a museum. The goal of this date is to see, now that both parties are a bit more relaxed and less nervous, if they still enjoy the other’s company. Conversation on a deeper level may begin on this date, or may wait for date number three. Again, after this date, the couple do not set up their own third date but report back to the *shadchan* for evaluation and coaching.

Depending on how things are going, a couple may be encouraged to talk more seriously from the third or fourth date. Seriously means discussing life goals, desired family styles, childhood experiences (as they pertain to how they would want to replicate or change them for their own children), education styles, specific religious values, anger management strategies, what they do when stressed, spending habits, material needs, material desires, and spiritual goals.

The information gained on each date, both intellectually and emotionally, is then used to evaluate if this person continues to be a possibility as a partner for building the type of life they are interested in. They continue to date until the answer becomes either a clear “no,” or a clear “yes.” A “no” usually happens before a fourth date. A “yes” may take a while longer. While the dating period should not be rushed, it is important that it remain goal-oriented, rather than becoming an unbridled social or romantic experience.

In addition to the role of mediator and coach in dating, the *shadchan* may be the one to actually find or suggest a match. A *shadchan* may just be a friend making a suggestion, and some are professional matchmakers, who get paid for their work. Some professional *shadchanim* are paid an up-front fee to work on a match, others are paid only if a match goes through. When someone is having trouble finding what they want in a timely manner, a professional *shadchan* may help. They have larger networks, more experience, and can often provide important assistance.

**Touching**

Prior to dating, throughout the entire dating process, and until marriage, girls and boys do not touch at all. The essential reason for this derives from the mitzvot of *taharat hamishpachah* (family purity) and the *mikvah* (ritual bath). As Jewish marriage is both a physical and spiritual union, the mitzvot of *taharat hamishpachah* and *mikvah* play a critical role in setting the conditions and atmosphere for actualizing and strengthening the marriage. The laws of *taharat hamishpachah* are based on the concept that a husband and wife must abstain from physical contact during her menstruation, at which time she acquires the status of *niddah*, meaning “separate.” During this phase, the couple abstains from marital relations, and even any physical contact, and focuses on the non-physical aspects of their relationship. They unite again after a period of purity has been observed which culminates in the wife immersing in a *mikvah*.

Hence, once a girl reaches puberty, she has the status of a *niddah* and refrains from any physical contact with boys. Moreover, touching creates connection on an emotional and hormonal level, and both of these can cloud the intellect. The choice of a mate should be intellectually clear, emotions should follow. Hormones, however, play a definite part, even before touch. They create a sexual tension that can speed up the decision making process and create a lot of sparks, but if they are acted on before marriage, they can take away one’s ability to evaluate with clarity, and separate if necessary.

Sex between married partners, in the appropriate circumstances, is a most powerful and hallowed physical act. It is both the fountain of and the mirror of marital happiness. It is not just “allowed” once married, but it is actually a mitzvah. It is highly encouraged and seen as a marriage builder, as well as a procreative force. An engaged couple will be instructed how to channel and develop their sexual relationship. Just prior to the wedding the woman will immerse in the *mikvah*, in preparation for entering this most wondrous of worlds. (Men also have the custom to immerse in a *mikvah* prior to their wedding, and on other occasions.)

In order to heighten the experience of the married couple, touching before marriage is completely proscribed. If the first touch is with a spouse, all the bonding energy that touch produces is poured into that specific relationship, making it that much more powerful. By waiting to become sexual until marriage, the marital relationship opens new vistas that the couple can explore together.

If, on the other hand, a person is sexually active before marriage, then committing to only one relationship can be binding rather than freeing. Other experiences with other people can surface in their mind while trying to connect to their spouse. Comparisons can ensue; dissatisfaction can arise.

Cultivating the special bond between husband and wife is seen as so important in Jewish society that preparation begins at a very young age with gender-separate education, establishing the “no-touch” and little interaction rules, and excluding media exposure to other paradigms of romantic relationships. In this way, when a person is ready to marry, they can create a unique vision and unique relationship with fewer outside influences.

Finally, the no touching rules and the no flirting modality of childhood and early adulthood, allow a developing teen/adult to focus their energies on self-growth and self-development, rather than on impressing members of the opposite sex. Young adults raised this way are often ready for marriage at a younger age, not just because they are ready to become sexual beings, but because they are actually more mature than their secular counterparts.

Many friends and family members of newly observant Jews frown upon the no touching rules. They can’t imagine marrying someone they have never touched. Some wonder how a couple can marry without knowing if they are sexually compatible. This question arises from a totally different concept of marriage. Some try out sex before marriage, find a partner with whom the sex is particularly enjoyable, and then marry so that they can have regular access to that person and that sex. In this paradigm, sexual compatibility is vitally important, as it is the foundation of the relationship.

In the Orthodox paradigm, a partner is chosen because of compatibility in other realms: life and religious goals, personality, and the spiritual. Sexuality is vital in this paradigm as well, but here it consummates the relationship rather than initiates it. Usually, when the other realms line up, the sexual experience is enjoyable for both parties. In marriages where this is not the case, a couple is encouraged to seek help. There are some sex therapists that specialize in helping Jewish couples. Contact Aliza Bulow for referrals at alizabulow@gmail.com.

**Dor Yeshorim – Premarital Genetic Testing**

Because there are some devastating diseases that afflict primarily the Ashkenazic Jewish community, and also some in the Sephardic community, universal premarital genetic testing is highly recommended. This testing can be done privately or through a Jewish community organization called *Dor* *Yeshorim*. The Committee for Prevention of Jewish Genetic Diseases, was started in the 1980s by Rabbi Joseph Ekstein, who lost four children to Tay-Sachs disease. Today, the founding of *Dor* *Yeshorim* is credited with the near eradication of Tay-Sachs in the Orthodox community.

*Dor Yeshorim* currently performs carrier tests for Tay-Sachs, Canavan disease, Fanconi Anemia, Cystic Fibrosis, Familial dysautonomia, Glycogen storage disease (type 1), Bloom syndrome, Niemann-Pick disease, Mucolipidosis (type IV), and Gaucher's disease (only by request).

The testing is subsidized and therefore costs about $200 a person. After the test, an individual is assigned a number. The test results are not associated with, or stored with, a name, so be careful to keep track of this number. When a couple is dating, hopefully in the very early stages, or even before they meet, the numbers of the two individuals are compared, and *Dor Yeshorim* will say if it is a genetically compatible or incompatible match.

In order to make the testing universally accepted and to avoid any possibility of stigmatization*, Dor Yeshorim* will not tell an individual whether they are a carrier; they only inform both parties whether the two numbers will work together.

There are those who take issue with the way *Dor Yeshorim* has constructed its policies. Nevertheless, it is standard practice today to check numbers. If testing has not yet been done before a *shidduch* suggestion comes up, *Dor Yeshorim* has two “emergency” testing sites in Brooklyn where results can be expedited. The rush fee is substantial and may require a trip to New York as well. It is therefore prudent to get tested in advance of dating. *Dor Yeshorim’s* phone numbers are 718-384-2332 (Williamsburg), 718-837-5222 (Brooklyn), and 773-973-7350 (Chicago) in the U.S., or 972-2-649-9888 in Israel.

Also interesting to know, in 2005, *Dor Yeshorim* created a new program for the collection and storing of Umbilical Cord Blood called *Kehila Cord*. This program is available both in the USA and in Israel. Its goal is to store stem cells for the baby in case of future need.

**Baal Teshuvah Dating**

Depending on the age and stage of the *baal teshuvah* seeking marriage, their dating process may or may not resemble the above description. Many *baalei teshuvah* do not come from a gender-separate world, so they may meet a person and have interest before they have “checked them out” or vetted them. They may date without the benefit of a *shadchan* and have to do all the figuring out on their own. They may not have the benefit of parents or teachers in the process, but still have carefully considered what is important to them. They understand that dating is for the goal of marriage, and dates are part of a process and not just for fun. This type of dating is often referred to as “*tachlis* dating,” or dating for a purpose. It is not as formal a process as *shidduch* dating, but it is still very goal oriented.

There is a new organization called The Rebbitzens (therebbitzens.org) that assists young singles who are either *baalei teshuvah* themselves, or children of *baal teshuvah* parents, in the vetting and coaching process. It is not a matchmaking service, but rather provides individual counselling to young singles in the dating process who come from a *baal teshuvah* background.

You may or may not want to get involved with your child’s dating. If you have a very close relationship, your child may welcome, and even desire, your counsel and assistance. You may think about how your child chose a college and your interactions with them at that time. This may give you some guidance as to how your assistance might be viewed during the dating process.

As a mother who has stood by the side of several children as they dated, I can tell you that it is a surreal experience. It is a strange combination of holding on, supporting deeply, conversing intensely, and at the same time, letting go, using my very closeness with them to help them find an even closer relationship with another. It is bitter-sweet, and part of one’s own growing up, to let go of a child so they can grow up too.

There is a lot of advice and understanding about dating on Aish.com, just type dating into the search bar for hundreds of articles.

Helpful books:

*The Magic Touch* (on touching) and *From Head to Heart*, both by Gila Manolson

*I Only Want to Get Married Once*, by Chana Levitan

*You’re Teaching My Child What?!* (Chapter 2 from page 41 on), by Dr. Miriam Grossman

**Chapter 10**

Weddings

by Aliza

Weddings are both an exciting and stressful time in almost all families. Having an Orthodox wedding can both add to and alleviate the stress. It can add to the stress as the non-Orthodox family ventures into territory unknown, but if they are open to it, the stress can be alleviated by discovering that there is a fairly standard road map that is almost universally used. This, of course, does not address the other aspects of wedding related stress such as finances, in-laws, letting go of a child, gaining a new family member, trying to get everyone to cooperate, making it all happen, etc. but, at least it is a starting point for shared discussion. But most meaningful is that the *mechutanim* are gaining a son-in-law and daughter in law who, God willing, will bring them family continuity, a greater appreciation for Jewish life and much joy!

**A Typical Orthodox Wedding Road Map**

First, let’s go step by step through an Orthodox wedding. Afterward, we will describe the events preliminary to and surrounding the wedding. The following description is typical of an American wedding; in Eretz Yisrael some things may be different.

**Kabbalat Panim: The Preliminary Reception**

The wedding begins with parallel receptions, in separate rooms, one for the *chatan/chosson* (the groom), and one for the *kallah* (the bride). The groom’s reception is called the “*chosson’s tisch,*” a Yiddish term for “the groom’s table.” Mostly men will visit the groom. Usually liquor and some cake are provided for the guests, and the wedding documents are reviewed and finalized by the rabbis who will officiate at the wedding ceremony.

The bride will be in a separate room. Usually she sits in an elegant chair flanked by a few chairs for her mothers and grandmothers. There are refreshments or even a smorgasbord provided for all the guests. The bride is greeted by guests, with primarily women lining up to greet her and receive her blessing.

The greeting period lasts for close to an hour. It closes with the two mothers leaving the bride, going to the *chosson’s tisch*, witnessing the signing of the *tenayim*, the official, legal engagement document, and then breaking a plate together. Some say that the breaking of the plate symbolizes the sentiment that “just as breaking this plate is permanent, so should the couple’s commitment to each other be permanent.”

Some have the custom to break the plate at the engagement celebration rather than at the wedding, following the practice of former times. In those times, breaking the plate served a similar function to breaking a glass under the chuppah (see below for more on that). Some also sign the *tenayim* at the engagement celebration.

Some break a pretty plate and then make a necklace or a brooch for the bride out of one of the pieces. Some give pieces to singles attending the wedding as a wish that a plate should be broken in their honor soon. After this ceremony, the mothers return to the bride and the next event begins.

**Bedeken: The Veiling**

When the biblical Jacob married, he thought he was marrying Rachel, when in fact Leah had been substituted instead. Since then, it has been a custom for the groom to personally veil his bride so he knows for certain whom he is marrying.

This is often a very emotional ceremony. Anyone who knows the bride will want to get a good view. The groom will be danced with music and joyous shouts into the bride’s room from his *chosson’s tisch*. When the men part and give the groom access to the bride, it will be the first time he is seeing her as a bride. In many cases, it is the first time the bride and groom have seen each other in a week.

He approaches her, and perhaps whispers something to her as he lifts her veil to cover her face. Then he steps back and the two fathers, and perhaps the rabbi, step forward, one at a time to give the bride a blessing. This is an emotional and teary moment for the bride’s father as he blesses her as she starts a new life as her husband’s wife. Mothers and others tend to cry at this point, so bring tissues!

Then the men dance the groom away and all prepare for the chuppah, the wedding ceremony. The guests go to the area with the chuppah. The bride and groom have a chance to freshen up.

**The Chuppah: The Wedding Ceremony**

The guests now move to and take seats in the chuppah area, as the band sets up behind them. There is a little table with wine and a Kiddush cup, to hold the wine for the blessing, under the chuppah. The band starts to play, all conversation ceases (hopefully), and the groom’s family begins to walk down the aisle. Then the groom enters, his parents at his side. The parents carry candles, since candles and light are always associated with joy. Light and joy were also present at Mount Sinai, which is viewed as the wedding between the Jewish people and God. The candles signify that the couple’s life together will be filled with light and joy.

 When they arrive at the chuppah, someone takes the candles from the parents, and they stand to the groom’s side while a singer sings a welcome to the groom. If the groom plans to wear a *kittel*, a special ceremonial white garment, or an overcoat, he may put it on at this time. Some have the custom to put ashes on groom’s head in remembrance of the destruction of the Holy Temple.

The music begins again, and the bride’s family begins to walk down the aisle. Finally, the bride enters with her parents at her side. In some cases the parents accompany the bride all the way to the chuppah, and in others, they leave her half way and the groom comes to escort her the rest of the way.

Wedding customs vary, and the band might be replaced by one or more people singing, or a single instrument, such as a clarinet. Similarly, there are different customs as to who escorts the bride and groom. Sometimes both parents do this. Other times, both fathers escort the groom, and both mothers escort the bride. This is explained in more detail later.

Some brides wear a thicker veil in front to allow them privacy during the walking and ceremony. They may want to pray or cry without thinking about what others see. The bride then circles the groom seven times. Usually the two mothers walk with her, holding her hands, as well as her dress if she needs help managing it. After the seventh circle, the bride takes her place next to her groom and the parents step to the side.

The seven circles represent the seven days and the seven mystical spheres through which the world was created. Seven is the number that represents wholeness and completion. As the bride circles the groom, she is saying, in effect, that she will create the new world in which the couple will live, and they will have access to a wholeness together that they could not have achieved alone.

Two initial blessings are said for the betrothal by the officiating rabbi over a cup of wine, and a sip of wine is taken by both bride and groom. The groom then gives the ring to the bride. The *ketubah*, marriage contract, is then read out loud and handed to the groom. He gives it to the bride, who then hands it to a trusted individual for safe keeping until after the wedding. Then seven more blessings are said over the marriage and another sip of wine is taken. Often different rabbis or close family members are called upon to say each of these blessings, thereby bestowing honor upon as many people as possible. This also engages as many important scholars and role models as possible in the wedding of the couple.

The couple is now officially married, but at our hour of greatest joy, we are enjoined to remember that G-d’s Presence, so to speak, is still in exile. So we sing “If I forget thee O Jerusalem,” and the groom breaks a glass. Breaking the glass is supposed to cause a small amount of sadness as a perfectly good glass is ruined. It is hard to feel sad at this moment of peak joy. To engender a feeling of sadness, we destroy something of value, even if the value of that thing is small. The sound of the glass breaking is the signal to all the guests to shout “Mazel tov!” “Congratulations,” and for the band to begin playing as the couple leaves the chuppah area.

**Cheder Yichud: The Privacy Room**

After the ceremony, the couple is entitled, and required, to have some time alone. They are ushered into a private room, and two guards are posted at the door to ensure that the couple is secluded for a certain period of time, usually about eighteen minutes. This is seen as part of the wedding. In most cases, the couple shares a few private words, a first kiss, and a snack as they may have been fasting all day. Often the groom gives the bride an additional gift of jewelry.

Privacy ends (usually before the couple is ready!), with the photographer rapping on the door, waiting to take the couple’s picture. Since many couples do not see each other before the ceremony, pictures of the couple and families are often taken at this time, before the dancing. This can take a little too long for the guests, but if the couple takes all those pictures after the dancing, they are no longer fresh for their photographs.

**The Meal and Dancing**

There is a gap of about forty-five minutes to an hour between when the ceremony ends and when the bride and groom are ready to greet their guests in the dining hall. During this time, the guests usually go from the chuppah area into the dining hall, chatting along the way, since they know they have plenty of time. Often a minyan, a gathering of at least ten men for the prayer service, is organized for the afternoon or evening services during this break. Guests find their seats, wash their hands for bread, and begin their meal by eating the first course, which is usually on the table when they enter the hall. The band plays background music.

When the bride and groom are ready, the young female guests of the bride jump up and create an entrance archway with decorated pool “noodles” or something similar, that they have prepared in advance. The band sounds the “here they come” notes, announces the couple, “Ladies and Gentlemen, please welcome, for the first time, Mr. and Mrs. \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_!” Then the couple enters, the music gets loud, and everyone pours onto the dance floor.

There is usually a *mechitzah*, some type of divider, on the dance floor to keep the genders separate for dancing, due to reasons of modesty. Sometimes the divider is a row of potted trees, sometime it is large enough that the women’s area is completely obscured from the men’s area. This enables the women and girls to rejoice and dance while maintaining the laws of modesty. Each side dances with its own particular flavor and energy. So, after the couple emerges from the arches, the groom goes to his side of the dance floor and the bride to hers.

The two sides dance separately for a while and then the bride is usually brought to the men’s side for a break, to sit next to her husband and watch the antics performed by the men. The women then steal the bride back to their side for more fun.

It is a special mitzvahto “gladden the hearts of the bride and groom.” Much of this is accomplished by the wedding itself and the attendance of guests who love the bride and groom, but special care is usually given to this mitzvah by the couple’s close friends. They prepare “*shtick*” or special tricks, costumes, props, and games to entertain the bride and groom during the dancing. The *shtick* usually begins with the decorated arches and continues based on the creativity and energy of the friends.

*Shitck* may include: decorated drinking cups for the bride and groom (many fast during the day before the ceremony, so between the adrenaline and the fast, they need water,) costumes representing the home city of the “foreign” member of the couple, costumes representing interests of the bride or groom, just plain wacky costumes, coordinated hats, big sunglasses, flower leis, maracas or castanets, mazel tov tee shirts, big hands or signs with the letters of mazel tov written on each one, balloons with sparkles in them and a special pin to pop them, jumping “rope” with the cloth napkins of the dining tables tied together, a scarf dance, lighting a hat on fire and dancing with it, balancing bottles and dancing, acrobatics, and any kind of wild or crazy dancing that is appropriate for an Orthodox wedding, of course. In Orthodox circles, a wedding provides the opportunity to go really crazy for a kosher reason, to delight the bride and groom. Many teens and young adults relish this chance, so the dancing is often quite lively.

The first dance, meaning the first set of dances, lasts for about an hour, depending on the crowd. The main course of the meal is then served, and the guests have a chance to rest and chat, while the bride and groom have a chance to eat a bit and move around the room to greet their guests. Many guests leave after the meal, but closer, and more energetic friends stay for the second dance.

The second dance is usually before dessert and lasts for about thirty to forty-five minutes, again, depending on the energy level of the guests. Dessert follows, with the special wedding *bentching*, Grace after Meals, being the official end of the festivities for the evening. The regular grace is recited, with a special beginning, and then followed by the same seven blessings that were recited under the chuppah, repeated by seven different men.

The last close guests linger, the couple leaves, the inner circle chats and reflects a little while longer, and then everyone goes home for some much needed rest. If you are the parent of the bride or groom, you will likely be especially tired. There is a special tiredness, a combination of physical and emotional exhaustion on the day after the wedding. It is far different from being tired after attending someone else’s wedding, and its intensity can be quite surprising as it settles in fully on the day after. If you can, try to keep your calendar clear for the day after the wedding, and plan a day of rest.

**Events Prior to the Wedding and Other Important Information**

**The L’chaim: Gathering to Celebrate the Engagement**

Traditionally, a couple becomes engaged in the presence of their parents, with all agreeing to the match and possibly even making a financial arrangement of how the couple will be supported until they can support themselves. A *l’chaim*, an alcoholic drink: schnapps, wine, or hard liquor, would then be shared to “seal the deal.”

Today, the *L’chaim* is the term used for an informal, impromptu celebration attended by family, or family and close friends, celebrating the engagement. It often takes place immediately as the couple returns from the date on which he proposed.

**The Vort: Engagement Reception**

After the engagement, the couple wants to proclaim their exciting news to the world. This is accomplished through the *vort*, which literally means “word” in Yiddish, but here is used as “engagement reception.” Depending on the families’ finances and community expectations, the *vort* can be anywhere on the scale of fanciness. The purpose of the *vort* is for community members to wish the couple mazel tov. When a match is made between people from different cities, there may be a *vort* in each city. It then serves the added function of introducing the fiancé to the other’s community.

In “out of town” communities, anywhere outside the NY area, the *vort* is usually a homemade affair with baked goods, fruit trays, and vegetable platters contributed by members of the community, as well as made by the family. It is usually an open house, in the parents’ home, for two to three hours. People are invited by phone calls, e-mail, and word of mouth. The couple and the parents usually wear dressy attire. The guests usually dress one level down from that. Guests arrive, greet the engaged couple, have a snack, and chat with others. This is not an engagement party (there usually isn’t one) and gifts are rarely brought to the *vort*.

In the New York area, and in wealthier communities, the *vort* may be catered, it may be in a hall, a photographer may be hired, and there may even be a band. This can be expensive and for that reason, the *vort* as such is rabbinically frowned upon. In the wedding “guidelines,” published by a group of rabbis attempting to lower community expectations for fancy affairs, one of the directives is that the *vort* is to be discontinued. For this reason, some refer to the “out of town” version of the *vort* as a *l’chaim* rather than as a *vort*.

Here are links to two articles about the wedding guidelines:

nytimes.com/2002/05/25/us/religion-journal-a-big-wedding-with-a-smaller-bill.html

[jweekly.com/article/full/18004/orthodox-rabbis-are-putting-harness-on-opulent-weddings/](http://www.jweekly.com/article/full/18004/orthodox-rabbis-are-putting-harness-on-opulent-weddings/)

In Israel, the *l’chaim* is also called a *vort*, and what is called the *vort* in America is called an *eirusin* (betrothal/engagement)*.* Some have the custom to sign a contract called *tena’im* (conditions) at the *eirusin.* These “conditions” delineate the obligations, including financial ones, of both sides toward the wedding, as well as setting a date for when the wedding will take place. The *tena’im* are binding. For this reason, some prefer to make the *tena’im* prior to the wedding ceremony during the reception held immediately beforehand.

**The Shower**

Friends, family members, and community members may wish to make a shower for the bride. In some communities, most of the guests contribute to a “group gift,” which is a sum of money to be spent on kitchen appliances and bedding necessities to get the bride started with her new home. The bride usually chooses what this money will be spent on, and the items are displayed at the shower. Others give whatever they choose, or whatever is in keeping with the theme of the shower, if there is one.

It is important to be aware that at Orthodox showers, there are NO embarrassing gifts. Nothing is given that intimates the couple will soon be sexual, no lingerie, or anything else like that. The bride will likely buy lingerie or pretty pajamas and under things, but that is done privately and is part of her process of transition from sexually inactive, or in the case of some *baalei teshuvah* girls, sexually active, to married life. It is a process best left to the bride and those she chooses to share her thoughts with, and is not something to be made public.

**Aufruf: TheGroom’s Celebration**

The Yiddish word *Aufruf* or *Ufruf* refers to the groom’s celebration on the Shabbat immediately preceding the wedding. It is sometimes made a week earlier, if a Sunday wedding requires the groom to travel. The groom is called to the Torah for an *aliyah* and makes the attendant blessing, and often he will *lein* (read/chant) the *haftarah,* as well. After the blessing at the close of his reading, there is a custom in many congregations to shower the groom with candy, as an expression of hope for a sweet wedded life. The candy is provided by the groom’s family, and is often distributed by young children using baskets to hold it. Commonly used are individually wrapped candies such as laffy taffies, kisses, Sunkist fruit jems, or little bags filled with candy of many different varieties. According to a family’s means, they may also sponsor a Kiddush, light buffet, after the services.

In the Sephardic custom, this celebration is called the *Shabbat Chatan* and is held the week following the wedding.

**Shabbat Kallah: The Bride’s Last Shabbat at Home**

For the bride, the Shabbat before the wedding is known as the *Shabbat* *Kallah*. It is a special time as she spends her last Shabbat as a single girl with her family. Her family and friends are already beginning to gather for her wedding. The Shabbat meals are particularly festive, and any out of town guests would be included. Often there is an afternoon reception for the women and girls of the community to celebrate together. In many communities, neighbors and friends will bring over baked goods and other food to help make this reception. Often the reception is at another’s home so that the bride’s family does not have to be in charge of it.

**The Giving of Gifts**

It is traditional to exchange gifts during the engagement period. The purpose of giving gifts is to show appreciation and love toward the new member of the family and is a step in creating a positive relationship between the parents-in-law and the child-in-law to be. Each family will exchange gifts according to their means and traditions.

It is customary for the parents of the groomto give the bride a piece of jewelry, apart from an engagement ring and wedding band, as well as a pair of silver Shabbat candlesticks. It is customary for the parents of the brideto give the groom a watch and/or Kiddush cup, as well as a set of *Shas* (a full set of the Talmud), if appropriate. The groom or her family might also give the bridea *siddur* (prayer book), a *sefer Tehillim* (book of Psalms), and set of *machzorim* (prayer books for the festivals). Similarly, the bride or her family might also give the grooma tallit (prayer shawl) and tallit bag, as well as a *kittel* (ceremonial white garment) to wear under the chuppah.

Usually,the groom gives the bride a piece of jewelry in the *cheder yichud*. This can be one of the pieces of jewelry mentioned above, which has been saved for the occasion, or something extra.

**The Prayer List**

Tradition teaches that people directly involved in an important celebration are able to confer a blessing on others. For this reason, some may ask the parents of the bride and groom for a blessing, especially if they are trying to match up one of their own children.

More significantly however, the bride and groom themselves are often appreciated for their enhanced ability to offer a blessing on their wedding day. Because the wedding is a new start in life, the wedding day is viewed as a private Yom Kippur, Day of Atonement, when G-d forgives all the sins of the bride and the groom as a wedding gift, so to speak, so that they can start their new life together with a clean slate.

This understanding explains an important tradition. Both the bride and the groom create a prayer list before their wedding. They gather the names of people who need or desire prayers. The Hebrew matronymic names are used, such as Sarah *bat* (daughter of) Malka, or Abraham *ben* (son of) Sarah, or in the absence of a Hebrew name, Susan *bat* Annette or Bob *ben* Alice. The names are often listed by category, for example: those who need a *shidduch*, those who wish to conceive, those who need healing, those who need a job or increased income, those who need marital harmony, and those who need help rearing their children. They then pray for these people by name on their wedding day, and some even pray for them during the entire first year.

**Clothing for the Wedding**

Orthodox weddings are usually very formal, even if they are not black tie. Men in the wedding party usually wear suits, usually dark suits with white shirts. Women in the wedding party usually wear gowns. For Orthodox girls who do not have proms, this is their chance to really dress up.

It is a challenge to find gowns for women that meet the Orthodox standards of modest dress (see chapter on Jewish dress for more information on this). Most off the rack gowns are strapless or backless, have plunging necklines, are very formfitting, have long slits, or all of the above. It is possible to buy or rent ready-made gowns in the NY area that meet Orthodox standards. And, in NY and some other large communities, there are *gemachim*, free-loan organizations, that lend dresses, including wedding dresses, or rent them out for a very small fee.

Alternatively, you can have a dress made or altered to specifications, or wear a form-fitting shirt underneath. Two helpful brands of shirts for this purpose are Linda Leal and Kikky Rikky, both made for the Orthodox community and available online. If you find gowns at a discount, it pays to buy two, in order to have the matching fabric to fix up the first.

Many brides wear sneakers under their full skirts so that dancing will be more comfortable. Others, including members of the wedding party, wear fancy shoes for greeting people, walking down the aisle and pictures, and switch to pretty sneakers, or other more comfortable shoes, for the dancing.

**Bridesmaids, Groomsmen, and Attendants**

Most Orthodox weddings do not have bridesmaids or groomsmen. Usually the siblings, parents, and grandparents of the bride and groom form the wedding party. Occasionally, a good friend may dress as part of the party, to show their closeness, but usually that person has no official role.

A role that a close friend may fill is that of *shomer*, guard. A bride and a groom are considered like royalty on the day before (some say the week before) and day of their wedding. They therefore should have an attendant. In addition, because the potential for the spiritual power of their union is so great, there is a concept that bride and groom should be guarded before the wedding. A *shomer* serves both the practical and mystical dimensions of this guardianship. The job of the *shomer* is to attend the bride or groom for the entire day and night before the wedding, making sure they eat, drink, and rest appropriately, as well as fending off excessive phone calls and unwanted attention. Since they are with the bride or groom all of the time, they should be a close friend.

**Walking Down the Aisle**

In most Orthodox weddings, even if there are bridesmaids or a best man, it is only the family that walks down the aisle. In many cases it is just the bride, groom, and their parents. Sometimes the grandparents and siblings are also part of the processional.

In some cases, a bride or a groom may feel strongly about who walks them to the chuppah. There are some who feel that those accompanying the bride and groom to the threshold of their new life should be married to each other, and some feel that it should be a couple who is still in their first marriage. If you are not married to your child’s other parent, this may be a concern. In such cases, sometimes the parents walk the child part way down and then a “first match” couple walks the child the rest of the way. Other times, a first match couple, possibly the child’s rabbi and his wife, walk the child all the way to the chuppah. Still other times, even when divorced, the parents walk the child themselves. In cases where the parents do not get along with each other, it may be possible for the fathers to walk the groom and the mothers to walk the bride, so that the couple does not have to walk together. Many families use this custom in the first place, as explained earlier. Alternatively, the groom and bride can each walk down the aisle alone, with no one taking them. The main thing is to arrive at the chuppah happy and ready.

**Sheva Brachot: Seven Blessings**

For seven days following the wedding, festive meals are prepared by family and friends to continue the celebration of the addition of a new family to the Jewish nation. At the close of each of these meals, the same Grace that was said at the wedding, including the seven marriage blessings, is recited. These festive meals are named after those seven blessings and are therefore called *sheva brachot*, literally, “seven blessings.” The guest list for the meals can be on the longer side, because in order to recite the seven blessings, a minyan must be present. Therefore, a minimum of ten men, and, if they are married, their wives, are invited to each meal. It is also fine to have a small number of guests for the meal itself and invite additional men for dessert to be able to recite the *sheva brachot*.

An important feature of these meals is the community support that is displayed. The message is, “We are happy for you and we support you, and now that you are married, you are one of us.”

While many newly married couples plan to retreat to a honeymoon immediately after the wedding, observant couples usually do not go on a honeymoon, at least not right away, so that they can participate in *sheva brachot*. Important to note here is the subtle message that this drives home to the new couple: “We’re all fawning over you, but you should know, it’s not all about you. We love you, and we have great expectations of you. So, right now, while you’re reveling in your new selves and you’d rather be alone and apart, be a part of us, and a part of the community. You have new joy and with that, new responsibilities that take precedence to your preferences.”

At the end of the week, the couple, fully celebrated, is ready to start their new life together, surrounded and bolstered by the good wishes of all.

**Further reading:**

*Made in Heaven: A Jewish Wedding Guide*, by Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan, Moznaim 1983

*Guide to the Jewish Wedding*, by Chaplain Shlomo Shulman, aish.com/jl/l/m/48969841.html

*The Dating Guy: The Wedding Day* (3 of 3), by Richard Rabkin, Torah.org

*Giving Joy to the Bride and Groom*, by Yehonasan Gefen, Jewish-History.com

Look around for Jewish wedding clips, you’ll find a lot to watch.

# Oralee’s Reflections on Weddings

The mother of the bride – that was my role in the very first Orthodox wedding I ever attended. I had no experience as a mother of the bride, or with Orthodox weddings. I was out of my element. The mother of my new son-in-law was experienced with both. She was a knowledgeable and compassionate guide. She told me where to be and what to do. I was mesmerized by all the food available, even before the ceremony began. I didn’t know people would come to greet the bride before the wedding and that I should sit with her. I had no idea how joyous and festive the entire ceremony and celebration would be. I was unprepared for all the dancing; women with women, and men with men. I knew nothing about the antics performed to entertain the bride and groom. Everything was new to me.

One of the most difficult aspects we faced was the very different expectations about the cost of the wedding. Most Protestant weddings that we were familiar with, our own and the weddings made by friends, were very modest events compared to what happens in the Jewish community. We were definitely in a clash of cultures. We had to do some painful and very embarrassing negotiations with the groom’s family. I know it was hard for the bride to have a family with no clue about the culture she was embracing, what a wedding in that culture meant, and how it was treated. It was not an easy time. We had to face into it and talk it through with all concerned.

The wedding itself was the most joyous marriage event I had ever attended. I was sorry more of my extended family did not get to experience it. If I had known how incredible it would be, I would have strongly encouraged them to come.

Part of the poignancy of any wedding is the release of your child into an adult life of her own. It is harder when it is also the release of your child into another culture with different expectations, standards, and values. It is akin to seeing them off to another country and not understanding the implications of it, and wondering if they do.

Today there are more articles, books, and movies about different kinds of weddings available. I recommend reading and viewing what you can before getting into the planning stages. You need to know the context of what happens in order to understand the decisions that are made and the amount of money that is spent. If this is what you are facing, connect with other parents on both sides of the fence, if you can.

By the time of my grandson’s New York wedding, I had attended several Orthodox ceremonies. I could look forward to it and encourage my family to come. I knew we would be in for a wonderful cultural experience, and I was ready for it. Aliza prepared her non-Jewish uncles and aunts, cousins and friends for the wedding experience in a conference phone call a month before the wedding. She talked about what to wear, customs to expect, what to watch for, which hands to not shake, where hugs were acceptable, and what the order of the day would be like. This was very helpful to all of them and made them feel much more at ease by being “in the know.”

We had a grand time at a glorious wedding, and all the non-Jewish relatives were so glad they had been there. It was an experience of a lifetime for them. We have had glorious weddings in Denver for two of my granddaughters. Now I know what to expect and anticipate. I love to share the incredible joy and energy of these celebrations with my Jewish family, as well as my non-Jewish family and friends.

**Chapter 11**

Education and Day Schools

by Aliza

**A Philosophy of Jewish Education**

The schooling a child receives is vital. It guides and shapes their world-view and aspirations, and their ability to achieve those aspirations. It acculturates, educates, and ***dedicates.*** I choose the word “dedicates” because that is the root of the word *chinuch*, which means education in Hebrew. You might recognize the word as similar to the word Chanukah.

Chanukah is the holiday that celebrates the rededication of the Holy Temple in Jerusalem, after a period in which the Greeks took it over and used it for services and offering sacrifices to foreign gods. The place from which Jewish wisdom was supposed to emanate to the world was misused by the Greeks and needed to be rededicated to that role after the battle that wrested it back from foreign hands.

 Most of us have heard the part of the story where the Jews wanted to relight the Menorah*,* the Temple’s seven-branched candelabrum, as part of the rededication ceremony, but found only one flask of pure oil to use. It was enough for only one day, and because of either the war, or the logistics of making and transporting the oil to Jerusalem, they would not be able to have new oil for seven more days. The oil miraculously lasted for eight days until they could make more.

 We celebrate this miracle by lighting a menorah for eight days. But this is no festival of lights. The miracle that took place with the oil, as well as the miraculous victory of “the few against the many,” signified something much deeper: the victory of “the pure against the impure.” The Hasmoneans were not fighting for physical autonomy, but for the spiritual survival of the Jewish nation.

The Greeks’ sophisticated philosophy was very alluring to the intellectual Jew. But in the end, as sophisticated as it was, it represented nature and its unshakable rule. Jewish thought is entirely different. It recognizes that we live in a natural world, but teaches that through our connection with the Creator of it all, we can transcend nature. We are not bound by observable systems; we can live in a world of miracles. David Ben Gurion, the first prime minister of Israel, who was a secular Jew, said, “In Israel, in order to be a realist, you must believe in miracles.”

The battle of Chanukah was about which philosophy would become dominant; the one in which you are what you are, or the one in which you are what you make of yourself.

One of the most empowering and vital messages Judaism brings to the world is that no individual is bound by his or her nature or circumstances; *transcendence of both nature and nurture is available to every human being.*

The triumph of Chanukah is the triumph of transcendence. Finding one flask of pure oil symbolizes finding a bit of untainted Jewish wisdom, even after a massive campaign of Hellenization. The fact that the small amount of pure oil burned miraculously for longer than it “should have” shows that when we use untainted Jewish knowledge to light up the world, G-d will help, and extend the effect well beyond nature.

Jews are here to change the world for the better. As Jewish ideas such as world peace, justice, inherent human dignity, social justice, and universal education take hold all over the planet, the world will be transformed. Not by external power, but by *internal empowerment*, and by systems that ensure safety, justice, and access to empowerment.

For this to happen, Jewish intelligence needs to be *dedicated*, Jewish hearts need to be directed, Jewish minds need to be filled with Jewish wisdom. Today, that process happens best when Jewish parents partner with Jewish schools.

With limited funds and, sometimes, limited training, Jewish day schools can only do so much… according to nature. But when we do our part and seek to instill untainted Jewish wisdom in our children, G-d does the rest. Every year, thousands of miracles graduate from Jewish day schools.

 \* \* \* \* \* \* \* \* \* \*

I am including here a story of one of those miracles that happened in my own home. This was published on Aish.com in 2003. (It is still available on that website along with reader's comments.) It is about my own experience with a son who revolted against his Jewish school education and later returned. (I wrote under a pseudonym at the time to protect our family’s privacy.) He is now one of the few fully, and happily, observant Jews on his university campus.

**Harry’s Magic**

**A true story about what one Jewish kid learned from the teenage wizard.**

I run a group home for Harry Potter addicts. The house is chock-a-block with Harry Potter books, Harry Potter tapes, Harry Potter computer games, magic wands, chocolate frogs, Quiddich rulebooks, spell books, owls and wizard capes. Children read through the night and then spend the day holed up in their rooms listening to the stories on tape. When forced to exit their rooms, they move about like zombies with headphones on as they perform menial tasks while they listen. Conversations focus on which spell is appropriate for which occasion and how Nearly Headless Nick nearly lost his head. With most of the addicts, you could start a paragraph in any one of the five books and they could finish it for you.

Okay, I admit it. It's really my home, and the kids… well, they're mine too. Maybe we don't actually have an owl, but they *can* quote paragraphs at a time.

One day my 12-year-old, one of the more serious addicts, came home from his Jewish day school and declared that he'd had it. School was not for him. The teachers were "stupid," the Jewish curriculum was "irrelevant," and he was *not* going back.

It wasn't the first we had heard of his school woes, and he had been struggling with his feelings about Judaism for quite some time. A few years ago, when he was nine, he scolded me for converting to Judaism. As I tucked him into bed he said, "Why did you have to convert?! I feel like I'm in prison. You should have waited until the children were born so we could all choose for ourselves!" Since then, he basically maintained the trappings of Jewish life in school and in public, but he let us know on a regular basis that this was our program, not his.

In the past, when our son needed time away from school, he managed to get suspended for a few days. Since this particular day was the first time he talked about his feelings *before* we received a phone call from the principal, we decided to give him some preemptive time off.

A week later found him well rested, deeply engrossed in his books -- but not more ready to attend school. We talked, we listened, we cajoled, we hugged. But returning to school was not on his list of possibilities. We gathered in the principal's office and listened while our son clearly explained why he didn't want a Jewish education and how we were all wasting our time, our efforts and our tuition money.

The principal suggested that perhaps this was not the environment for him, and we left, not quite sure what to do. We received a lot of advice and considered all the options: homeschooling, Internet schooling, the local public school (he would have been the only Jew in a failing inner city school), and other private schools. We checked out an Academy that had a program for the motivationally challenged, another Jewish day school, and a Montessori private school. It was already six weeks since he had been behind a desk and the Montessori method looked promising. A month after we enrolled him, both he and the teacher agreed that it too was not the right environment.

Back to square one. He came with me to work; he stayed home. He became an expert on the municipal bus system and learned how to make pizza from scratch. He spent a lot more time with both his parents and he looked forward to his siblings' daily return from school. He went to the library regularly and began to expand his reading beyond Harry Potter and comics. We had long conversations about the new ideas he discovered, giving him the love and space that he needed, but he still wasn't ready to go back to the school his siblings attended, and so far, we hadn't found another viable alternative.

Our local school, which was willing to handle a motivationally challenged child, also had very strict discipline with a truant officer on staff, in-school suspension and an in-house drug treatment program for 6-8 graders! Another grade 6-12 school had very innovative programming, lots of out-of-the-box learning, trips to the wilderness and even to some foreign countries... but they openly acknowledged their drug problem. In fact our son was offered marijuana on the one day he shadowed another student. He also saw students with extensive body piercing and discovered that the school actually provides a time and place for a smoking break.

These experiences allowed him to see firsthand some of the contrasts between what was "out there" and what we were trying to provide for him. He recognized that these schools were not the place for him, and yet… a leather choker with spikes was pretty cool looking. I nixed the choker and it gave us a chance to talk about how people dress in order to identify with certain groups, and about how people try to feel special by changing something external. It was the perfect opportunity to launch into one of my mini-pep-talks about how special he is because he is part of a special people with a special mission.

He gave me one of those, *That's what you think* eyeball rolls, but silently I prayed that some of the message would get through.

One day he was in the car with me as I was listening to a tape on the Jewish view of the occult. I don't usually torture him with my lecture tapes, but in this case he was with me on "my time" and I wanted to listen. On the tape, Rabbi Mordechai Becher was comparing the world of Harry Potter to that of the Jews. He explained that just as Harry lived in a parallel dimension in this world, so do the Jews.

My son's ears perked up. He listened for a while and then had a few questions. I turned off the tape and we fleshed out the concept together:

*We live in the same world as everyone else, but we have vastly different lives*. Jews have our own secret world of practices and rituals. We wrap tefillin, eat kosher food, carry Hebrew names, and study and pray in an ancient mystical language. We spend one-seventh of our lives (Shabbat) refraining from creative influence on the world, and during that time we even get an extra soul.

*We look like other people, but we have our own mission that requires special responsibilities*. Jews are charged with being the teachers of morality. Our job is to reveal God's presence on earth by engaging in our daily activities in a spiritually conscious way.

We have been given 613 pathways to help us achieve this mission. These mitzvot give us access to a spiritual "magic" that a) helps us bring our potential to fruition, through the positive commandments, and b) prevents us from subverting our energies and diminishing ourselves, by refraining from the prohibitions.

*Jews have our own "Diagon Alley."* We talked about Central Avenue in Cedarhurst, where we shopped during a trip to New York. The whole street is full of stores catering to Jews: kosher restaurants, Jewish book stores, kosher grocery stores, clothing stores with kippot and tzitzit, and silver stores with candlesticks and Kiddush cups. (Most non-Jewish New Yorkers don't even know the street exists.)

My son sat in silence for a few minutes, lost in thought, and then turned to me with his own insight that was worth every day off from school. "So it's like… I'm a wizard kid… being raised by a wizard family. And I'm thinking of going to a *muggle* school?"

Another silent moment.

"I think I'm ready for a Jewish education."

I couldn't believe my ears. He finally got it. With God's help, the patience, love and space that we gave him was bearing fruit. When we got home, *he* called his teacher to see if he could return to class.

Harry's magic helped our son realize that he has his own hidden specialness, a specialness that hinged on being part of a unique group with its own distinctive life. After seeing what was out there in the other schools, he was able to view what was in his own backyard with a new appreciation. Suddenly my son understood that in order to fully embrace one's uniqueness, one has to understand it. And in order to understand his, he needed to attend his own Hogwarts.

Epilogue to *Harry’s Magic*: This son graduated with honors from a Jewish High School. For the gap year between high school and college, he enrolled in a religious studies program in Israel. He is now attending a university in the States and maintaining his Jewish identity and religious practices.

**Aliza and Oralee’s Reflections on Schooling**

**Aliza:** On my first day of kindergarten, in 1969, my mother took me into Public school #16 and introduced me to my teacher, Mrs. Brown. She was a kindly older woman, and she showed me around her classroom. After visiting the reading corner, the blocks area, and the circle time space, my mother led me back outside to walk the picket line with her. We joined the community strike calling for more integration in the schools. An important part of my education was taking place outside the classroom. My parents put a lot of effort into social reform, and they inculcated this ethic into their two daughters from a very tender age.

My parents felt very strongly about public schools. They saw the public school as an equalizing force in American society, a place where all people had, or should have, access to information, growth, and development. A place that, if supported and strengthened properly, would lift individuals and their families out of poverty, would expose and connect members of diverse communities to and with each other, and would create a common cultural language by offering a common educational foundation. They had friends and colleagues who sent their children to private schools, especially those who lived in our urban school district, but my parents were dedicated to the cause of public schools, and they volunteered hours and hours of school board time, community meeting time, and in-the-classroom time to bring our local public schools into closer alignment with their vision.

Oralee: There was a separate Catholic grade school but no Jewish school in the small Wisconsin town in which I lived. In my own elementary and high school experience, I was aware of a few Jewish students among my classmates. One was in my circle of close girlfriends. I knew the Jewish students had some days off that most of us didn’t have. Other than that, they seemed to fit right in with the rest of us. I now realize how assimilated they were.

 As I watched Aliza’s children grow up in her home, I had to seriously confront my attitudes and commitment to public schools. It was **not** an easy transition. I came to realize that her family and religious values were not supported in the public school environment. The religious calendar of Judaism did not fit into the public school calendar. Friday evening and Saturday activities were out for them. The Jewish holidays required absence on school days.

 I began to realize why other people with deep religious commitments and lifestyles, not only Jews, would want to have their own schools, or do homeschooling. My eyes were opened to other ways of looking at schooling. I still value the diversity of public schools. I now also value the unique schooling needed to support a life commitment to religious practices that are not part of the common culture. I have enjoyed attending programs, classes, and graduation ceremonies at my grandchildren’s Jewish schools.

**Chapter 12**

Mainstream Culture: Engaging and Refraining

Television, movies, media, music, reading materials, entertainment

**by Aliza**

You may have noticed that your *baal teshuvah* family member or friend listens to different music, reads different books, and feels differently about television, movies, and other forms of entertainment than they used to. For some parents, this can be a concern; for some friends, this can be a pain; for some siblings, this can be annoying. For the *baal teshuvah*, this is vitally important.

Many people feel that a person is the product of influence exerted by both nature and nurture. Genetics, parents, siblings, city, century, socio-economic status, schooling, and societal attitudes all play a role in how we think, what we believe, how we behave, and what we desire. Some of these things can be shaped or influenced by the individual who is being shaped or influenced by them, while others are immutable. Yet none of us are absolute products of our environments or our genetics. Judaism believes very strongly in free will and that everyone, therefore, has both the ability and the responsibility to shape their own selves to the greatest extent possible. Ultimately, while we are heavily influenced by both nature and nurture, we are the product of our own choices.

A result of taking responsibility for our lives is the wish to carefully choose how and where we spend their time. Literature, music, entertainment, news media, and educational materials all influence how we view the world and who we grow to become. For that reason, schools assign classics, require music appreciation, and argue about textbook choice. For that reason, parents and teachers want to expose and to limit exposure to art, video games, movies, literature, and other forms of media. For that reason, any sensitive person will carefully evaluate with what they fill their environment and to what they expose themselves.

Scenes of adultery, violence, drug use, dishonesty, premarital sex, disrespect of parents, of elders, of authority, disrespect of marriage, of men, of women, racism, unkindness, materialism, humor at the expense of another, disrespect of G-d and religious belief and practice are all common in movies, sitcoms, reality TV, books, radio shows, and modern music. Of course, it is common in the real world as well, but those who wish to *limit* their exposure to such things will necessarily have to limit exposure to the media that produces so much of it.

In addition to the preceding concept, within the right wing Orthodox world, there is a general aversion to movies and novels for pure entertainment’s sake. If you have ever cried in a movie, even if you know you are only watching actors on a screen, or if you have ever had an adrenaline rush, even though you know the starship chase is computer generated, or if you have ever been happy for a kissing couple as they start married life, even though you know that in real life they are probably married to other people, you know that authors and producers of movies, books, and television shows understand how to manipulate the feelings of the viewer or reader.

From a Jewish point of view, there are those who understand that emotions and feelings are necessary for many important human qualities. Curiosity, worry, compassion, joy, sadness… all of these and more can help us learn, grow, pay attention, exercise care, go out of our way to benefit another, and become kinder. Emotions can also lead us to become bitter, hurtful, or cold. They are within us in order to lead us to action, and in order to present us with choices as to which direction we should take in their presence. If they are that important, some feel that it is incorrect to simply play with them by allowing another to concoct situations that put their emotions on a rollercoaster. For that reason, some may eschew even a movie or novel that contains scenes which may taint their carefully constructed environment.

Finally, there is the concept of *bitul zman*, or wasting time. Time is the one commodity where there is total equity. Everyone has 525,949 minutes in a year. Rich or poor, wise or foolish, healthy or sick, we all have the same number of minutes in a year. We can accomplish a lot when we use time wisely, and conversely, we can fritter away our time without accomplishing much at all.

A person with high aspirations, who understands that their time is limited, will want to use the time they have very carefully. A person without driving aspirations, but with a sense of responsibility, will not want to waste the time with which they have been entrusted. Many new, and experienced, *baalei teshuvah* feel that they have lost time that they would like to make up. Especially in the early stages of Jewish growth, and for many, in later stages as well, there is a strong desire to study and assimilate Torah thought and ideas. Initially, this requires almost constant effort. Many enjoy learning and expanding their mind so much that they don’t want to take “time off” for other entertainment. Some people even keep science text books in the bathroom, so that when they are not permitted to think about Torah, they can still use their time constructively.

The Torah certainly permits people to rest and relax, and to play. But a sensitive person will be careful to ensure that these activities are constructive as well. Rest, not just because they are tired, but so that they may have strength to continue. Relax, not just because they are wound up, but because being calmer is healthier and leads to the mind being more receptive and the memory being sharper. Play, not just because they want to have fun, but to build connections with others, or to strengthen the body, or to be healthier.

Some parents wish their *baal teshuvah* child would read more widely. Some friends wish they could drag their old pal to a movie; some siblings will miss the joking and teasing. As with many new changes in a *baal teshuvah*, there are several ways in which this change may be manifested, and many levels of care and stricture that a *baal teshuvah* may pass through. Each person has their own sense of propriety and of ways to use their time wisely. It is a kindness to respect any given person’s lines of priority and propriety, including those of an evolving *baal teshuvah.*

Chapter 13

Grandparenting

by Oralee

My life as a grandmother has been a long distance and visiting relationship. I was in the air between Portland and New York when my first grandchild was born. The call came that labor began and I was on the next flight. I would guess that many of you have had the experience of going to the hospital and peering through the nursery window looking for the ONE. There is the incomparable feeling of holding the baby for the first time. My child’s child – it is hard to believe. Love pours forth.

Over the years, I discovered the grandparent/child relationship has a freedom that does not exist between parent and child. Skipping a generation has advantages. A different kind of friendship and intimacy develops. I can advocate for the child. I can be more playful and even childish with the child. I do not have to establish and maintain the structure that a parent does, especially when I am visiting or my grandchild is visiting me. I can be a special confidant for the child.

The **good news** is I am not the parent. I do not have to be the authority figure that the parent has to be. I can go home to a different house. The **bad news** is I am not the parent. I am not the authority figure that the parent is. I go home to a different house.

Major decisions are not mine to make, even though “I am sure I know best.” The transition period between being the parent in charge and being the grandparent **not** in charge was often a long and sometimes difficult one. There was tension between me and my adult children. I was no longer in charge of the health care decisions, the financial decisions, the house and job decisions, the religious decisions. I had to let go, over and over. This takes practice and patience. I hope that those of us who are grandparents can make this transition with some grace, even through the rough spots.

So much of being a grandmother or grandfather has **nothing to do with religious differences.** There are challenges and joys that arise from differences in culture, differences in generations, and differences in the expectations of both sides of the family. It helps to remember this and not “blame” all the stresses on religion.

When I entered the “new baby scene” in my daughter’s Long Beach, New York, Jewish community, the first thing I observed was the tremendous outpouring of community support. Other mothers brought meals, baby clothing, nurturing advice, and much baby experience. There was a baby naming ceremony, and others helped provide the food at the synagogue.

The custom in much of the Jewish community is to wait until the baby arrives before furnishings, diapers, clothing, and all the gadgets of babyhood are purchased, borrowed, and assembled. There is a lot to do to prepare for the first baby’s life in the home. Over and over, I had to remember that this was not MY house or MY baby. Learning to defer to my daughter and son-in-law took practice and commitment, especially when they seemed so young, and I had already been through it. There were some bumpy and teary times. Everything was new, and all of us were sleep deprived.

Excellent advice came from my son-in-law’s mother. She had been through this with her children. “Oralee, don’t get up at night with the baby. Let them do that. You need your sleep so you can be the caretaker during the day.” So even though the crying woke me up, I stayed in bed and went back to sleep. She was right; there was so much to do during the day.

I stayed for three weeks. That was the beginning of many cross-country trips to be with my daughter and grandchildren. I came for each of the five births to care for the toddlers and the new babies, including one set of twins. On each visit, I learned more about religious practices, keeping kosher, and keeping the Sabbath. At first, it took me so long to shop for groceries because I had to learn about the kosher symbols and where to find them on food products. With more experience, I became a good detective and learned the certifying source for many of the symbols. I also learned which brands were more likely to be acceptable. Fortunately all fresh fruit and fresh vegetables are kosher (you just need to make sure they are bug free).

In many ways, it is easier to stay in your grandchildren’s home to be with them. They are set up with all the things they need. You are out of your home setting, so you can focus on them and not have to take care of your at-home duties. You don’t have to protect your things from their innocence and their job in life to touch, hold, lick, shake, toss, or take apart everything they see.

## Gifts for Grandchildren

This is an important and often touchy topic. It is so essential in life to both give and receive. Both are a joy, and both can be difficult. What is considered appropriate gift giving is very tied into cultural norms, family background, financial ability, and creativity.

Here are some things to be aware of and sensitive to when you are giving gifts to an observant household and children.

**Be sure any food or wine is kosher.** If you are unsure, ASK the family if they can eat or drink it before you give it. If they can’t, they also don’t want to have it in their house.

Be especially careful during all the days of Passover. There are many more restrictions. Check to see if the food is kosher for Passover. If you are not knowledgeable in this area, it is better not to give food, unless it is fresh fruit. That is safe.

**For young children and babies, avoid toys with batteries and ones that make noise.** One reason to avoid them is they are soon annoying for the adults who hear them over and over. Another is they are not permitted on the Sabbath. If the child gets attached to the toy, it is hard to take it away for the Sabbath without ill feelings. Let the parents decide if they are going to introduce such a toy in the house.

**For school age children, give games that can be played on the Sabbath.** This gives you playtime with the children on the day they are not in school. Many families like to play cards or board games. ASK the parents which games are congruent with the household values. I have played many card games and board games, including lots of Monopoly, with my grandchildren. A new set of cards is a welcome gift.

**For all children, I give gifts that enhance their creativity and imagination, that engage and build skills**. Art supplies are great. Most children love getting new crayons, coloring and special effects pens, water colors, and fancy papers. Museum shops are great places to get books, crafts, kits for building, sewing, beading, and historic paper dolls.

**Recognize each child’s birthday.** This is their own private holiday, and it is important to them to be remembered. A card, money, or gift certificate is easy to send in the mail, if you are not in their town. Celebrate with them when you are in town. Sometimes the celebration might be delayed until your next visit. It still counts. I like to give them experiences as gifts. A foot, hand or head massage, a trip to a museum, amusement park, ice cream parlor, or going bowling are possible options, if their parents consent.

**Gifts on visits**. When I visit my grandchildren in their home, I bring each one a small gift. I am often challenged to come up with something different for each one. Some gifts have been hits and some have bombed. I have learned from both kinds. The smiles of delight when they were young were major gifts to me.

I taught all of them to give hand and foot massages by giving massages to them. I brought special oil scented for children. They returned the massages, and I had the pleasure of receiving. I recently received the wonderful gift of recognition and gratitude when Avi, my married grandson, told his bride, Gitty, she should experience one of my foot massages. “She is the best!” he told her.

**Storytelling as a gift**. I began my saga of storytelling with my first grandson, Avi. Sitting at his bedside at night, I would tell him stories about my childhood dog named Snowball. On successive visits, he would beg for more Snowball stories and repeats of those he already knew by heart. Soon I found Snowball capable of many more feats, as I allowed my imagination to weigh in over actual history. Once my imagination was in gear, other characters began to populate the stories. My grandson Uriel asked for the stories of a character inspired by him. I would ask him to name things, and then I made up a story including those things. Ghosts, robbers, pirates, cannonballs, dragons, and time machines were repeat favorites. Storytelling along with massages became an important part of my time with each of the grandchildren. Recently, Avi got his own first dog. It was a white mixed breed from the animal shelter. When he named him Snowball, I knew my stories had been an impactful part of his growing years.

**Support from the Jewish Community**

In the summer of 2003, I borrowed my sister and brother-in-law’s nineteen foot RV. It is a great size for two people, but it can sleep six if you don’t need room to store anything. I made plans to drive it from Denver to New York with four grandchildren to attend a wedding. Then I would use it for two grandchildren for more traveling in the east, before heading back to Denver. It was outfitted for kosher eating, camping, and entertainment on the road. About noon on the second day, smoke began rising from the engine. We stopped, all got out, and over the next hour watched as, wrapped in flames and black smoke, it burned to the ground. Only the charred frame was left. We held each other and cried and laughed and cried. We were so shocked. We were also so grateful that the dress Sahra had worked so hard to make for the wedding was still in Denver.

The police said they would take us to a hotel in Kansas City. I thought: What would I do with these children in a hotel? We had no kosher food and only the clothing we were wearing.

“No, take us to Irv’s Market in Overland Park.”

“Irv’s Market?” They couldn’t imagine why I would want to go there.

I knew what they didn’t. I knew that if I could get to a rabbi or someone in the Jewish community, the community would take care of us. I had planned to stop at Irv’s Market for lunch. It was the only kosher grocery and deli between Denver and St. Louis. We were twenty miles away from it.

Sure enough, the community took care of us, in ways beyond any expectation. The owner of Irv’s took us into his home for the night. He and his daughter fixed a birthday dinner honoring Elisheva, while his wife took us shopping to buy clothing essentials. She even paid for them. Others in the community provided clothes, toothbrushes, prescription medicine, a ride to the airport, and sweaters and food for the plane trip to New York. We made it to the wedding. Doni and Aviva and I even continued with the other plans we had made for our trip with help, gifts, loans, and moral support provided again and again from Jewish friends and family and my friends on the journey.

Aliza was so grateful that I knew enough to know where to go for help. My visits in her community and my summers in the bungalow colony had taught me that. She wrote the story, which is published on Aish.com, under the title *Kindness in Kansas*. (http://www.aish.com/jw/s/48899557.html)

Part III

What About Us, the Parents and Friends?

How can the *baal teshuvah* accommodate us?

Chapter 14

Honor Your Parents – What Does This Mean?

 by Aliza

The Torah dictates how a child must treat their parents. It is the fifth commandment of the Ten Commandments, enumerated in Exodus, and it is mandated again in Leviticus. In Exodus 20:12 it says, “*Honor* your father and your mother, that your days may be lengthened on the land which Hashem, your G-d, is giving you.” In Leviticus 19:3 it says, “Each person: You shall *fear/be in awe of* your mother and your father and you shall safeguard My keep Sabbaths, I am Hashem, your G-d.”

*Honor, fear/awe*. What do these words mean, and how should we behave to manifest these qualities? As with all commandments, the concept behind it is not left as a nebulous idea. There is a definition of what should and should not be done to keep these laws.

Because each verse is different, each teaches a different aspect of the concept, as well as an additional lesson. Our Sages point out that it may be more natural to *honor* one’s mother and to have *fear/awe* for one’s father. It is interesting to note that in the first verse, in which honor is commanded, the father is listed first, thereby teaching that the father must be honored just as the mother is, but in the second verse where fear/awe is commanded, the mother is listed first, thereby emphasizing that she must be treated with fear/awe just as the father is. The seemingly “reverse order” stresses that the two aspects of honor and fear apply equally to both mother and father.

**Behaviors That Reflect Honor and Fear/Awe**

Some of the classic mandated behaviors that you, the parent, may see in your child, or that you may remind your child, include:

* Greeting you when you enter your home and rising for you when you enter the room
* Serving you when you desire food or drink
* Assisting in household tasks as an expression of appreciation for what you do and have done for your child
* Carrying your packages or otherwise tending to you when possible
* Refraining from sitting in your accustomed place
* Refraining from directly contradicting you (a child may say, “I understand it differently…” or “is it possible that…” or respectfully ask for clarity if a parent is contradicting their own words, but a child may not say, “no, it’s not,” “nuh-uh,” “last week you said…” or otherwise directly contradict)
* Refraining from speaking in a way that assumes parallel authority with you
* Refraining from causing you embarrassment (Sometimes there is natural embarrassment felt by a parent over the child’s new mode of dress, use of Jewish name, or other behavior stemming from Jewish observance. If the child can tone this down within the parameters of Jewish law, at least in the presence of his parents, he should—this may a good place to seek rabbinic guidance together.)

In the brief examination of the concepts of honor and fear/awe below, I have included excerpts of the descriptions of the two basic mitzvot as related in The Book of [Mitzvah] Education (Sefer HaChinuch), which was written in Spain by an anonymous father in the thirteenth century for his bar mitzvah-aged son. I have quoted him here both for the author’s authority and clarity.

### Honor: The Basic Concept

“*Honor* your father and your mother, that your days may be lengthened on the land which Hashem, your G-d, is giving you” (Ex. 20:12).

The Talmud explains, “What constitutes honor? To provide food and drink, clothing and covering, and to escort and attend them” (Kiddushin 31b).

The Book of [*Mitzvah*] Education (Sefer HaChinuch), mitzvah 33, explains: “At the root of the mitzvah lies the thought that it is fitting for a person to acknowledge and treat with loving-kindness the person who treated him with goodness, and he should not be base, an ingrate who does not recognize the good; that this is an evil quality and utterly vile before G-d and mankind. It is for a person to realize that his father and mother are the cause of his being in the world: hence in very truth it is proper for him to give them every honor and every benefit that he can, since they brought him into the world, and they also labored through many exhausting efforts for him in his early years….

“This mitzvah applies in every place and every time, to both men and women… and the one who transgresses is disobeying a positive commandment and his punishment is very great.”

The additional lesson:

Very few mitzvot have the reward for keeping them directly stated in the Torah, but this one does. It is the same reward as for the mitzvah of chasing away the mother bird before taking the eggs from her nest: that of lengthy days or a long life. The Talmud relates that the fact that these two mitzvot have the same reward, with one being perhaps the easiest mitzvah in the Torah to perform and one being among the most difficult, indicates that a person never knows the value of the performance of a particular mitzvah, so they should be equally careful in keeping the details of them all.

 Although we do not perform the mitzvoth in order to receive reward, the Torah is nonetheless teaching us that regarding honoring parents, there is a tangible reward in this world. Consequently a child will earn a longer life if they are careful in fulfilling their obligation of honor and respect of their parents. It is therefore considered both the responsibility and a kindness on behalf of the parent to instruct their child in the proper observance of these laws. After all, who doesn’t want their child to live a long life?

For that reason, it is appropriate to teach your child to behave respectfully.

### Fear/Awe: The Basic Concept

“Each person: You shall *fear/be in awe of* your mother and your father and you shall safeguard My keep Sabbaths, I am Hashem your G-d” (Lev. 19:3).

The Book of [Mitzvah] Education (Sefer HaChinuch), mitzvah 212, states that this means “to have a reverent fear of parents; that is to say that a person should behave toward his mother and father the way he would behave toward someone before whom he stands in awe… and what is this behavior? Not to sit in his place, not to speak in his place, and not to contradict his words…. How far should this reverence of one’s father and mother be extended? Even if they hit him and spit in his face, he should not shame them (nevertheless, our Sages have commanded that a man should not hit his grown child…) … even if a father or mother becomes deranged, a child should try to behave respectfully with them according to their understanding. But if they become excessively deranged, one may leave them and direct others to care for them as is appropriate…

“Additionally, our Sages teach that if parents command one to transgress the words of the Torah, or even the decrees of our Sages, they are not to be listened to…

“This mitzvah applies in every place and every time, for both man and woman… if a father renounces his right to respect, the respect due him is thus nullified.”

The additional lesson:

We see from the above that the requirement of reverent respect extends very far, even to abusive parents, but it ends where a parent requests or demands a child to transgress Jewish law. That does not mean that the child is exempt from showing respect once a request to break a law is made; respect must still be shown even in their refusal to grant the request or to meet the demand of the parent.

There is, however, no requirement for a child to love or even to be social with a parent. That is a byproduct of a positive relationship and cannot be mandated. What is required is respectful behavior as well as caretaking behavior. A child may respectfully withdraw from a negative or harmful relationship, but a child must still see to his parents’ *needs*, to the best of his ability.

Hopefully, the guidance in this book will help parents and children avoid the situation in which a child will feel the need to withdraw. But even more than that, hopefully parents and children will be able to create and maintain relationships that are in general joyful and a source of strength and comfort to them both.

Oralee’s Reflections on Honoring Parents

As Aliza grew in her observance, I began to notice the ways in which she was honoring me. She stands to greet me when I first enter the room in the morning. She is quick to serve me at the table, bring me a hot drink or water. She cheerfully makes special food for me when I am on restricted diets. She does not contradict me when we engage in discussions, even ones in which we have disagreements.

For the first ten years, my visits to her home were to help her with babies and toddlers, with a move to a house, and with organization in the house. I was so used to helping her that it took me a while to notice this shift of how much she was now serving me. It also took me a while to be comfortable with it. “No, no, don’t get up, I can get my own tea,” I would say. “Let me get it for you,” she would answer.

In fact, as I read what she has written, I now understand this on a deeper level. This so often happens as I continue learning more about Judaism. There are so many levels of meaning and ways of understanding the impact and import of each behavior. It is endlessly fascinating. What a great place for growing together.

Helpful book: *After the Return*, by Rabbi Mordechai Becher

#### Chapter 15

#### The Rabbi and Teacher as Ally

#### by Aliza

In the first chapter of Pirkei Avot (Ethics of Our Fathers) 1:6, it says, “Make for yourself a rabbi, acquire a friend, and judge everyone to the side of merit.” This is not considered just a nice thing to do, but rather a requirement for the proper functioning of an observant Jew.

A person needs a rabbi (a teacher) to educate, guide, prod, and correct them in their life-long growth process. It is important to have a relationship with an authority figure who is familiar with you, your history, and your potential so that they can keep expectations realistic and offer education and guidance that is appropriate.

A friend also serves an important role in the growth process but has a different function. A friend is a peer, often someone who is more involved in a person’s life on a day to day basis than is a teacher. A friend can be a sounding board, a support, and a companion on the journey. A friend gives but also needs, and so provides the opportunity to give to them as well.

The relationship with both rabbi and friend can become very close, close enough that it is prone to faultfinding and criticism. That is why the requirement to establish those important relationships is immediately followed by the requirement to judge everyone favorably.

It is important that your child have a guide and Jewish legal (*halachic*) authority in their life. Not only can that person keep them on track, they can give them direction and even rebuke when necessary.

Here is an important secret: your child’s rabbi can be your ally. I don’t mean this narrowly, that if you choose to follow your child’s path, your child’s rabbi can help you along too. I mean right now, if you get to know your child’s rabbi and/or principle teacher (for some women, this may be a rebbitzen, or rabbi’s wife), you will have an ally in understanding and dealing with your child.

A common phenomenon among many newly observant Jews is that the depth of their commitment grows faster than the depth of their knowledge. This can lead to excessive stringency and rigidity as the newly observant person tries to avoid crossing lines when they are not even sure of where the lines are. You may already be familiar with the extra tension that can stem from this.

When you encourage a relationship with a rabbi, you bring into the equation a voice of authority and reason to whom you can **both** turn. If your child is maintaining a position that seems unreasonable, or is doing something that seems extreme or detrimental, have them check in with their rabbi to clarify their understanding. It may be important for you to talk with the rabbi yourself, as questions can be asked in many different ways, and that, of course, can lead to very different answers.

*As the Jewish High Holidays approached, I knew that my son would miss several days of college. We live in Colorado, so many of the professors are not familiar with Orthodox students having to miss days of school for religious reasons. My son had a test scheduled for one of the days he would miss, so I advised him to ask his teacher if he could take it early. When he came home and reported that his teacher denied his request, I asked him how he asked the question.*

*“I just said, ‘Can I take my test early?’ and she said, ‘No.’”*

*Disturbed by this clearly inadequate conversation, I explained to him “how to ask” for the next time.*

*“Excuse me, Professor… I will be missing several days of school over the next few weeks due to the Jewish holidays. I’ll be sorry to miss your classes, but because of various religious restrictions, I will have to. I see from the syllabus that there is a test scheduled on one of those days. Is there any way I could arrange to take that test early so that I won’t miss it?”*

It’s easy to see how providing context and more information changes the tenor of the above question. The same is true when consulting a rabbi. “Can I spend Shabbat in a non-kosher hotel in the Bahamas?” is very different from, “My grandparents are celebrating their fiftieth anniversary, and the entire family is gathering in a hotel in the Bahamas for the weekend. It’s really important to my parents that I join them. How can I go?”

My mother understood how helpful consulting a rabbi could be, and she advised me to do so when we ran into this tricky situation.

During one of her visits to our home in Long Beach, she told me that she was so excited because one of her friends had told her about a wonderful place in Manhattan to buy statues of Quan Yin, a Chinese “goddess” of compassion. She used these statues when creating altars and in her “sacred space” design. She was looking forward to going into the city to purchase several.

My heart sank. I knew statues of any kind of god or goddess were strictly off-limits for Jews, and even for non-Jews. I knew the rule was strict, not even allowing any use or benefit from an item used in the service of idols, and sometimes requiring the destruction of the idol, but I had never learned any details of how the law applies. My mother was so excited. I wanted her to be happy, but I didn’t want to transgress a Torah prohibition by allowing an idol on our property.

I told her about my dilemma and asked her if she could mail them to her home directly from Manhattan after she bought them so that she wouldn’t have to bring them to my home first. She hesitated and explained that she was buying delicate porcelain statues, and she was worried about how they’d arrive in the mail. She planned to carry them on the plane with her to keep them safe.

Thinking about the laws of Passover, I wondered if I could sell our guest room to her, and possibly our car, so that she would be storing the statues and transporting them in her property, not ours. She thought about taking them to a non-Jewish neighbor when she returned from the city, but then there was still the problem of how to take them to the airport. We talked about it over several days and couldn’t figure out what to do.

The day came when she was going into the city and we still didn’t know what to do. Finally, she said, “Why don’t you call your rabbi and ask him.” Of course, why didn’t I think of that? I called Rabbi Moshe Dov Stein, of blessed memory, the rabbi to whom my husband and I turned to answer our most difficult questions. I explained the entire situation and asked him what I should do when my mother returned from Manhattan. He asked enough questions to be sure of the details and then told me, “It is not your business what your mother buys, and you should not ask her!”

When my mother returned from Manhattan, she stepped gingerly into the house and asked, “Did you reach your rabbi? What did he say?”

I told her emphatically, “It’s not my business what you buy, and I should not ask you!”

“Okay then,” she said.

“Okay then,” I replied.

I made myself scarce while she brought in her packages. We both learned that it pays to ask.

## Oralee’s Reflections

In my experience, the more Aliza knew about Judaism, the more flexible she was. When she was a beginning-stage student, she was especially rigid. We had some very difficult family situations, which would have been much easier had she known more. And it would have been easier had we known to ask a rabbi for help.

Through the years, I have found most rabbis to be very approachable and willing to help create more peace in the family. They also know where to draw the line, and their clarity is helpful. Sometimes the third party makes it easier on both the parents and the newly observant child.

**Chapter 16**

**Making Room for Your Family’s Views and Lifestyle**

 **by Oralee**

Just as you are making room for your newly observant child’s views and ways, so too, should they make room for yours. It does not mean that you can expect them to violate their level of observance to accommodate you. It does mean they should try to do what they can within that level to meet you where you are.

**You can expect them to sit at your table with family and friends**. You can discuss ahead of time how to handle food in a way that takes care of kashrut requirements. You can ask them to take care of their kosher food needs by shopping, bringing what they need to prepare the food, and bringing paper and plastic goods upon which to serve their food. They can ask their rabbi how to handle their food in your home. They can also join the conversation at the table without eating.

If the gathering is for a Jewish holiday, it is much easier, and in the beginning perhaps even necessary, for them to be in their new community. That is where they will have the support they need to learn the Torah ways. Sometimes the family can gather in a hotel or resort catering to the Jewish community, which provides kosher food and the ability to observe the Sabbath. Extended families sometimes do this for Passover (Pesach) or New Year (Rosh Hashanah)*.*

**You can expect them to show up for family events** that do not conflict with the Sabbath or the Jewish holidays. When I started planning a family reunion and community event in Portland, to celebrate my fiftieth birthday, I discovered my actual birthday was on a Friday. What was important to me – the actual day, or having my daughter and her family with me for the celebration? I scheduled the celebration for Sunday. I asked Aliza and her family to fly from New York before the Sabbath. They stayed in a home at the coast, made a family birthday dinner for me there on Friday, and drove to Portland on Sunday for my community celebration.

**If there is no way to avoid a family event on a Friday evening or Saturday**, and you feel strongly about their attending, they need to stay within walking distance, and they need to have kosher food available.

When Aliza’s grandmother died, the funeral was held in Sheboygan, Wisconsin, on a Saturday. Aliza and Ephraim flew from New York to Wisconsin on Friday morning and stayed in a hotel several blocks from where the service would be held. They brought their own food and were able to walk to the service on Saturday. They sat with the family during the meal afterward, even though they could not eat anything served. They understood that the main thing was to share and connect with family.

In all these situations, we can choose to make being together the most important thing, and then work out whatever needs to happen to make that possible. If we choose to let differences divide us and keep us apart, then we are placing a higher value on other things such as “being right” or “being angry” or “being victimized and martyred.” We all need to remember we have choices we can make, and there are ways to be creative when family connections matter to us.

**You can expect them to respect your friendships with people who once were but no longer are close to them.** It is a given that their friends will change.That is an important aspect of their new life commitments.You may have a special bond with some of their friends from their non-observant life. Some of them may seem like family to you. You do not have to cut these people off because they are no longer an active part of your child’s life. **It is important you do not collude with them in making your own child wrong**. Focus on what is important between you and these friends. Is there something other than their previous friendship with your child? Perhaps you are surrogate parents to them, or perhaps you share other important interests. Allow time for these relationships to adjust to the new situation. Some will stay, and others will drift away.

**You can expect tolerance for your personal religious or non-religious preferences**. They will naturally have desires for you, just as you do for them. However, you can expect that they will not try to proselytize. If needed, you can create ground rules for discussions. For example,

* We will learn from each other about our views and practices.
* We will not make the other wrong.
* We will be open to other possibilities.
* We will not make each other feel bad about the practices we choose.

This may take practice, as many families have a default mode of attack and defense – feeling that others are wrong and we are right. One of the rich benefits of wading into discussions with ground rules is stretching the ability to tolerate and learn, and taking the risk that in learning, we may each see things in new ways.

Here is a story about that natural desire to have loved ones be like yourself. Each one of my grandchildren asked me at different times in their lives, “Why aren’t you Jewish?” At first the answer, “Because my mother wasn’t Jewish,” satisfied them. As they became more sophisticated, they told me “You are Ima’s mother and you aren’t Jewish, and yet she became Jewish. So you could too.”

For a while, I wasn’t sure how to respond to that. I asked if they wanted me to become Jewish. One granddaughter said, “Yes, I love you, and I want you to be the same as the rest of us.” That was a deep desire in all of them. I was so much a part of their lives that they wanted me to be one of them. I told her that meant a lot to me. I loved her very much too.

Then I told her that if I understood that Hashem wanted me to become Jewish in the way their mother had, then I would. But for now, I have my own way of being with Hashem, and that seems to work for both of us. I love learning about Judaism and participating with her family. I see how important it is for all of them and for the whole Jewish community. “I have a big place in my heart for Judaism, even though I am not a Jew. I know that you are, and I love you.” All the grandchildren are teenagers and older now. They don’t ask me anymore. They respect my religious practices and know I respect and support theirs.

I have never felt any pressure from my daughter or my son-in-law to become Jewish. Nor have they felt any pressure from me to be other than who they are. My son-in-law jokes that it is often very handy to have a grandmother in the family who is not Jewish. I have learned over the years how to be a “Shabbos goy.” That means I can do things for myself on the Sabbath that they cannot do. One example is turning on the air conditioner or an electric fan on hot muggy Saturday afternoons. I can also turn on or off lights, the stove, and the dishwasher. I am careful about this and sometimes decline a request from the children to do something they really wanted to do for themselves that is not allowed on the Sabbath. They have come to understand the distinction. One Saturday, my granddaughter came running into the house calling to me, “Grandma, come quick, we need you!” She took me across the street where the house alarm was blaring. They needed someone not Jewish to punch in the code to stop the alarm. I did it, and the neighbors also appreciated the visiting grandmother.

When I visit the Bulows in Denver, I have the chance to visit a cousin from my parents’ generation. She enjoys having me worship with her on Sunday mornings and have dinner with her afterward. My Jewish family is very generous about this connection. They loan me their car to meet her and invite her to celebrations at their home. Sometimes I feel caught between two worlds, because Sundays are a day the Bulows can travel somewhere together. I have to choose. The Bulows have been understanding, supported my choice, and done what they could to help me.

Early on in our journey, I felt there was no room within Aliza’s Judaism to hold my views and life outlook. The way to stay connected was up to me. I needed to enlarge my views to contain hers. In actual experience through the years, I have sometimes been surprised by her capacity to listen to and accept me where I am. I have gradually felt safer and more willing to be vulnerable with her and share more of what is going on in my spiritual life.

Over the years, as she has grown more in her knowledge and practice of Judaism, she has also grown in her ability to be tolerant and accepting of others in their own unique spiritual journeys, both within and outside Judaism.

The importance of some interactions is not the details. The importance is that we are each trying to solve the problem in a way that is respectful of the other. Those interactions give us both room to grow – not apart but together.

In the summer of 2001, I helped Aliza and her children move from New York to Denver. They rented a house with a fireplace in the living room. The children had not had the experience of a fireplace, and they enjoyed making fires and roasting marshmallows. I returned for another helping visit for the last half of December. Their dad was commuting weekly between New York and Denver, and there was much to do. It was a bit strange for me to let go of any of the outward signs of my holiday. I pretended even to myself that it wasn’t important and I said very little about it. On the morning of December 25, the kids were anxious for me to get up and come into the living room. They had made a fire in the fireplace. There, hanging from the mantel, was a stocking filled with fruit and small gifts. A red and green wrapped present sat on the floor in front of the fireplace. “Santa came for you!” they told me with big grins on their faces. Tears filled my eyes and ran down my cheeks. I discovered it did matter to me. This gesture from them was so precious. It is among my most cherished holiday memories.

I was surprised when I learned that Aliza went to the movie *The Passion of Christ*, read *The DaVinci Code*, and saw a movie called *What the Bleep Do We Know*. As a teacher of Jews from all backgrounds, she felt the need to be up to date on certain “spiritual” and contemporary cultural conversations.

While I was not willing to view *The Passion of Christ* myself, I was intrigued that she would go to see it. We talked about the movie and the variety of views about it. I had stayed up until 3 am reading *The DaVinci Code* one weekend. The suspense and story line in the book was compelling for me. I thought I would have fun discussing this with Aliza, but I couldn’t imagine that she would ever read it. To my amazement, she had, and we did have a chance to share reactions to it. I was even more surprised that she had seen the movie *What the Bleep Do We Know*. She was talking about concepts in the movie to the women in one of her classes that I attended. When I told her I had seen it three times, she told me she had gone twice, once with a women’s group she led and then with her husband. We talked about parts of the movie that we both enjoyed. Again, I felt I needed to revise my perceptions of the possibilities for shared experiences outside of Judaism.

One day, I received an unexpected package from Amazon. I couldn’t imagine what it would be – was it a mistake? I hadn’t ordered anything. Tears filled my eyes when I held the book in my hands. It was a book on prayers from different religious traditions with a note from my grateful Jewish son-in-law. He said that when he saw this book, he knew I would appreciate it, so he ordered it for me. He met me on my grounds.

We have each benefited from the respect given and received from the other, and from the learning shared. Our lives are richer for the connection. When you commit yourselves to learn from one another, rather than be defensive or attacking, or having to be right, doors open to wondrous new rooms of insight, perception, vulnerability, and awe. There is the possibility for heartfelt connections and the joyous dance of life in these spacious places. This book is the invitation to them.

Chapter 17

Compassion

An Essay Directed to the Newly Observant

by Aliza

It was the Friday night that my daughter Sahra got engaged. We set the Shabbos table for a “family only” dinner, and there were twelve places: my husband and myself, our six children, two spouses, one brand new spouse-to-be, and my mother. After the singing, to which everyone added their voice; Kiddush, during which everyone was respectfully quiet; the blessing of the children, for which all the children and children-in-law lined up; and the washing and the *motzi*, during which everyone hummed playfully, we all began to eat and chat and have a lively time together. It was a perfect Friday night.

My mother has been at my side for so many years that she knew how remarkable it was. No one was arguing, no one was late, no one complained, no one didn’t want to sit next to someone else… and everyone was cooperating, enjoying, and having a good time. She leaned over to me and said quietly, “When I think of all the work you did to create a night like this…” She had tears in her eyes.

She wasn’t talking about the shopping or the cooking or the beautiful flowers or the ironed tablecloth… she meant ALL of the work: my teenaged search, the relationship building, the learning, the conversion, the continued learning, the time in Israel, my marriage, our children, the hundreds of thousands of dollars spent on tuition and summer educational experiences, the hard times, the perseverance, the prayer, the humor, the patience, the cultivation, the personal growth, the support of our children’s personal growth and divergent pathways… the culmination, even if temporary, in a moment of family harmony, of welcoming in a new member, of showing our best side, of having a best side to show, and of having that side be richly Jewish.

It was the fruit of three decades’ efforts. But those efforts were not mine alone. My mother had a large share in making it all happen. Her compassion, her warmth, her tolerance, her willingness to grow and to stand at my side with encouragement and constructive criticism helped, in no small measure, bring me through all those years. And it has not been easy for her. She had to do a lot of work: a lot of learning, a lot of processing, a lot of letting go, a lot of creating new hopes and expectations. I didn’t know it then, but I should have cut her more slack and given her much more credit all along the way, especially in the beginning.

That’s why I’m writing this now. Now that I can look back over thirty years of Jewish growth, and now that I have adult children of my own, I understand things very differently. You may be going through a lot, so you may not realize that ***your parents need your compassion, as well as your heartfelt appreciation.***

**A Letter to the Baal Teshuvah**

Dear Baal Teshuvah,

You have embarked on a wonderful journey of connection to a deep and rich heritage. You are changing your life as you learn about the meaning of what it is to be a Jew. Your perspectives and goals are shifting as you learn how to transform yourself and transform the world through Torah. It is exciting and daunting, demanding and worthwhile, meaningful and important.

But you are not the only one being shaken during your transformation. Your parents, siblings, and friends are also profoundly affected. Each of them must learn how to be, or evaluate if they want to continue to be, in a relationship with the new you. As far as they are concerned, you changed the rules. This whole thing was your idea, your choice, and therefore, perhaps, should be your responsibility.

For your parents, it’s even more significant. They had dreams and goals for you. They invested years in creating the type of home and the collection of experiences that would take you in the direction that they planned for you. When you became observant, you might have dashed some of their hopes. You might have spoiled some of their dreams. You might have significantly complicated their lives.

PLEASE, have compassion for what they are going through! Please take the time to ask them how they feel and listen carefully when they share. Please take their concerns for you seriously. Please listen to their frustrations and discomforts, and try to find workable, *halachic*, empathetic solutions.

This does not mean you have to give up your *teshuvah*, either in quantity or quality. It may mean thinking a little bit more broadly about the impact of your behavior and about the real point of your *teshuvah* goals. It may be helpful to have a conversation with your rabbi or *rebbitzen,* or a trusted friend about how to stretch yourself appropriately to accommodate as much as you can. It also means being careful in your learning and finding out what the “real” *halachah* is.

Many family difficulties can be avoided if you are clear about the difference between *halachah* (law), *minhag* (custom), *chumrah* (stringency), and *kulah* (leniency), and between what is “preferred” and what is “acceptable.” Please check with your *halachic* authority about what may be acceptable in your parents’ home or in your parents’ presence, but may be different from the way you would ultimately like to practice. In many cases, there is quite a bit of leeway. But you can only use that leeway if you know about it.

Remember that *kibud av v’eim*, honoring your parents, is *de’orisa* (biblically ordained). Many *minhagim* and *chumrahs* do not take precedence over a *de’orisa*. *Halachah* literally means “walking.” A good rabbi can help you figure out how to walk the *halachic* path, your own individual *halachic* path, during different stages and different phases of your life.

For some issues, perhaps even including the issue of choosing an appropriate *halachic* authority, it pays to go right to the top. Rabbi Dovid Cohen is one of the top *poskim*, *halachic* deciders, in the country. As of 2014, he takes phone calls every day, from 3-4 and 10-11 pm Eastern time, to answer queries of all types, from all types of people. Among many specialties, he specializes in questions pertinent to *baalei teshuvah,* so if you need a tricky question answered, or if you need sound advice that is unassailable, or if you and your parents are struggling over an issue, a call to him can be extremely helpful. His numbers are: (718) 376-7423 or (718) 376-7388 during the school year, and (845) 292-5158, 10-11 at night only, in the summers.

It’s hard for a child, even an adult child, to imagine how much a parent loves and cares about them. And it’s almost impossible to understand how difficult it is to have one’s life and values rejected by one’s child. As much pain as you may feel in that your parents are not joining you in your journey, it is likely that your parents are feeling similar pain that you are not joining them in their journey, coupled with the additional pain of you rejecting what they so carefully cultivated.

Occasionally, there are parents who may not even want a relationship with their adult child, who have let go of concern about their child’s future or life choices. But if you have parents who care about you and care about your choices, please deal with them kindly, have compassion, and thank them for raising you in a way that allowed you to make the important choices that you have.

May you have *brachah* and *hatzlachah* in all your Torah endeavors,

*Kol tuv*,

Aliza

Afterword

by Oralee

The gifts of “growing together” now reach to the third generation for me. My great-grandson, Ezra, was born in 2008, Moshe in 2010, and two great-granddaughters, Rachel and Meira, in different families, in 2011. The joy of being involved in their lives and watching them unfold is a great reward in my life. The depth of that joy comes from being familiar and comfortable with the traditions surrounding their lives. I have watched grandchildren move from birth into marriage and giving birth. I have experienced the milestones that make up the potential arc of my great-grandchildren’s lives. I know the beauty of the daily, weekly, and yearly rituals that sustain their community.

The journey through these thirty plus years has been filled with poignant moments and tearful joy, as well as difficult moments and tearful pain. It is the commitment to family and a higher purpose that holds it together for me. Families that embrace diversity provide a unique platform for exposure to differences, which does not happen in friendship circles. The view from this platform can open us to greater understanding of humanity and to greater compassion, when we keep our hearts open. The awareness of a higher purpose creates bridges for the journey when the chasms seem too deep to risk crossing.

When a committed religious community is spread around the world, and when most of it lives in the Diaspora, it is crucial to have people who maintain its traditions and cherish its values. This has been crucial to the ongoing life of the Jews for thousands of years. In our lifetime, we can project what will happen to the Tibetan Buddhist community that now lives in their diaspora if they will not have people to continue keeping their rituals and values sacred and alive. The draw to blend into the host culture is a powerful magnetic pull. Growing along with your newly observant family members and friends gives you a connection to those keeping the flame burning. They have a unique role in humanity, and you have the unique opportunity of supporting them in that role.

The willingness to be in that supportive role has brought immeasurable richness to my life. I have been privileged to be inside the community not as a stranger but as a compassionate participant and guest. My worldview includes various Jewish perspectives, as well as those from my own upbringing and education. My interest in the Middle East is more extensive, my prayers for peace more intense. I am deeply grateful for this journey. May you find your own way to making the journey, too.

**Appendix A**

**The Thirty-nine Categories of Work**

The rabbis delineated thirty-nine key categories of work (each with subcategories) that were required for the construction of the Tabernacle. These cannot be done on the Sabbath.

1. Sowing
2. Plowing
3. Reaping
4. Binding sheaves
5. Threshing
6. Winnowing
7. Selecting
8. Grinding
9. Sifting
10. Kneading
11. Baking
12. Shearing wool
13. Washing wool
14. Beating wool
15. Dyeing wool
16. Spinning
17. Weaving
18. Making two loops
19. Weaving two threads
20. Separating two threads
21. Tying
22. Untying
23. Sewing two or more stitches
24. Tearing
25. Trapping
26. Slaughtering
27. Flaying
28. Salting meat
29. Curing hide
30. Scraping hide
31. Cutting hide up
32. Writing two or more letters
33. Erasing two or more letters
34. Building
35. Tearing something down
36. Extinguishing a fire
37. Kindling a fire
38. Putting the finishing touch on an object (lit. hitting with a hammer)
39. Taking an object from the private domain to the public domain, or transporting an object within the public domain.

(*Mishnah Shabbat* 7:2)

Helpful books:

*Sabbath Day of Eternity*, by Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan (only 44 pages long)

*The Sabbath: A Guide to Its Understanding and Observance*, by Dayan Dr. I. Grunfeld

Also go to Aish.com

**Appendix B**

**Check List for Sabbath Preparation and Observances**

Oralee’s list for the things that need to be done before the Sabbath begins.

**Friday**

Check candle lighting time for where we are. It is eighteen minutes before sundown. This is very important, because all preparation for the Sabbath must be done by that time. You can usually find the time of sunset in the local paper. You can call a local synagogue during the day on Thursday or Friday morning, or use the internet to get the time for your city. Click on [www.myzmanim.com](http://www.myzmanim.com) and enter your zip code.

Buy or bake the challah. If you can’t get challah, use bagels, rolls, or *matzah* – you need two pieces for each meal. If one of the two is not used Friday night, you can use it at the next meal.

Prepare all cooked food. Sabbath observing Jews need to light the fire or participate in preparing their food. I ask my grandchildren to turn on the burner or help make the food. Salads and other cold food can be prepared on the Sabbath.

Set up the slow cooker with ingredients for *cholent*, the hot dish served for Sabbath lunch. I ask my grandchild to plug it in just before candle lighting. *Cholent* can be a combination of many different ingredients, depending on family custom. The idea is to have a hot food to serve on Shabbat morning, so it needs to be on a fire all night long, which is why a slow cooker is helpful. Common ingredients are meat, potatoes, barley, beans, water and seasoning.

Set up the candles for candle lighting. You do NOT move or put out Sabbath candles once lit! So put them in a place where they can burn safely until they go out on their own. You can use tea lights on a saucer. This is safe and good for when traveling too.

Turn off the refrigerator and freezer lights. I put duct tape over the switch. This is so the doors can be opened without turning on the light. Alternatively, the light bulbs can be unscrewed.

Turn on the oven light, if you will be opening the oven door, and leave it on until the end of the Sabbath.

Turn on the bathroom lights and put tape over the switch to reduce the risk of anyone turning it off out of habit. These lights need to be left on during the day, because it gets dark again before the Sabbath ends.

Put tissues or pre-torn toilet paper near the toilet (tearing is forbidden on the Sabbath).

Turn on closet lights in the bedrooms. This is a way of having light in the bedroom when needed. (Or buy the "Kosher Lamp.") The closet door can be closed when you want to go to sleep.

Be sure needed lights in the kitchen, dining room, and living room are on. These are left on for the entire Sabbath. Lights can be put on a timer to go off at bedtime and come on before sundown on Saturday.

Take showers and dress in Sabbath clothes, which are dressier than weekday clothes.

Set the table. Use nice paper or plastic goods on a nice tablecloth, if you do not have kosher dishes and cutlery. Because the food is cooked and warm or hot, it must be served on kosher tableware. New paper and plastic goods are kosher.

Set up the Kiddush cup or a wine glass for grape juice or wine. This is needed for Kiddush, the blessing on the wine.

Put a challahcover or other cloth over the challah and a salt shaker on the table next to it.

Set a clean cup and towel next to a clean sink in the kitchen. This is for the ritual hand washing which takes place after the blessing on the wine and before the blessing on the challah. Once you have washed your hands and said the blessing, you do not talk until you eat some bread.

Turn off all radios, television, computers, phone ringers, alarm clocks, and watch alarms before candle lighting time.

I asked my daughter to make sure her children could say and read the blessings for each ritual through the Sabbath. These are candle lighting, Kiddush (blessing over wine), blessing the children, hand washing, blessing the bread, as well as singing Sabbath songs and reading the Grace after Meals(*bentching*) from a prayer book (*bentcher*).

# Sabbath Day – Saturday

A meal with bread is not eaten before reciting the morning prayers or attending the morning prayer service. That is why many synagogues serve a light meal after the prayer service, which is called Kiddush*.*

In my daughter’s family, they often eat some sweet roll or cake in the morning.

**The Sabbath day main meal** is after the prayer service. This is usually about noon. It is a common practice to have guests for this meal.

The table is set as it was for Friday night. The food can be warmed on an electric hot plate or on a metal sheet that is placed over burners on low. This metal sheet is called a *blech.* It is a standard item in most Sabbath observant homes. Fully cooked dry foods can be reheated by placing them in a pan that in turn is placed on top of another pan that is placed upside down over the *blech*.The important traditional warm food is the *cholent*,which is prepared before Shabbos and cooks throughout Shabbos.

The meal begins with Kiddush, ritual hand washing, the blessing on bread, and then eating. Often stories are shared and songs are sung during the meal. The meal ends with *bentching* sung from the *bentcher.*

The afternoon is used for, napping, playing games, walking, visiting other families, reading, and relaxing.

**The Meal Before the End of the Sabbath – Shalishidus or Seudah Shelisheet**

This is usually a light meal of challah, salads, and tuna, or other fish. Milk products are eaten at this meal if the amount of time that one waits between eating meat products and dairy products has already elapsed. (This is usually three to six hours, depending on the custom of the family.) It is a shorter time for young children. (Ask a rabbi about the waiting time needed.) Whoever eats bread at the meal needs to do the ritual hand washing. This is usually done individually. The meal ends with Grace after Meals being recited from the *bentcher* by those who ate bread.

# End of the Sabbath

There are different customs when Shabbat ends depending on latitude and longitude, so you should ask your rabbi which chart to consult with the exact times.

The ritual done when the Sabbath ends is called Havdalah*.*

For this ritual, one needs a glass of wine or grape juice, a multi-wicked candle, and a good smelling spice such as cloves or cinnamon.

This ritual separates the Sabbath from the rest of the week. The prayers for this ritual are in the *bentcher* and *siddur*. The Sabbath is over. Plans for the week can now be made. The weekdays are named according to their position in the count to the next Sabbath, e.g. Sunday is *Yom Rishon* – the “first day” to Shabbat. Preparations for the next Sabbath begin.

The electrical and working part of our lives is turned back on. The contrast is great. The Sabbath seems very sweet, and so important.

**Appendix C**

**The What and How of Kosher Food – Kashrut**

**Origin of Food**

The first set of kosher laws relates to the source of the food. Meat must be from animals that both chew their cud and have split hooves. There are four families that meet these criteria: cow, deer, goat, and sheep.

Fowl must be of specific species as well. The Torah forbids eating birds of prey and other specific birds. Determining which particular birds are kosher is very complex, so the kosher-keeping population relies largely on tradition as it has been passed down to determine what is acceptable. Fowl that may be eaten are chicken, duck, goose, pigeon, dove, pheasant, partridge, quail, guinea fowl, and sparrow. There was no tradition for eating turkey, since it came from the New World. However, it was evaluated according to its characteristics and has been deemed kosher as well.

Kosher fish must have both fins and scales. All species with obvious fins and scales are permissible. No other sea creature is kosher. This means shrimp, oysters, scallops, turtles, sharks, sea mammals, crustaceans, eels, squid, octopi, etc., are not kosher.

All raw, non-processed fruits and vegetables are kosher. Fruits and vegetables grown in the biblical boundaries of the Land of Israel are subject to the laws of tithing before they are edible. Every seventh year, they are also subject to the laws of the Sabbatical year (*shemittah*). These laws are complex, and specific guidance is required in order to consume fruit or vegetables grown in Israel during that year. You can tell if it is a *shemittah* year by dividing the Jewish calendar year by seven. Years that divide evenly by seven are *shemittah* years.

There are some types of grasshoppers that are kosher. Apart from these, no bugs or any other animals not mentioned above are kosher.

All animal products such as eggs and dairy must come from kosher animals. The only exception is honey, which is kosher, although bees are not.

**Ritual Slaughter of Kosher Animals**

Once it is determined that the animal is kosher, it must be slaughtered according to Jewish law. Ritual Jewish slaughter is called *shechitah*, a ritual slaughterer is called a *shochet*. A special razor-sharp knife called a *chalaf* is used to make one single cut across the throat, severing the trachea, esophagus, the carotid arteries, and jugular veins in one uninterrupted movement. The animal loses consciousness before it feels pain and then dies from the loss of blood.

The blood is then drained, and the lungs are checked to ensure that the animal was healthy. An animal that would have died from natural causes within a year is not kosher. The lungs are therefore checked for any adhesions or signs of disease that would indicate impending natural death. Some adhesions do not indicate fatal disease, some are questionable. When adhesions are found, they must be evaluated as to their cause. An animal could have some manner of adhesions and still be kosher. An animal with smooth lungs is called *glatt*, which means “smooth” in Yiddish. Glatt Kosher is the highest standard of kashrut. The phrase “Glatt Kosher” is often used to refer to other “very kosher” items as well, even when they are not meat-based products.

After the blood is drained and the lungs are checked, the animal is butchered, and the meat is soaked and salted to remove any remaining blood, as animal blood is not kosher. All of this must be done under the supervision of a qualified rabbi and is relatively labor intensive. For these reasons, kosher meat is generally much more expensive than non-kosher meat.

Poultry must also be ritually slaughtered and soaked and salted. Fish does not require ritual slaughter or the removal of blood, as fish blood is kosher.

**Food Preparation and Cooking**

Kosher food can be divided into three main categories: meat, dairy and *parve*. “Meat,” also called *fleishic* or *fleishig* in Yiddish, includes any meat or poultry product, as well as any food cooked with meat or a meat product. “Dairy,” also called *milchic or milchig* in Yiddish, includes milk and anything made from milk, as well as anything that has milk or any other dairy product as an ingredient. *Parve* is neutral, it is neither meat nor dairy. Fruits, vegetables, eggs, grains, and their derivatives, such as vegetable oils, are *parve*. Fish is also *parve*.

Meat and dairy products may never be cooked or eaten together. *Parve* foods can be eaten with either meat or dairy. The exception to this rule is fish, which although *parve*, cannot be eaten together with meat. Some Sephardic Jews do not eat fish with dairy either.

The preparation of kosher food requires using kosher utensils, which are used solely for the preparation of kosher food. Utensils include cutting boards, cutlery, cooking, stirring, and serving implements, pots and pans, dishes, mixers, food processors, bread machines, etc. Separate utensils are used for the preparation of meat and dairy foods, and many use separate utensils for *parve* foods as well. Kosher ingredients that are cooked in non-kosher utensils become non-kosher. Besides the requirement that the utensils be kosher, if they are owned by a Jew and made of metal or glass, they also require immersion in a kosher *mikvah* before use.

Separate ovens are used for meat and dairy (or the oven may be self-cleaned in between). Cooking utensils are washed separately, according to their category. Food may be stored in the same refrigerator, and you do not need to separate food thrown into the garbage.

All ingredients, except some specific single ingredient items, must have reliable rabbinic supervision. Rabbinic supervision is noted on the food packaging by a small kosher symbol called a *hechsher*. A circled U, circled K, a K within a star examples of reliable kosher symbols. There are many others. Each person must know which symbols are acceptable to them, as some symbols are more reliable than others. Check with your rabbi.

Finally, for food to be kosher, it needs either to be prepared by or prepared under the supervision of a Sabbath-observant Jew. This is because the laws of kashrut are so numerous and far-reaching, and require so much attention to detail, that only a person who is dedicated to the observance of Jewish law is relied upon to keep them in all their detail. For purposes of Jewish law, the definition of a person who is truly, personally dedicated to the observance of Jewish law is a person who is, or truly attempts to be, fully Sabbath-observant.

**Kashering**

It is possible to make many types of non-kosher utensils kosher. This process is called *kashering* and is specific to the type of material the utensil is made of, as well as to its mode of use. *Kashering* is necessary when buying a secondhand item, when desiring to use an item from a non-kosher kitchen, and when mistakes are made in a kosher kitchen. Most kosher kitchens have a “*kashering* pile,” a place where utensils used mistakenly for the wrong food, or washed in the wrong dishwasher, are placed while they await rectification. It is important to know that mistakes happen, and many can be fixed.

Before an item may be *kashered*, it must be cleaned and not used for twenty-four hours. Placing an item in an oven and then running it through a short self-clean cycle will *kasher* any utensil that survives the heat, though clearly not every utensil will. Another method to *kasher* a utensil is to immerse it in rapidly boiling water and then dip it in cold water. This method works for a lot of utensils, but not all. Other, more difficult, *kashering* methods are required for certain specific items. Consult an Orthodox rabbi for more details. Many rabbis will come to a home to assist with the *kashering* of an entire kitchen. When just one or two items are being *kashered*, usually a phone call to the rabbi will suffice to clarify which method needs to be used. While there are some items that cannot be *kashered* at all, most utensils can be *kashered* by one or more of the several *kashering* methods, and it is always worth it to ask.

**Toiveling: Immersing New Dishes in a Mikvah**

Dishes and utensils that are new to a Jewish owner, whether brand new or previously owned, need to be immersed in a kosher *mikvah* before use. This procedure is called *toiveling*; a new dish needs to be *toiveled*. This law is in addition to, and separate from, the need for utensils to be kosher. If dishes were previously owned by someone else and were used for non-kosher or questionable food, they need to be *kashered* first. The immersion rule applies to all utensils made of metal or glass. Wood, plastic, pottery, stoneware, and earthenware are exempt. If the utensils were owned by a Jew from the time of manufacture through wholesale and retail purchase (such as some items purchased in Israel), they do not require immersion. There are differences of opinion concerning disposable foil pans; some say they do require immersion, some say that they do not.

**Passover**

Passover, the week-long holiday commemorating the Exodus from Egypt, has multiple and elaborate additional layers of kashrut that apply to it. Everything that we have discussed until now applies as a foundation for Passover, but the additional laws are very detailed, and cannot be explained here. In addition, there are many levels of stricture that are kept in different Jewish communities. It is imperative to discuss the level of requirements with each individual Jew, newly observant or not, before offering any food to them on Passover. Even within the observant community, there are many who will not eat at the homes of others during this holiday. All the rules of kashrut are magnified for the week. In order to understand how the newly observant family member or friend keeps kosher for Passover, you must discuss it.

 Central to the additional levels of kashrut on Passover is the prohibition of deriving any benefit from leavened products during this week. All products containing wheat, rye, oats, barley, or spelt (of course, excluding *matzah* that has been made specifically for Passover), are termed *chametz* and are not permitted. In addition, as a protective measure, Ashkenazic Jews refrain from eating legumes (including corn, peanuts, lentils, peas, and beans) as well as rice, and all products derived from them. These are called *kitniyot* or *kitniyos*. Most Jews of Sephardic heritage (Moroccans are an exception) eat *kitniyot* on Passover.

 The prohibition of eating *chametz* is so stringent that even the tiniest speck of one of the five forbidden grains would render food inedible for Passover. It is therefore the practice to have an entirely different set of utensils and dishes for Passover. Additionally, Jewish law requires the removal of all leavened products from one’s property for the duration of the holiday. This requires a lengthy period of cleaning preceding the holiday, with particular concentration on the kitchen. In most observant Jewish homes, the kitchen is made into an almost sterile field before the Passover dishes are brought out of their *chametz*-free storage and put to use for kosher for Passover foods.

In addition to this huge body of Jewish law, the Seder, the ceremonial Passover meal, is suffused with deep religious significance. These combined factors can make it very difficult for families on multiple religious levels to share a Seder together. It may be easier to have a family dinner the night before Passover, or to share a non-Seder family meal at the home of the most stringently observant during the intermediate days of the festival. The diversity of laws and practices that the various participants would like to uphold in celebrating the Passover Seder may be too wide to be satisfied in one meal. It may be best to create separate meals that allow for the different levels of kashrut, as well as the varying interest in participating in the Seder rituals, of all those involved.

Helpful book: *Passover Survival Kit*, by Rabbi Shimon Apisdorf.

**Appendix D**

**Shidduch Resume Samples**

**Sally (Shira Malka) Fish**

Date of Birth: 3/29/1988

Height: 5’6”

**Family:**

Father: Steve (Shimon) Fish, owner of Fish’s Diner

Mother: Alice (Elana) Fish, attorney

Sister: Annie-16, 11th grade student at Madison High School

**Education:**Madison High School, 2003-2007

Neve Yerushalayim Seminary 2007-2008

Touro University, Jerusalem 2008-2009, began degree in special education

**Shul:** Congregation Beth Tefillah, Rabbi Moshe Alter

**Work and Volunteer Experience:**

Preschool aide at JCC

Volunteer clerk at “Leone” store in Yerushalyim, serving people in need

Youth group leader for four years in high school

Preschool day camp counselor every summer of high school and seminary

**About Sally:**

Sally is a kind and generous person. Everyone loves her because of her calm and easy-going nature. Sally is a great listener and a team-player who gets the job done with a smile. She is looking for a Ben Torah from a happy home who takes his learning seriously and who plans to work and set aside time to learn daily. He should have excellent middos, a sense of humor, and a somewhat outgoing personality. She would enjoy having an open and welcoming home with yeshivish hashkafos. She is willing to travel in order to date and is flexible about where she would like to live.

**References:**

Mrs. Mandel, teacher at Neve 02-927-8713

Rabbi Meir and Mrs. Rachel Schwab, family friends 414-927-9670

Rabbi Moshe Alter, Rav of Congregation Beth Tefillah 658-926-7867

Miryam Shwartz, single friend 689-221-5036; Shifrah Green, single friend 689-360-1998;

Batsheva Passic, friend from seminary 393-498-2546Shlomo I Movitz\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

shlomo123@gmail.com cell: 404 465-0006 home: 404 563-1598

Age: 22 Height: 6’ 2”

Currently living in Atlanta, GA

Religious style: modern-yeshivish

Who I am:

I am a thoughtful, friendly person who wants to build a warm and caring home. I want to be a kind and giving husband and father, and be a supporter of my community. I am responsible and reliable, and I want to grow in my *yiddishkeit*. I like to have fun but I don’t need to be entertained. A game of Boggle or cards, or a movie at home, chatting with friends around the Shabbos table or going out with them on Motzei Shabbos are fun for me. I love children and I am good at taking care of them. I work hard and I would like to learn with my chavrusa on a daily basis. I hope to make Hashem proud of me by how I care for my wife, my family, and my fellow Jews.

What I am looking for:

I want a partner in life who will help me build a warm and caring home. I know that the wife builds the husband, and I hope to find a woman who wants to bring out the best in me. I want to trust her and be able to rely on her advice, and know that she trusts me. I hope that she has interests that I can support her in. I would encourage her to work in a field that she feels comfortable in, and hope that she would like to be a full time mother when the children, IY”H, are little. I would enjoy cooking and caring for the house together with her.

Education:

Ohel Simcha for late elementary school

Lomdai Torah in Far Rockaway for high school

Atlanta Community College for Associate’s Degree

Family:

The Movitz Family moved from Russia to New York in 1994. They became *frum* a few years later. Shlomo is now an American citizen.

Shlomo’s father, Chaim, completed college in Russia and is currently a teacher.

Shlomo’s mother, Miriam, went to college in Russia and the United States, and is currently a telephone operator.

Shlomo has two sisters: Sarah, who is 24 and lives with her husband and 2 children in Far Rockaway, and Esther who is 18 and in seminary in Jerusalem.

References:

Rabbi Bentzi Freidman (rebbe) 718 825 0880

Aryeh Schwartz (close friend) 412 468 5646

Rabbi Yiroel Kahan (rosh yeshiva) 718 685-8200

Rabbi Yigal Anonoff (rabbi who influenced family to become frum) 718 598 2832

**Appendix E**

**Helpful Books**

For more information about Judaism:

*Gateway to Judaism: The What, How and Why of Jewish Life*, by Rabbi Mordechai Becher

*The Non-Orthodox Jew’s Guide to Orthodox Jews*, by David Baum

*The Book of Our Heritage*, by Rabbi Eliyahu Kitov

For more information on kashrut and keeping kosher:

*Kosher for the Clueless but Curious*, by Rabbi Shimon Apisdorf

For more about Shabbat/Shabbos:

*Sabbath Day of Eternity*, by Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan (only 44 pages long)

*The Sabbath: A Guide to Its Understanding and Observance*, by Dayan Dr. I. Grunfeld

For an overview of the overall purpose of Judaism:

*Masterplan Judaism: Its program, meaning, and goals*,by Rabbi Aryeh Carmell

For learning to listen effectively:

*The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, by Stephen R. Covey, especially the fifth habit “Seek First to Understand, Then Be Understood” pp. 235-260

For seeing what a life permeated with Judaism can look like:

*The Committed Life*, by Esther Jungreis

For more information concerning the *baal teshuvah*:

*The Baal Teshuva Survival Guide*, by Lisa Aiken

*After the Return*, by Rabbi Mordechai Becher

For a memoir about a quiet foray into one’s own Jewish journey:

*Miriam’s Kitchen*, by Elizabeth Ehrlich

For the story of a physician’s search into his Jewish roots:

*Anatomy of a Search*, by Rabbi Akiva Tatz

For help with understanding the dating process and finding a good match:

 *I Only Want to Get Married Once*, by Chana Levitan

 *The Magic Touch* (on touching) and *From Head to Heart,* both by Gila Manolson

 *You’re Teaching My Child* *What*?! (Chapter 2, from page 41 on touching), by Dr. Miriam Grossman

Helpful Websites:

 Aish.com

 Torah.org

 Ohr.edu

 Ou.org

 JewishVirtualLibrary.org

**Appendix F**

**Glossary and Helpful Words**

Notes:  A) An italicized *ch* denotes the guttural sound of ch as pronounced in *ch*allah or neba*ch*

B) The Hebrew letter **ת** “tav” is pronounced as an “s” in the Ashkenazi pronunciation and as a “t” in the Sephardi and modern-Israeli pronunciation so that the Hebrew word for Sabbath could be Shabbos or Shabbat. When the pronunciation is very different, I list the word twice, when it falls at the end of a word and there is just the s or t difference, an s/t is used.

C) All words are in Hebrew unless noted otherwise.

**A**

**Abba** (*Aramaic*) – father

**Aharon** (also pronounced Aron) –Aaron, Moses’ brother

**Ahavas/t Yisroel** – love of fellow Jews, love of the Jewish people

**Aliyah** –1) when pronounced Ah-**lee**-ya(accent on the middle syllable) – the honor of ascending to make a blessing over or to read from the Torah (literally: going up)

2) when pronounced Ah-lee-**ah** (accent on the last syllable) – moving to Israel permanently

**Aibeshter** (*Yiddish*) – G-d

**Alef-beis** –Hebrew alphabet (Ashkenazi pronunciation)

**Alef-bet** –Hebrew alphabet (Sephardi/Israeli pronunciation)

**Amidah** –standing silent prayer that is the pinnacle of all prayer services (the Shemoneh Esrei)

**Aron** –1) cabinet, especially referring to the Ark in the synagogue that holds the Torah scrolls; 2) casket

**Aron Kodesh** –Holy Ark that holds the Torah scrolls in the synagogue

**Ashkenazi** or **Ashkenazic** –of, or related to Jews living in, or who have roots in European countries (Poland, Russia, Ukraine, Hungary, Germany, Austria, Holland, Switzerland, England, Denmark, etc.)

**Av** – 1) father

2) month in the Jewish calendar, usually midsummer July/August

3) also used to mean “master category” as in *Av Mela*ch*ah* or *Av Hatumah*

**Aveilus/t** – period or state of mourning for a parent, sibling, child or spouse

**Aveirah** – transgression

**Avinu** – Our Patriarch

**Avodah zarah** – idol worship, or any form of foreign (non-Jewish) service of G-d, or any other type of worship of anything else

**Avraham** – Abraham

**Avraham Avinu** – Our Patriarch Abraham

**B**

**B.C.E.** – **B**efore the **C**ommon **E**ra **–** used with dates from 0 and earlier (instead of BC, which means Before Christ, see C.E.)

**Ba’al Shem Tov** –founder of *Ch*assidic Judaism

**Baal Teshuvah** –Jew who significantly increased his or her level of personal observance of Torah laws as compared to the family in which he or she was raised

**Bamidbar** –Numbers (literally: In the Dessert), the fourth of the Five Books of the Torah

**Beis Medrish** or **Beit Midrash** – study hall where sacred texts are studied

**Beis/t din** – rabbinical court

**Beis/t HaMikdash** – Holy Temple

**Bar Mitzvah** – 1) Jewish male thirteen years of age or older, who is obligated in observing the commandments (mitzvot)

2) ceremony and/or party that celebrates reaching this special birthday and its attendant responsibility and privileges

**Baruch HaShem** – “Thank G-d,” literally: “Praise G-d”

**Bas/t Mitzvah** – 1) Jewish female twelve years of age or older, who is obligated in observing the commandments (mitzvot)

2) ceremony and/or party that celebrates reaching this special birthday and its attendant responsibility and privileges

**Bashert** *–* 1) a person’s destined marital match

2) something that is/was destined to be

**Bavel** – Babylonia

**Bavli** – Babylonian

**Bnei Yisroel** – the Children of Israel

**Bentch** – to bestow a blessing upon or to say the blessing for, also commonly used to mean saying the Grace after Meals

**Bentch le*ch*t** – to (light and) say the blessing over the Shabbos*/*Shabbatcandles

**Bentcher** –thin book or pamphlet containing the Grace after Meals and other blessings

**Bentching** – 1) saying Grace after Meals

2) Grace after Meals

**Bereishis/t** – Genesis, the first of the Five Books of the Torah

**Bimhayrah biyamaynu** – “Speedily in our day”

**Bircas/t HaMazon** – Grace after Meals

**Bita*ch*on** – strong trust (in G-d)

**Ble*ch*** –metal covering placed over the stove on Shabbos*/*Shabbat to allow the heating of food, while reminding the Sabbath observer not to use the fire to cook

**Bli ayin hara** – “Without the evil eye”

**Bra*ch*ah** – blessing

**Bris/t** –1) covenantal circumcision, also known as *bris milah* (pronounced *meelah*)

2) covenant

**BT**– *Baal Teshuvah* (see above)

**Bubba-meisah** – tall tale, old wives’ tale, untruth, literally: grandmother story

**Bubbie** (*Yiddish*) – Grandma (Grandpa is *Zaydie*)

**C**

***Ch*allah** –1) braided bread eaten on Shabbos*/*Shabbat and holidays

2) portion of dough separated for the sustenance of the Cohen (today it is separated and either burned or respectfully discarded)

***Ch*ag** – holiday, festival

***Ch*a*ch*am** –1) Sage, wise person

2) wise

**C.E.** – **C**ommon **E**ra, used with dates from 0 to present (used instead of A.D., since A.D. means Anno Domini, Latin for “in the year of the lord” referring to Jesus)

***Ch*ametz** – 1) leavened product forbidden to be consumed on Passover, made out of any of the five grains (wheat, rye, oats, barley, spelt) that have come into contact with water and have not been made into *matzah* within eighteen minutes from contact

2) referring to this type of forbidden food

***Ch*ametzdik** (*Yiddish*)– food, dishes, and recipes used for, related to, or containing ch*ametz*

***Ch*asson/chosson** – bridegroom (American/Ashkenazic pronunciation), also fiancée

***Ch*atan** – bridegroom (Sephardic/Israeli pronunciation)

***Ch*aburah** –group that meets regularly (usually once a month) for Jewish education, spirituality and/or socializing

***Ch*eder** –1) in Europe: pre-WWII elementary school level religious education for boys

2) in America: post WWII afternoon supplemental religious education for both genders

3) in Israel: elementary school for religious boys

***Ch*aim*/Ch*ayim** – life, see also l’*ch*aim

***Ch*ap** – to grasp, both literally and figuratively, to understand or to “get it”

***Ch*azal** –acronymfor ***Ch***a*ch*ameinu **Z**i*ch*ronam **L**evara*ch*a, Our Sages of Blessed Memory

***Ch*azan** –cantor: one who leads the prayer service, whether lay or professional

***Ch*azunus/t** –opera style singing of the publicly read parts of the prayer service

***Ch*esed** – 1) kindness

2) act of loving-kindness

***Ch*ilul Hashem** –desecration of G-d’s name

***Ch*inu*ch*** – education

***Ch*isaron** – negative quality or deficiency, drawback

***Ch*ofetz *Ch*ayim** – 1) Rabbi Yisroel Meir Kagan, author of the book by the same name (Radin, Poland 1838 -1933)

2) book containing the laws and applications of proper Jewish speech and the laws of guarding one’s tongue against evil speech (see also *lashon hara*)

***Ch*ol** **Hamo-ed** (also pronounced as *Ch*olamo-ed)– the intermediate days of Passover and Sukkus/Sukkot

**Cholent** –stew prepared before the Sabbath from meat, beans, barley, potatoes, and onions that is kept on a flame or heat source overnight so it can be served hot during the daytime Sabbath meal

***Chosson/chatan*** *–* groom, also fiancé

***Ch*umrah** – stringency

***Ch*uppah** – wedding canopy

***Ch*urban** – destruction, often used in reference to the destruction of the Temple or of European Jewry in WWII

***Ch*urban** **HaBayis/t** – destruction of the Temple

***Ch*utzpah** – cheek, nerve, boldness, rudeness

**Cohen** – priest, who performed the Temple service

**D**

**D’var Torah** or **Devar Torah** – 1) Torah thought or explanation

2) sermon; literally: a Torah word

**Daven** (*Aramaic*) – pray (from the phrase *d’avunon* “from our fathers,” intimating that the strength we inherited from our fathers is the ability to use our words well, especially in prayer)

**Derech** – pathway, sometimes used to mean the proper way

**Dovid** – David, usually King David

**Dovid HaMelech** –King David

**Draydle** (*Yiddish*) – a top spun during a *Ch*anukah game (Hebrew: *sevivon*)

**E**

**Eliyahu** –Elijah, often referring to Elijah the prophet

**Eliyahu Hanavi** – Elijah the prophet

**Elokim**, **Elokaynu** – G-d, Our G-d (said with a “k” replacing the “h” so as not to pronounce the name of G-d in vain)

**Emmes/t** –truth

**Emunah** – faith

**Eretz Yisroel** – the Land of Israel

**Erev** –1) evening

2) when combined with the name of a day, it means the day before that day, such as “Erev Shabbos,” “Erev Yom Tov” or “Erev vacation”

**Esrog/etrog** – citron, a citrus fruit used as part of the “four species” on Sukkus/Sukkot(the other three species are: *lulav* – palm frond, *hadassim* – myrtle branches, and aravos/t – willow branches)

**F**

**Fleishig** or **fleishic** (*Yiddish*) – meaty, of or related to meat, used in reference to kosher food laws (in which dairy and meat foods are prepared and eaten separately) to designate meaty foods and utensils that are used exclusively for meaty foods (the designation for dairy is *milchig*)

2) the description of one who has eaten meat and is waiting the subsequent required three or six hours before they may again consume dairy products

**Frum** (*Yiddish*) – religious or observant of Torah law

**Frumkeit** (*Yiddish*) – observance of Jewish law and practice

**Fry** (*Yiddish*)– not religious (literally: free)

**FFB** – **F**rum **F**rom **B**irth

**G**

**Gabbai** –synagogue sexton

**Gadol** – 1) a great person

2) an adult (literally: great or big)

**Gadolim** – Sages, Luminaries, Great ones

**Galil** – Galilee

**Galus/t** –exile, spiritual or physical

**Gaon** – 1) genius

2) title given to the outstanding leaders of the 7th - early 11th centuries (690-1040 C.E.)

**Gehenom** – Hell (a place where souls are purged of negativity gathered during their earthly sojourn, most souls do not stay there more than several months)

**Gemara** (*Aramaic*) –the Talmud

**Gematria** – the numerical value of a Hebrew letter

**Gemilus/t chesed** or **gemilus/t chasadim** – acts of loving kindness, kind deeds

**Ger** or **ger tzeddek** – convert to Judaism (literally: sojourner, which is why “*ger*” is sometimes modified with “*tzeddek*” to specify a righteous convert)

**Geirim** – converts to Judaism

**Get** – writ of divorce

**Geulah** –redemption

**Goy** – 1) nation; 2) non-Jew

**Goyim** – 1) nations; 2) non-Jews

**Goyish** (*Yiddish*)– non-Jewish

**Guf** (pronounced goof) – body

**H**

**Haftarah** –reading from the Prophets read after the weekly Torah reading on Shabbos/Shabbat

**Haggadah** –book containing the order and readings of the Passover Seder

**Heimish** (*Yiddish*) – warm, homey, cozy, comfortable

**HaKadosh Baru*ch* Hu** – the Holy One Blessed be He, G-d

**Hala*ch*ah** – Jewish law

**Hala*ch*ic** –of or pertaining to Jewish law

**Hamotzie** – the blessing said before eating bread; on the Sabbath and holidays, *hamotzie* is said in conjunction with Kiddush, the blessing over wine, to commence the festive/ceremonial meal

**Har Habayis/t** – the Temple Mount, the place where the Temple stood in Jerusalem

**Har Hamoriah** – Mt. Moriah, the mountain on which Isaac was bound, Jacob had his dream, and later the two Temples stood. After the Temples were built, it also became known as *Har HaBayis/t –* the Temple Mount

**Har Sinai** (pronounced See-nie) – Mount Sinai, the place of G-d’s revelation to the entire Jewish nation and giving of the Torah

**Hashem** –literally: the Name, used deferentially to refer to G-d

**Hashga*ch*ah** – supervision

1) Divine supervision

2) the supervision necessary for kosher certification

3) the printed symbol on a package of kosher food indicating which group certifies it as kosher

**Hashga*ch*ah** **pratis/t** – personal or individual Divine supervision over one’s life

**Hatzla*ch*ah** – success

**Havdalah** – the ceremony including wine, spices, and a multi-wicked candle concluding the Sabbath and ushering in the week

**He*ch*sher**, **he*ch*sherim** (pl)– 1) a kosher certification

2) the mark on the package of food that indicates the food’s kosher status

**Hoshana Rabbah –** the last day of *Sukkus/Sukkot,* on which there are extra “*hoshanas”* performed in the synagogue and a special beating of the willow branches of the four species

**I**

**Ikar** (also pronounced Ikker) – 1) principle; 2) main component

**Ima** (pronounced Eema)(*Aramaic*) – mother

**Imeinu** (pronounced Eemeinu)– Our Matriarch

**Im yirtzeh Hashem** (also pronounced Imyirtz-Hashem) – “G-d willing”

**Issur** – prohibition

**K**

**Kabbalah** – the received mystical tradition

**Kaddish** – 1) an Aramaic prayer that is said between sections of the public prayer service; 2) a prayer said in memory of the dead for a year after the death and on the anniversary of the death

**Kadosh** – holy

**Kallah** – bride, also fiancée

**Kasher** – to make kosher

**Kashrus/t** – the body of laws and behaviors pertaining to kosher food

**Kavanah** – intent or feeling, often in regard to that which is invested in prayer

**Kavod or Kibud** – honor, respect

**Ketuvim** – Writings, referring to the third part of the Torah, from Psalms through Chronicles

**Kiddush** (also pronounced kiddish) – 1) the prayer said over wine, usually before a meal, sanctifying the Sabbath or a holiday

2) a light repast after synagogue prayer services

**Kiddush Hashem** (also pronounced Kiddish Hashem) – sanctification of G-d’s name

**Kineina Hara** (*Yiddish*: *Kine Ayin Hora*) – “Without the evil eye”

**Kippah** – skullcap (see also *yarmulke*)

**Klaf** – the parchment scroll in a mezuzah

**Klal Yisroel** –the Jews (literally: the community of Israel)

**Ko-a*ch*** (sometimes pronounced koy-a*ch*) – energy, strength

**Korban** – offering in the Temple (literally: something that draws a person close (*karov)* – to Hashem) often and inadequately translated as “sacrifice”

**Kosel** or **Koisel** or **Kotel** – the Western Wall or Wailing Wall in Jerusalem, currently the holiest Jewish site accessible to Jews (the Temple Mount is the holiest), famous for being the center of constant yearning and prayer (whenever access was possible) since the destruction of the Temple in 68 CE, (actually the remains of a retaining wall build by Herod the Great to enlarge the Temple Mount so that it could accommodate the glorious Second Temple)

**Kosher** – fit or appropriate, especially concerning food that Jews may eat

**Kotel** – the Western Wall or Wailing Wall in Jerusalem (see *kosel*)

**Kugel** – a baked dish of a main ingredient mixed with eggs, flour, and salt or sugar often served on Shabbos, e.g. noodle *kugel*, spinach *kugel*, apple *kugel*, challah *kugel*, potato *kugel* etc.

**Kup** (*Yiddish*) – head; the common diminutive is *keppie*

**L**

**Lag B’Omer** – the 33rd day of the Omer period between Passover and Shavuos/t, a day of celebration, traditionally picnics, bonfires, and first haircuts. It marks the end of the plague that killed 24,000 of Rabbi Akiva’s students and is the *yartzeit* of Rabbi Shimon bar Yo*ch*ai

**Lashon Hara** – 1) negative or forbidden (by Jewish law) speech in general

2) specific Jewish legal definition: negative speech about people, communities, the Jews, or Israel that is true (untrue speech is called “*motzie shem ra*”)

**L’chaim** – “To Life!” (often when drinking alcohol, used like the English “Cheers!”)

**Lehavdil** – “To differentiate!” meaning “Even though these were mentioned in the same breath, they are incomparable”

**Levi** –one who assisted the priests in the Temple service

**Lo aleynu** –“It shouldn’t happen to us,” “we shouldn’t know from it” (literally: “Not upon us”)

**M**

**Ma’aris ayin** – An action which seems to be inappropriate, when it is really appropriate

**Ma’asim tovim** – good deeds

**Mabul** – flood, usually referring to the flood in Noah’s time

**Madreigah** – level (literally: step)

**Maidel**, **maidela** (*Yiddish*) – girl, young lady

**Maidela*ch*** (*Yiddish*) – girls, young ladies

**Mal’a*ch*** – angel

**Ma’ariv** – the evening prayer service

**Maror** – bitter herbs eaten at the Passover Seder (celery, romaine lettuce, scallions, or parsley)

**Mashal *or* moshol** – parable

**Mashgiach** (pronounced Mashgee-a*ch*)–1) a person who oversees food preparation to ensure kosher dietary laws are kept

2) the spiritual counselor and coach of a yeshivah

**Matan Torah** – the event of the giving of the Torah (celebrated on the holiday of Shavuos/t)

**Mazel tov** – “Congratulations” (literally: good luck or good fortune)

**Me*ch*itzah** – the wall or curtain separating men and women during religious services and during dancing at a wedding or other celebration

**Me*ch*utonim** – parents of one’s child’s spouse

**Menorah** *–* the seven-branched candelabrum of the Holy Temple

2) colloquially: the eight-branched (nine branches including the *shamash*) Chanukah candelabrum which is also called a Ch*anukiah*

**Mentch** (*Yiddish*) – a well-mannered, decent person (literally: a human being)

**Mentchli*ch*** (*Yiddish*)– well-mannered or proper, extra nice behavior

**Mesorah** – tradition (literally: passed along or handed down)

**Mezuzah** – a small rectangular box attached to doors containing the *Shema* and related Scriptural passages written on parchment, in fulfillment of Deut. 6:9 (literally: a doorpost)

**Middah**, **middos/t** – character trait(s)

**Mikvah** – ritual pool for full body immersion, also used for new dishes and cookware (usually a separate, smaller one)

**Mil*ch*ig** or **mil*ch*ic** (*Yiddish*) – dairy, used in reference to kosher food laws (in which dairy and meat foods are prepared and eaten separately) to designate dairy foods and utensils that are used exclusively for dairy foods (the designation for meat is *fleishig*)

**Min*ch*ah** – 1) the afternoon prayer service

2) a flour offering in the Temple

**Minhag** – a custom, often a required custom

**Minyin** or **minyan** – a quorum of ten men over the age of thirteen (barmitzvah)

**Mishnah** – 1) the primary compellation of the Oral Law, edited in about 200 CE, comprising six books

2) a singular paragraph in any book of the Mishnah

**Mitzvah** – commandment; used colloquially but incorrectly as “good deed”

**Mitzvos/t** – plural of mitzvah

**Mizbeia*ch*** – altar upon which offerings are brought

**Motzei Shabbos** – Saturday night (lit. when Shabbat goes out)

**N**

**Nachas/t** – the feeling of pleasure or fulfillment when seeing something one worked on come to fruition, especially the pleasure in seeing one’s children or students do well
**Navi** – prophet

**Nebba*ch*** (*Yiddish*)– a pathetic or unsuccessful person, an awkward person, a loser; also used as an expression of compassion

**Nefesh** – 1) soul

2) animating force

3) lowest of the five levels of the human soul (the *neshamah*)

4) animal soul

**Neshamah** – human soul

**Nevi’im** – prophets, referring to either the group of people or the body of writing they produced, the second of the three sections of the ***T****a****N****a****Ch***

**Niggun** – tune, melody

**Netilas/t yadayim** – ritual washing of the hands using a container to pour water over the hand, done upon awaking from sleep, before eating bread, before prayer, after using the bathroom, and after visiting the cemetery. In Yiddish, the morning washing is called *negel vasser*.

**No-a*ch*** – Noah

**O**

**Olam Haba** – the next world

**Olam Hazeh** – this world

**Oy!** or **Oy vey!** (*Yiddish*) – “Oh my!” or “Woe!” or “Oh dear!”

**P**

**P’shat** – 1) an explanation; 2) the simple meaning

**Paro*ch*es/t** – curtain covering the Holy Ark in a synagogue, also the curtain covering the entrance to the Holy of Holies in the Holy Temple

**Paroh** or **Par-oh** – Pharaoh

**Parashah** – weekly Torah portion read on Shabbat

**Parve** (or pareve) – 1) neither meat nor dairy, used to designate food that may be eaten with either meat or dairy foods, such as fruit, vegetables, eggs, grain, oil, etc.

2) neutral

3) dull

**Passover** (Pesach) – the festival celebrating the Exodus from Egypt and the birth of the Jewish people

**Pasuk** – a biblical verse

**Paysadik** or **Paysa*ch*dik** (*Yiddish*) – fit for or related to Passover

**Perek** – chapter or section

**Pirkei Avos/t** – one of the six books of the *Mishnah*, dealing with proper behavior and ethics (also called Ethics of the Fathers)

**Purim** – the festival celebrating the salvation of the Jews in the times of the Persians (sixth century BCE) as recorded in the Book of Esther. Celebrations include hearing the Scroll of Esther being read, dressing in costumes, sending food gifts to friends, giving monetary gifts to the poor, and a festive meal that includes alcoholic drinks. It takes place in the early Spring.

**R**

**Rabbi** – 1) teacher

2) a leader of a synagogue

3) one who has learned enough Jewish law (a standard delineated quantity) to qualify to render a Jewish legal decision

**Rambam** – acronym for **Ra**bbi **M**oshe **b**en **M**aimon, also known as Maimonidies a philosopher, physician, and codifier of Jewish law (1135-1204, Spain, Morocco, Egypt)

**Rasha** –evil person

**Rashi** – acronym for **Ra**bbi **Sh**lomo **Y**itz*ch*aki, most widely printed and read grammarian and commentator on the Torah and *Talmud* (1040-1105, France)

**Rebbe** – one’s own rabbi or long term teacher, especially in *Ch*assidiccircles

**Rebbitzen** – 1) the wife of a Rabbi

2) an honorary title for a learned or pious woman

**Ribbono Shel Olam** – “Master of the Universe,” referring to G-d

**Rivka** – Rebecca (daughter of Lavan, wife of Isaac)

**Rivka Imeinu** – Our Matriarch Rivka

**Rosh *Ch*odesh** – the first day (or two) of the Jewish month (literally: the head of the month)

**Rosh Hashanah** *–* the Jewish New Year (literally: the head of the year)

**Rosh Yeshivah** – head or dean of a yeshivah(a highly respected person and position)

**Rov/Rav** – rabbi, especially one’s own, or a very respected rabbi

**Ru-a*ch*** – 1) spirit (even “team spirit”); 2) wind

**S**

**Sabba** (*Aramaic*) – Grandfather

**Savta** (also pronounced Safta) (*Aramaic*) – Grandmother

**Sarah Imeinu** – Our Matriarch Sarah

**Satan** – the force of challenge, difficulty and distraction from Torah goals, sometimes by means of deception, always in the service of G-d for the ultimate strengthening of mankind

**Sei*ch*el** (*Yiddish*) – intelligence, acumen

**Seder** – literally: order

1) any one of the six major divisions of the *Mishnah* and/or *Talmud*

2) the ceremonial Passover meal

3) a learning session

**Sedra** – weekly Torah portion

**Sefardi** or **Sefardic** – of or related to Jews living in, or who have roots in, Middle Eastern and Mediterranean countries (Iran, Iraq, Turkey, Greece, Syria, Spain, Morocco, Egypt etc.)

**Sefarim** – books

**Shabbaton** – an organized group Shabbos*/*Shabbatretreat or Shabbos*/*Shabbatweekend experience

**Shabbos/Shabbat** – Sabbath, the seventh day of the week, observed from sunset Friday until a little more than one hour past sunset on Saturday night (until three medium-sized stars can be seen)

**Shabbosdik** (*Yiddish*) – of or related to Shabbos

**Sha*cha*ris/t** – the morning prayer service

**Shema** – the central declaration of Jewish faith, “Hear O Israel, the L-rd our G-d, the L-rd is One.” Said morning, evening, before sleep, and when in mortal danger (G-d forbid) that it might be the last words uttered.

**Shep nachas** – deriving the feelings of pleasure or fulfillment when seeing something one worked on come to fruition, especially the pleasure in seeing one’s children or students do well

**Shiddu*ch*** –match (for marriage)

**Shivah** – the seven-day period of mourning following the death of a close relative (a parent, child, sibling or spouse); from the word *sheva*, meaning seven

**Shlep** (*Yiddish*)– to carry or pull, especially something heavy or burdensome

**Shmoneh Esrei** – the *Amidah* prayer, the central prayer of every Jewish prayer service, (literally: “Eighteen” referring to the original eighteen blessings that composed the weekday *Amidah* prayer)

**Shofar** – ram’s horn blown like a trumpet, especially on Rosh Hashanah

**Shtetel** – little village or town, used particularly when referring to prewar European Jewish towns or enclaves

**Shul** (*Yiddish*) – synagogue

**Sheilah** – question, especially a question of law or procedure asked of a rabbi or teacher

**Siddur** (also pronounced sidder) – prayer book

**Sim*ch*ah** – 1) happiness; 2) celebration

**Sukkah** – temporary booth or hut with a roof made of branches or bamboo, in which meals are eaten, and some families sleep, as part of the celebration of Sukkus/Sukkot

**Sukkus/Sukkot** – the weeklong “Festival of Booths” celebrated in the fall, four days after Yom Kippur, recognizing G-d’s embrace of the Jews during their journey through the desert, when they lived in booths and were protected by the metaphoric booth of the Divine Clouds of Glory.

**T**

**Tallis/t** – prayer shawl with ritual fringes, called tzitzisor tzitzit, attached

**Talmid** ***Ch*a*ch*am** – someone learned in Torah (literally: wise student)

**Talmud** – the encyclopedic written compellation of the Oral Law given to the Jews at Sinai along with the Torah, compiled from 350-500 CE in Babylon

**Talmud Torah** – 1) the concept of learning Torah

2) a supplemental Hebrew school

**Tana*ch*** – the entire Jewish Bible: Torah, Prophets (*Nevi’im)* and Writings (*Ketuvim)* (acronym for **T**orah*,* ***N****evi’im* and *Ketuvim*)

**Tefillin** (n.)–a pair of small leather boxes, one worn on the arm opposite the heart, and the second worn on the head above the hairline aligned with the space between the eyes, attached with leather straps, in fulfillment of the commandment “And you shall bind them as a sign upon your arm and as frontlets between your eyes” (Deut. 6:8). The boxes contain parchment scrolls inscribed with four Torah sections (Ex. 13:1-10; Ex. 13:11-16; Deut. 6:4-9; Deut. 11:13-21) and are usually only worn during the weekday morning prayer service

**Tehillim** – Psalms

**Temple** – 1) The central place of worship in ancient Jerusalem (the first Temple stood from 833- 423 BCE, the second Temple stood from 353 BCE- 68 CE, both were built on Mt. Moriah in Jerusalem)

2) colloquially: a Reform synagogue

**Teshuvah** (often pronounced as choova) – 1) return, referring to repentance

2) answer to a *sheilah* (Jewish legal query)

**Tisha b’Av**, **Tish’ah b’Av** – the 9th day of the Hebrew month of Av*,* a full day fast and a national day of mourning (1) the anniversary of the evil report of the spies (Numbers 13-14); (2) the destruction of both the First and Second Temples (in 423 BCE and 68 CE);(3) the fall of Beitar (in 135 CE); (4) the Spanish Expulsion (in 1492); and (5) the beginning of WWI.

**Torah** – (also pronounced Toe-rah) 1) the five books of Moses, the Bible

2) in a wider sense the entire body of Jewish religious literature

**Tractate** (*English*) – a subsection of one of the six orders of the Talmud. The Talmud has 62 tractates

**Treif**, **traif** – non-kosher food; also applied to non-kosher non-food items and ideas

**Trope** – the cantillation marks of the Torah and *Haftarah* indicating how the verses should be chanted

**Tzaddik** – righteous person

**Tzion** – Zion, also referring to Jerusalem

**Tzitzis/t** – the garment with fringes worn by men and boys, or the fringes themselves

**Tznius/t** – "modesty," the reduction of the focus on externality and physicality to facilitate focus on spirituality, part of which includes modesty of dress, speech, and behavior

**Tzuris** (*Yiddish*) – sorrows or hardships; singular: *tzurah*

**V**

**Vayikra** – Leviticus, the third of the Five Books of the Torah

**Viduy** – confession, specifically the confession of sins said on Yom Kippur and before death

**Y**

**Yacov**, **Ya’akov** – Jacob

**Yarmulka** (pronounced yamaka)(*Yiddish*) – skullcap, from the Aramaic *yora malka*, meaning fear/awe of majesty (G-d)

**Yartzeit** (*Yiddish*) – anniversary of a person’s death, literally: year time

**Yehoshua** – 1) Joshua; 2) the first book of the Prophets

**Yehudah** – Judah

**Yehudi** – Jew, or (adj.) Jewish

**Yerushalayim** – Jerusalem

**Yeshivah** – academy of Torah study

**Yeshivah** **ba*ch*ur** – literally: a yeshivah boy, usually a yeshivah student in the high school and early post high school age range

**Yetzer ra** or **yetzer hara** – evil inclination

**Yetzer tov** or **yetzer hatov** – good inclination

**Yid** (*Yiddish*) – Jew

**Yiddish** (*Yiddish*) – 1)Jewish

2) a Jewish language of Eastern European origin that is a mixture mostly of old German and Hebrew, with Hungarian, Russian, and Polish dialects

**Yiddishkeit** (*Yiddish*)– Judaism

**Yisrael** or **Yisroel** – Israel

**Yitzchak** or **Yitzchok** – Isaac

**Yetzias/t** **Mitzrayim** – the Exodus from Egypt

**Yizkor** – short prayer service said on Jewish holidays in memory of departed family members

**Yom Tov** (also pronounced Yontiff)(*Yiddish*) – holiday, specifically Passover*,* Shavuos/t or Succos/t

**Z**

**z”l** (pronounced zal)–(appellation after name of deceased), acronym of **Z**ei*ch*er **L**i’vra*ch*a, “the memory of this person should be a blessing,” or “of blessed memory,” sometimes indicated in English as “obm”

**Za-tzal** or **ztz”l** – (appellation after name of holy deceased), “the memory of this holy person should be a blessing” (acronym of ***Z****e*ich*er* ***Tzad****dik* ***L****i’vra*ch*a*)

**Zaydie** (*Yiddish*) – Grandpa (Grandma is *Bubbie*)

**Zohar** – the primary book of Kabbalah or Jewish Mysticism, often attributed to Rabbi Shimon bar Yo*ch*ai, in the second century CE

**Appendix G**

**Aliza’s Story**

In 1980, I went to Jerusalem for a year of study in a women’s seminary. My mother helped me plan what I would need for the year and pack two huge suitcases to hold it all. As we stuffed every nook and cranny, and my mother invoked the “packing angels” to help cram the tops down, I was aglow with anticipation. How exciting to go to a foreign land and study what fascinated me most. The trip was the culmination of a year of planning and the real beginning of my adulthood. I was sixteen and a half years old. Six months earlier, I had converted to Judaism after a year and a half of study and attendance at Neve Shalom, a Conservative synagogue in Portland, Oregon.

I was raised as a Protestant, in the tradition of my ancestors, but my parents put a liberal 1970’s spin on my family’s religious experience. We attended a “house church” regularly, with occasional visits to larger, more conventional churches. At age ten, I reflected on my knowledge and experience of Christianity and decided to reject it, proclaiming myself an atheist. Shortly thereafter, I felt the absence of “spirituality” and I wondered what my future basis for community would be if not religion. I still wasn’t interested in belief in G-d, so I decided to explore non-G-d-based spiritual systems to see if one would resonate with me.

Over the years, I actively researched and dabbled in many possibilities, and at fourteen, I had a spiritual experience which seemed to indicate the existence of a higher being. After that, I began to explore G-d-based spiritual systems. I was a freshman in a large inner city high school with a performing arts magnet. I began reading some of the books in the “religion” section of the school library. When I read the book *To Be a Jew*, by Rabbi Hayim Halevy Donin, I knew “This is it.” No one in my school was Jewish. None of my friends or any of the kids I knew was Jewish. I had so many questions, and I didn’t know who to ask. But I kept reading and wondering, and eventually, through a non-religious, non-Jewish Italian friend, I met a Jewish woman.

Bernice Lynch was a single mother living in the heart of the Jewish community in Portland’s Southwest Hills. She was patient with my questions and invited me for a Friday night dinner in her home. After dinner, we drove to the synagogue where she introduced me to the rabbi. I became good friends with Bernice, and eventually I went to her home every Friday after school. We cooked and chatted together, had Friday night dinner and attended services almost every week for a year and a half. During that time, I became very involved with the congregation. Since I was in my mid-teens, I was eligible to attend both the teen and adult education classes and events; I went to as many as I could. The more I learned, the more I loved it, and the more I wanted to know.

Now, as I boarded the plane, I was standing on the threshold of the biggest adventure of my life. I was thrilled to be able to go to a place where I could learn more and grow and develop on my own. I didn’t know a single person in Israel; no one was going to pick me up at the airport: I had the address of the school and instructions on how to find a shared taxi to Jerusalem. I barely read Hebrew, and I certainly didn’t speak it. But I wasn’t worried; I knew I’d find my way once I got there. I was eager and curious.

At the time, it didn’t occur to me to ask my mother how she felt about me leaving. It was my life after all, and my adventure. Now that I am the mother of many teens, I am amazed that my mother allowed me to go. Sometimes I think about what I would say if my daughter came to me and said, “Ma, could I go to Afghanistan for a year to study in a women’s religious seminary? I know it’s a war-torn country, and you don’t know anyone there, and I don’t speak the language, and I’ll be studying a religion you know little about, and they don’t have much of a phone system, so we’ll be out of touch for most of the time, but I really, really want to go...”

When I asked her later, she told me that it wasn’t about “letting” me go. I was so bullheaded that she knew I *was* going. I applied to the school, made the necessary connections, sold the Disney stock my grandparents gave me for “my education,” and earned the rest of the money myself. I was making it happen. She decided not to stand in the way.

At the airport, she waited with me at the gate until it was time for boarding. She reminded me that I didn’t have to stay for the whole year if I didn’t like it, and that it was okay to come home early. As I walked down the jetway, she called after me “Remember Honey, you can always come back…”

Inside, I knew I was never coming back.

The flight to Israel was exhausting. I flew from Portland to Seattle, from Seattle to London, and then from London to Tel Aviv. While I was in the air, the sun set, and rose, and set again. I wrote in my journal, read books, slept, and wondered what it would be like when I arrived. As the plane neared Lod airport, they played the traditional folk song *Havaynu Shalom Aleichem* over the loudspeakers, and the passengers joined along. When the plane touched down, everyone broke into applause. My eyes welled up with pride as I felt connected to the excitement of all those strangers, my new family, who were happy to be home. When I stepped off the plane into the night air, I was enveloped by the heavy, sweet smell of the nearby orange groves. I inhaled deeply, and I knew that I was home too.

I had decided not to tell anyone my age, or that I had converted. I didn’t want either fact to get in the way of new relationships. The average age of the other students was twenty; it was a “junior-year-abroad” program (the current year-after-high-school model was in its infancy at that time). Since I would have been a junior in high school that year, I just told people that I was a junior too.

After my first week in Israel, I still hadn’t called home, because I hadn’t yet figured out how to place an international phone call from the pay phone three blocks away. I have to admit that I wasn’t in the biggest rush; I was pretty busy with setting up my dorm room, meeting new people, and getting a feel for Jerusalem. Then I got a stomach virus and felt sick enough that I wanted to hear my mother’s voice. Finally, I learned the phone trick and called. Was my mom happy! It never occurred to me that she might be waiting for a call, or that she was worried about me.

I learned so much that year that I would need a whole book just to tell the stories. I began the year believing that “all religions were branches of the same tree” or “paths to the same destination,” and that once a person was headed toward a spiritual destination, they simply picked the path they liked best. I had spent several years looking, and finally chose Judaism. After many trials, it was definitely the path I liked best. Now that I was studying it in depth, it was much richer and vaster that I had realized. All the laws and the minutiae, all the layers and the meanings, all the relevance and the earnestness… As my understandings deepened, my attitudes changed. The more I learned, the more I loved it, and the more I became committed to its practice.

Before I left Portland, my rabbi informed me that it was possible that not everyone in Israel would respect a Conservative conversion as authentic, and that a second conversion might be required. I wasn’t sure how to bring the subject up after I arrived, but after a few months, I entrusted my secret to a dorm counselor after I learned that she had also converted. She directed me to Rabbi Chaim Tabasky, the *halachah* teacher, and he felt the question was serious enough to take to the head rabbinical court of Jerusalem.

He accompanied me to that appointment and translated for both me and the judges. The usual procedure for Orthodox conversions is a lengthy period of study, including about a year of practice-observance as a non-Jew, followed by a renunciation of all other faiths, an acceptance of the tenets and laws of Judaism, circumcision for a man, and, finally, immersion in a *mikvah*.

After hearing my story, the court ruled that I was required to immerse in a *mikvah* for a second time but that I did not have to wait to do this, as I was currently enrolled in a Jewish Studies program. Several days later, I met the three judges at the *mikvah*, where I re-renounced, re-accepted, and re-immersed. When I emerged from the water, they re-granted me the Jewish name that I had previously chosen, and I became a permanent member of the Jewish people according to all Jewish opinions.

I soon realized that one year of study would never be enough to give me the foundation that I now understood I needed. I also realized that I could never return to the social milieu of the performing arts high school that I had attended previously. What I had thought would be a yearlong adventure became a lifelong passion and yearning. I really wanted to stay, but how could I afford another year?

I found out about the Hadassah Youth Aliyah program that would help me with tuition and food. Hadassah is the American women’s Zionist organization that has been fundraising to help build the Jewish state in general and to provide high quality medical care in particular since before well before the state was established. Youth Aliyah is a Hadassah program designed to assist children in moving to and acclimating to Israel. I qualified for Youth Aliyah funds since I was not yet eighteen. With the help they offered me for my first year, which I didn’t know about before I arrived, I was able to save half of my tuition money. And since I had that half, and I would still be under eighteen and therefore still qualify for their help the following year, I had enough money to stay for a second year. Now I just needed to figure out how to get my parents to agree.

After eight months of study, and weekly letters, my mother and I talked on the phone for the second time. She called to ask if I’d like it if she visited. I was ecstatic. We planned for her to spend a week with me in Israel at the end of my school year and then to travel together in Europe for a few weeks on the way back to Portland. When I asked to stay a second year, she said that we could discuss it but that I had to “come home first.” These words sounded a little strange to me, because I really felt I had a new home in Jerusalem.

When the day of her arrival finally came, I took the bus to Ben Gurion airport to greet her. I waited behind the fence with the others who had come to greet loved ones, my eyes eagerly fixed on the door as each passenger exited. When my mother came though, we both broke into smiles and she came right over to hug me, not even waiting to fully exit the gated area. As we hugged with the fence between us, I felt clearly that there was another barrier between us as well. I knew that I had changed in ways I couldn’t explain to her, that were far outside her paradigm of life. I was saddened as I wondered if we’d ever hug again without the barrier being there.

We had a wonderful time in Israel. She got to meet my teachers and friends, attend a few of my classes, and see me and my new practices in the context of observant Jewish society. She had a chance to see others doing what I now did and refraining from what I now refrained from. We climbed Masada, and hiked in the Galilee, and spent lots of time talking about all the nuances, insights, and rules I was learning about.

From Haifa, we took a boat to Greece to begin our European trip with a visit to the family she had stayed with as an AFS exchange student when she was sixteen. It was in their house in Athens that I began to look weird. Kosher restaurants behind us, I lived on cheese and crackers that I had brought in great quantity from Israel. Our hosts felt badly that they couldn’t feed me, and my mother felt badly that I had so many special needs that caused our hosts such consternation. I was happy with cheese and crackers, and didn’t understand why they couldn’t just be happy that they didn’t have to worry about meals for me.

In England, we stayed at Youth Hostels, and I did my own cooking with a frying pan and a “wonder pot” that I brought along. It was nice, however, when we had a normal meal in one of London’s kosher restaurants. I stocked up in London for the trip to Scotland, where we would be spending a week at a “spiritual community” in Findhorn. In a way, this was my mother’s Jerusalem. While we were there, I was able to see her in the context of other earth-connected, new-age, growth-oriented spiritual seekers. I participated in the community activities to the best of my ability within the confines of my existing understanding of Jewish law, and we had a wonderful time together. It was on this trip that we made the transition from the childhood relationship of Mother and daughter to that of friends who are also mother and daughter.

After we returned to Portland, my mother got sucked into the whirlwind of her life, and I got a job as a camp counselor at the JCC. We hardly saw each other, and I was left to fend for myself as I negotiated being the only observant Jew in the camp and, of course, in my family. My father was less understanding than my mother, but quite tolerant. He didn’t take the time to learn about what I was doing or why it was important to me, but he did let me do what I wanted. In his house, I was one of a pack of weird teenagers. We all had our eccentricities; in his mind, mine was being Jewish. My siblings felt the same way. They had a kind of “whatever” attitude when it came to me. To them, Judaism was just another in my long line of offbeat spiritual explorations.

Fortunately for me, both my parents agreed that I was within the realm of normal, and that another year in Israel might be good for me. They understood that returning to my former high school was not in my best interests. I had the money for tuition arranged, and my job at the camp provided exactly enough to cover airfare. All I needed was some pocket money. At the end of the summer, all the men in the morning minyanwith which I *davened*, chipped in and gave me spending money as a going away gift. I was all set.

I think my parents partially hoped that another year in Israel would “get it out of my system.”  I had some hard times with my father that summer as we clashed over what Jewish law actually was, and what G-d really wanted of me. I didn’t yet know enough to be able to explain all the “whys” and “what’s” in language that he could understand—I just barely grasped them myself. But I did know that the details *are* important, that they really do matter, and that I wasn’t about to cede any of the spiritual ground that I felt I had conquered over the last year.

I didn’t have an Orthodox mentor in Portland to turn to, and there were very few Jewish books in English at the time. I really needed something to help me see a broader picture and something to offer my father to help him understand what I could not yet express. In the absence of that support and understanding, my father felt I was being unreasonable and intractable, and I yearned to leave Portland and all those who felt that way about me behind.

The following year of study in Israel filled many gaps in my knowledge base. I became much more fluent in Jewish practice and more confident in my ability to make decisions about the application of Jewish law for myself. I learned how to differentiate between situations that required stringency and situations in which leniency would be permitted, and I created relationships with mentors and rabbis to whom I could turn for guidance and advice.

I maintained a correspondence with both of my parents, my grandmother, and a close friend from high school, and I was able to share with them some of my adventures and evolving understandings. My father seemed to struggle with my “rigidity” only when he physically ran into it; while we lived apart, his letters were very amiable.

My grandmother had a hard time with my abandonment of the religious views she held to be so precious, but, as I was the only other “biblically religious” person in the family, she tried hard to appreciate the religious connection that we did share.

Susan Thompson, my high school friend, fretted that I was unnecessarily placing limits on myself and on my behavior. She was a very creative writer and regularly wrote short stories to entertain herself and her friends, and to give expression to her feelings. She sent me a parable about a beautiful and powerful bird who taught a bird with a broken wing how to fly. The two of them soared to the heights of the sky and enjoyed the beauty from above. Through the time they spent together, the broken bird healed and grew stronger and learned how to see things in a whole new way. Then, one day, the bird who had taught, who had led the exploration of freedom, decided to become owned, and voluntarily entered a cage. The now healed bird looked with sadness and disbelief as its mentor remained in the cage, confined and restricted. “You taught me how to fly,” she explained mournfully, “and now you are subject to so many rules. How could you do that to yourself?”

She embarked on a one-woman campaign to keep me from “going over the edge.” Of particular concern to her was my new sense of modesty and resultant style of dress. She knew that in Israel I received mail in a communal mailbox shared by all the girls in my school. So she regularly sent me post cards with immodest pictures on the front. Needless to say, I always tried to be the first to the mailbox.

Susan and I maintained our friendship over the years, and we saw each other when I visited Portland. Once, after we were both married, my father sent her to visit me in my home in NY, as a gift to us both. As my family grew and she saw me fully engaged in Judaism, and more educated, she grew to appreciate my commitment and how important it was to me. It took many years, but finally she realized that I wasn’t caged at all, but rather that I had learned how to channel my energies to achieve the spiritual heights I yearned for.

During my time in Israel, the feeling that I was “home” intensified. I had a circle of friends I treasured, I loved living on my own, and I enjoyed the study and growth. I felt it was important for Jews to live in the Land of Israel, and I wanted to stay forever. I planned on “making Aliyah,” becoming a permanent resident of Israel.

There were, however, a few things I needed to take care of first. Chief among them was that I hadn’t yet graduated high school. I had also begun learning how to drive but didn’t yet have a driver’s license, and I had heard that it was difficult and expensive to obtain one in Israel. As I aspired to be a midwife, and I did want to begin college at Hebrew University the following semester, I flew back to Portland to tie up loose ends.

I spent a week working on my driving and taking the tests for a GED (a high school equivalency exam). I passed my driver’s test, “graduated” high school and turned eighteen. My mother and my aunt bought me a sewing machine as a combination graduation/birthday gift. As I had done quite a bit of sewing already, the gift of a machine was both welcome as a source of income and a creative outlet. I returned to Israel a few weeks later with a sense of completion and ready to start a new phase in my life.

Several months later, I had completed the science preparatory program at Hebrew U and applied to nursing school. I didn’t pass the interview. When the interviewing panel asked me what I did during my army service, I told them I didn’t serve since I was religious (there is almost universal conscription in Israel, with exemptions for all religious females and for some religious males who are studying in yeshiva). Then they asked me what I did for National Service, a voluntary program that many modern-Orthodox girls do instead of the army. I replied that I hadn’t done that, since I wasn’t yet Israeli.

Frankly, it hadn’t occurred to me. I was eighteen, which, in my mind, was time to start college. When they asked why they should consider my application when there were plenty of applicants who had served the country, I did not have an answer. I left the interview thinking about whether and how I should “serve the country.”

After some research into Israeli society, National Service, and the Israeli Army, and quite a few discussions with friends and mentors, I decided to enlist in the army. I knew the army didn’t “need” me or my “service,” but since I had learned that there was a large division in Israeli society between the religious and non-religious population, partly because of the lack of service by the religious, I decided that maybe I could make an ever so slight contribution to closing that gap by being religious and serving in the army. My mother did not share my enthusiasm.

I explained that Nachal, the unit in which I had chosen to enlist, was more like the Peace Corps than the army. Its role was to establish settlements, and, after basic training, I would most likely be doing agricultural work. I chose the unit because it enlisted people in groups, and each member could choose to join a group with a particular social or religious framework. The main body of the army was a religious desert, and for a girl, it could be a nightmare. The group system of Nachal provided a much more protected environment; I would be enlisting with kids from religious families. It was 1982, and Israel was at war with Lebanon. But my mother couldn’t really see my point.

Israel is a very family-oriented society, and its soldiers’ lives revolve around visits home. In addition, a soldier’s family provides important support services, such as laundry, errand running and, of course, moral support. Since my parents did not live in the country, I had a special status as a “lone soldier.” I received a special housing allowance, in addition to my regular pay, as well as some additional time off to take care of the things an Israeli mother would usually do for her child serving in the army.

I shared a one-bedroom apartment in Jerusalem with a friend, and I came home for the Sabbath about every other week. As part of my service, I learned how to prune avocado trees, clean out irrigation lines, run the “communications room,” assemble and fire an M-16, Galil, and Uzi, cook large quantities, and speak better Hebrew. After “early service” and basic training, I was sent to a cooking course, and I became the head cook and ran the kitchen on our settlement. (That was in the days when “settlements” were good things, and “settlers” were heroes.) I also combined my pioneer past with fabric scraps donated to our settlement from a garment factory, and I set up a “sewing factory” that turned out small patchwork dolls and quilts.

I enjoyed cooking and sewing, as well as supervising, and I was happy to be able to use my talents as I “served the country” and became integrated into Israeli society. I loved living in Israel, and I had many friends who did as well. But I saw that many left after a few years due to various reasons. I resolved not to become “a statistic.” In thinking about why some of my friends left and how I could avoid their fate, I resolved not to date Americans or even someone who spoke English.

Meanwhile, my roommate and I made room for a third girl, who needed a reprieve from dorm life for the three months before her wedding. She was an American, getting married in Israel, who studied in the same place I did when I first arrived. When she moved in, she brought with her not only her possessions but also her friends and relatives, as they visited her with increasing frequency as the day of her wedding approached. One of the people who came from America for her wedding, and for a summer of yeshiva study, was her brother, Ephraim. He was sitting in our living room when I returned from my base, and she introduced us. Three weeks later, when he picked his parents up from the airport in Tel Aviv, he told them about the girl he had just met and planned to marry.

Before his sister’s wedding, just a few weeks later, we both knew for sure that we were a match. But he had to return to the States for his second year of law school, and I was still in the army. While we were apart, he wrote me a letter every day, and two on Fridays, since he couldn’t write on the Sabbath. We planned our lives together, and I did not want to wait until the end of my service to join him. With a lot of help, I got a “deferral of service” that allowed me to leave Israel for six months. Israeli law grants an automatic discharge to female soldiers who marry, and we hoped to wed before the six months were over. I enrolled in Hunter College for the semester, and I lived in the dorms at the 92nd St. “Y” in Manhattan. That way, I could be close to Ephraim, who lived with his parents on the Upper East Side.

During the winter break, when Ephraim and I both had off from school, we traveled to Oregon so that he could meet my family. He had always envisioned marrying a girl with European parents, probably someone who at least understood Yiddish, even if she wasn’t fluent in it herself. The saying goes: “Man plans and G-d laughs.” Now he was thinking of marrying a religious-Zionist, American-born Israeli soldier who was fluent in Hebrew. But nothing prepared him for the distance between his vision of European Jewish in-laws and my parents.

My parents loved him the minute he walked off the plane. After all, he had brought their daughter back to the States and was the reason she was no longer in the army. In addition, he was a nice guy, had good career prospects, and planned on living in America. How much better could he be?!

Ephraim, however, was much less comfortable. For my family, it wasn’t winter break, it was Christmas break. The houses were decorated with wreaths and holly, there were ornamented trees with presents beneath, many of the women were wearing snowflake and Santa jewelry, and there was a crèche on the mantel. Not having spent much time with my family over the past several years, it didn’t occur to me to “prep” them about the Jewish laws of not touching members of the opposite sex outside of one’s own family. Ephraim was warmly hugged with every introduction.

He and I shopped and cooked for ourselves as a team, and we ate our kosher food at the table with the family, as Ephraim tried to absorb that his future in-laws enjoyed pork, shellfish, and meat casseroles gooey with cheddar cheese melted all over them. And that they drank eggnog and Wild Turkey and beer, and even that they preferred Miracle Whip to “real” mayonnaise, and they put it on sandwiches, sometimes to the exclusion of mustard. (“Jewish” sandwiches, I was taught, are meat and mustard on rye, that’s it).

The food, while a strong indicator, was just the tip of the iceberg. Even though Ephraim had some non-Jewish friends in college, thinking of marrying into such a family was a petrifying experience.

On Christmas Day, my father and stepmother rented a living room at the Marriot Hotel as a family gathering place. They stocked the room with a cooler of beer, other drinks, and a selection of snack foods. Between the two of them, there were six children and an assortment of significant others. Renting a room gave all the teens access to the pool, weight room, arcade, and other hotel-based entertainment. Kids came in and out of the room all day long, as the adults sat together and chatted. Ephraim, of course, was the only one wearing a yarmulke, and, according to his recollection, he felt so uncomfortable that he wished he could just melt into the fabric of the couch on which we sat.

In the middle of the day, we managed to “escape” for a while by volunteering to pick my grandmother up from the airport. In those pre-9/11 days, you could go all the way to the gate to greet travelers. She came down the jetway in a green and red plaid suit with a little sprig of holly pinned to her lapel. Ephraim, whose impression of grandparents was formed by his own four immigrant, Yiddish-speaking grandparents, was again “surprised” when she spoke in unaccented fluent English.

Returning to the hotel room with Grandma in tow, we continued the day of discomfort. Even I, who had been raised in this family, felt significantly out of place. To make matters worse, one of my stepbrothers, in immutable brotherly fashion, had noticed that there was a B’nai B’rith conference in the hotel, and that Ephraim and I were ripe for teasing, so he bounded into the room and announced, “Hey, there’s a whole convention of hook-noses downstairs!”

Somehow, we made it through the visit with my parents and the rest of the family, and we returned to New York with their blessing and encouragement for a future wedding. Now that he had met my family, I was ready to get engaged right away and marry as soon as possible.

Ephraim’s parents, however, had different ideas about when we should get married. They felt strongly that we should wait until we could support ourselves. They insisted that we wait until Ephraim graduated law school, a year and a half later. It was a difficult decree, but Ephraim took his obligation to respect his parents seriously. So I returned to Israel and to the army at the end of my leave.

After several more months and a lot more help, I was able to get another deferral of service. I returned to America, to college and, most importantly, to Ephraim. We got engaged shortly thereafter and set our wedding date for the first Sunday after the bar exam, which was just before the end of my deferral.

My parents had never been to an Orthodox Jewish wedding. Their wedding had been held in a church, with a reception in the social hall at which they served wedding cake, tea, and mints. I had been to many Jewish weddings in both Israel and America, but try as I might, I could not convey to them what I wanted or what they should expect. It was just too far beyond their experience. And since they lived so far away from New York, they couldn’t go see a sample or do much to help me plan. They gave us their budget. Ephraim’s parents gave us their budget. It was up to us to plan the wedding ourselves.

In the tradition of my family, I made my wedding dress with the help of my mother. My mother and my Aunt Marzenda made my veil, using scraps of lace left over from my mother’s wedding dress. The two of them, as well as my sister, stepmother, and grandmother searched high and low for modest dresses appropriate for a summer wedding, my father reluctantly agreed to wear a suit *and* a tie, and all of us were beautifully attired when the big day finally arrived.

The wedding was traditional, joyous, and exuberant. The food was plentiful, and the alcohol was minimal. The men and women danced in their own circles, separated by a row of plants, and many friends performed tricks and antics to delight us. My parents and their friends had never seen anything like it. Afterward, one of my parents’ friends wondered aloud, “How could Hitler have tried to destroy such a joyous people?” When my mother told me about this comment, I was thankful that our wedding helped change her perspective of who the Jewish people are.

After the festive week following our wedding, we went to Russia on a Mission in order to visit and offer moral support to the Soviet Jews who were trapped there. With Ephraim’s degree in law and the differences between Israeli law and American law, making *Aliyah* was not such a practical consideration. And, with all that education behind him, as well as a new wife beside him, the financial considerations of studying in *kollel* for a year or two, to start off the marriage deeply immersed in Jewish study, was out of the question. But we did want to start off our marriage with a mitzvah. So if it wasn’t going to be Aliyah or *kollel*, it had to be something else important.

We used all of our wedding money to buy tickets and items to leave behind for the Jews whom we would meet on our trip. We packed our bags full of food to eat while we were there (there was little food, let alone kosher food available in Russia at the time), clothes to wear and leave behind (we were told that the Soviet Jews who had applied to leave the country and were denied exit were poverty stricken and unable to buy basic necessities for their families), and Jewish items like tefillin, mezuzahs, books, a shofar, washing cups etc. We had a story for each item as we were told that only items for personal use were allowed into the country; nothing may legally be left behind. We knew that certain things were in demand, so we figured out a way to make each of those items be one that we would “personally need” during our trip.

There are so many stories and experiences that we had over the two weeks we were there. We met many Jews: survivors, strugglers, impassioned, imprisoned, impoverished. We saw pieces of their lives, heard their stories, and brought them news from the West and strength from the heart. We shared our possessions and our hopes and promised to work hard on their behalf when we returned.

The trip was scary, eye opening, and transformational. I never appreciated freedom until I went to Russia. I never appreciated the rule of law, the ability to live where I choose, the ability to speak unhindered, quality control, airplane safety, abundance of food, truth in the media, or the great and balancing moral force that is America until I saw a glimpse of life in Russia. When we returned, I wanted to kiss the ground of American soil.

I had been active on behalf of Russian Jewry before and now redoubled my efforts to work toward the release of Jews from Russia. I was president of the Jewish Student Union and participated actively in the Hillel student council. I used these roles to coordinate campus campaigns and activities, to organize a trip to Washington to lobby congress, and to get students in my Hillel and Jewish Student Union involved.

Meanwhile, my tummy grew as I finished my last year of college. Elisheva, our first child, was born the same day as my graduation from Hunter College. I wasn’t planning on attending the ceremony anyway. I waited for my diploma to arrive in the mail: Alisa Beach Bulow, Bachelor of Arts, Summa Cum Laude, Special Honors Curriculum, May 29, 1986.

We lived in Long Beach, Long Island, in a two-bedroom apartment that once belonged to Ephraim’s grandparents and now belonged to his parents. Ephraim’s mother had always wanted to use it as a summer apartment as it overlooked the boardwalk and the ocean, so she fixed it up for herself and then graciously let us live there first.

Ephraim commuted to the city to work in a law firm, and I stayed home with the growing family. I watched the sunrise and sunset over the water as I nursed, cooked, and picked up toys. A walk-in closet in our front hall became my sewing room. I made clothes for the kids, gifts for friends, and a little extra money on the side with custom garments and wedding clothes. My Jewish learning continued through books and hundreds of tapes. I used to sew into the night, after the kids were asleep and before Ephraim came home (and sometimes after he went to sleep), as I listened to tape after tape.

I also attended live classes when I could. I was part of a small women’s study group taught by Rebbitzen Renee Frankel and went to occasional lectures in the Five Towns, about twenty minutes away from our home. Then Rebbitzen Tehila Jaeger from Far Rockaway began teaching in Long Beach. I went to her class every week, and a whole new world opened up for me. It was through her teaching that I saw a paradigm of feminine text-based learning. My previous formal learning had been much more in the masculine model. I loved it, but I didn’t always get along with it. This type of feminine learning resonated in a very different way; I loved it even more. As Rebbitzen Jaeger did not drive, and as I wanted the opportunity to “serve a *talmid* *chacham,*” I volunteered to pick her up and take her home from the class each week. We developed a very nice friend and mentor-ship through those rides.

I put a lot of effort into creating the right environment for building a good Jewish home and a healthy Jewish family. As my learning continued, my understanding of what that meant evolved. I was raised in a very conscientious home, where ideas were carefully imparted, community service was inculcated, impact on the world was calculated, and television was limited, so translating much of that into Jewish expression came fairly naturally. And there was more. Learning the concepts was one thing; living them was another. It took a lot of practice. My teachers, my mother, and my friends were there to discuss the process with me and help me take the steps I needed at the necessary times. My husband was there too, but he was oh so busy at work and ever sleep deprived. I learned to rely on him for big picture consultations and on the others for the day to day tweaking.

In the summer of 1991, we had four children in our two-bedroom apartment, a five-year-old, an almost four-year-old, and eleven-month-old twins. My friend, Aviva Freifeld, invited us to spend a week in the Catskills in a bungalow colony next door to her. It was a fortuitous invitation as it took me to a whole new level in my observance and practice.

That week was so different than my life in Long Beach. There was only one phone booth for the entire upper part of the colony, and it was before cell phones, so there was very little phone conversation for anyone. If that phone rang, one of the passing kids would answer it and go find the adult being called. I appreciated the quiet of not having a phone readily available.

The colony was gated, so my older kids could run free, and the twins were such an attraction that I literally had a line of “tweenage” girls waiting turns to take them for walks and to the playground. There was a pool with three separate sessions a day for each gender, a playground, and a teen-led summer camp. My kids were in heaven, and I was free to chat with the other women. Many women did not have husbands there during the week, as I did not. Ephraim stayed home to work and joined us only for Shabbos. In that bungalow colony, Shor Yashuv, many of the women enjoyed learning and proactively working on themselves to lead a meaningful life. Conversations with them were not idle chatter. I was also in heaven.

I decided to stay for a while longer, it was so much easier to care for the four children there, with the wide open spaces and dozens of other children, than it was in our now-too-small-for-us apartment on the sixth floor in Long Beach, with retirees for neighbors.

The following year, we moved into a house with a playroom and a yard. It was much easier to handle the children, but that summer we went back to the bungalows again. We rented our house to an observant Jewish family from the Upper West Side of Manhattan and spent less than half the rental on a bungalow and summer full of fun for the kids. Ephraim stayed with his parents in Manhattan and joined us for Shabbos. We did this for six summers, earning a year’s tuition for a child, while at the same time absorbing the country air and strong Jewish values. Those summers really helped shape our family. I saw many Torah families up close, I hired a tutor for myself, and we learned to speak *Yeshivish*, a blended Jewish-English. The kids did not have to encounter conflicts between having fun and dressing and acting in very observant Jewish ways all summer long.

My mother, G-d bless her, came with us for three of those summers. She became known to all as Bubbe Bulow as she traipsed to and from the pool with her granddaughters in tow, knees and elbows covered. She joined in the daily Guard Your Tongue classes, attended the rabbi’s class for women on Shabbos afternoon, and even covered her hair the first year (it was something she took upon herself, I assured her that it was not necessary for her to do so the following years). She helped take care of our pet menagerie, took the kids camping, and let them play games on her new-fangled laptop computer. Occasionally she made a secret evening foray into the country town nearby to watch a movie, just to keep a sense of her own identity, but by day, she was Super Bubbe, the bungalow version of Grandma Oralee.

Because of our time “in the country” (that’s the *Yeshivish* way to say “in the Catskills”), we chose to send our children to more right wing schools than was our original intention. Our daughters went to Tapeinu (which has now changed into Bnos Bais Yaakov), and our boys went to Darchei Torah and later to South Shore Yeshiva. Between the summers and the schools, our family moved slowly into the *chareidi,* intensely Orthodox, world. But still, we had a foot in the “modern” world as well: Ephraim still worked in Manhattan, we still lived in Long Beach (where few *chareidi* Jews lived), we attended the Sephardic synagogue, and had a very eclectic circle of friends.

Our sixth baby was born the week after I turned thirty. As was her custom, my mother came for a month to help take care of me and the family. Her help was always essential and appreciated, but this time she was able to do fewer dishes and read more stories aloud, as we now had live-in help. My grandmother had gifted us with a year of full-time help after our fifth child was born, sixteen months prior. With so many kids, and another on the way, I didn’t want to give that up. We covered the cost for the second year, but it was not within our budget to continue. So I began babysitting for two kids, a boy the same age as my youngest, and his younger sister. Children of a single mother, they were dropped off at 7:00 am and picked up at 6:00 pm. They were part of our family for the next six years until we moved away.

During all this time, and buoyed by having someone else to do the dishes and the laundry, I continued my learning. I attended classes regularly, continued to listen to tape after tape, and even had a few one-on-one students. After several years, Rebbitzen Jaeger stopped teaching in Long Beach, so I began to go to the Five Towns to hear her and to hear Rebbitzen Debbie Greenblatt.

Eventually, Frada Passik asked me to give a class in Long Beach. I felt very reticent, given the knowledge and the talent of the *rebbitzens* across the bridge, but she pushed hard, insisting that women in Long Beach needed a class of their own and not everyone who needed it would be willing to drive to learn. And so I began a living room class that continued for seven years, until we moved.

I had adult students of all ages, from across the spectrum of observance, and with widely varied levels of background. Through the years, we studied the laws of proper speech, the weekly Torah portion, prayer, Psalms, and Jewish philosophy. It was a challenge to prepare, but I learned so much from the preparation and enjoyed the teaching so much that it was worth the lost hours of sleep.

Throughout these years, my interest in *kiruv*, drawing other Jews close to Judaism, was strong and growing. From the beginning of our marriage, we often had guests at our Shabbos table, but when we moved into our house, we stepped up our hosting. We invited guests regularly, and every week, after services on Shabbos morning, we took home those without a place or plans for Shabbos lunch. I prepared for about twenty, as we never knew how many guests we would have, but I wished for a larger dining room so that we could host more.

In those pre-Internet days, I subscribed to several Jewish newspapers from across the spectrum. I read the Jerusalem Post, The Jewish Week, and the Yated Ne’eman. I liked to see how they covered the same issue, as well as which issues each one focused on. Year after year, I wistfully read the ads in the Yated for the AJOP convention. I really wanted to go… At that time, AJOP stood for Association of Jewish Outreach Professionals. I wasn’t a professional yet, but I sure wanted to be. And anyway, how could I go? I had young children, it was in Baltimore, and my husband worked long hours every day… But I wanted to go so badly that one year we just worked it out. After that, the AJOP convention became a regular part of my life. It was my annual rest and rejuvenation time. I went alone, I learned a lot, and I came home with renewed perspective on our family and life.

Still, I yearned to go back to Israel to learn even more. Sometimes I had vivid dreams of flying back to Israel, moving into a dorm, and attending classes in a seminary. When I awoke, I really felt like I had been there for a little while. I looked forward to those dreams as the years ticked by without an opportunity to return.

One year, I saw an ad for a one-week *kiruv* training seminar for women from outside of Israel, hosted on the Neve campus in Jerusalem. I was so excited about going. I hadn’t been in Israel for fourteen years, and this was a special, self-contained women’s learning experience designed, I felt, just for me. I told my mother and my husband of my dream, and they pooled their efforts to make it come true. My husband agreed to be lonely and paid for the ticket, and my mother came for the ten days of the conference and ran the house and cared for eight children, including the children for whom I babysat!

I returned full of ideas and raring to go. It was the semester before all of the kids were in school, so I wasn’t ready to work outside of the home, but I was thinking about what I might do the following year. Meanwhile, I continued my volunteer work for Partners in Torah, an organization that matches curious Jews with more knowledgeable Jews to learn together for an hour a week (1-800-STUDY-4-2 or www.partnersintorah.org). I had been mentoring a woman for several years and before I left for Israel, I began to volunteer for their new telephone mentoring program as well.

After about six months as a telephone mentor, I got my first follow-up call asking me how it was going. I answered that all was going well, largely because I was now experienced and had been well coached in my early in-person mentoring years by Rabbi Eytan Kobre, but that for other new mentors, it probably wasn’t such a good idea to make the first follow-up call after six months. The woman on the phone acknowledged that earlier follow-up would likely be better, but that they were understaffed and it wasn’t really possible.

Perfect: a *kiruv* organization that needed more staff… and a lay *kiruv* person yearning to be a professional. I mentioned that I had just returned from a *kiruv* training seminar in Israel and that I’d be looking for just such a job in the fall. She asked me to come in to meet Rabbi Eli Gewirtz, head of Partners in Torah, for an interview. After we fleshed out the idea together, he hired me to begin working from home immediately.

I had a dedicated phone line installed and began to follow up with, guide, and advise telephone mentors. If I didn’t know an answer, I researched it and got back to them. I’d help the mentor put words together to explain what they already knew, and I’d call Rabbi Dovid Cohen to ask advice and guidance on the more difficult or legally based questions. And I tried to read as many books as possible so that I could properly advise mentors on which book would be best to use for study in each situation.

After the summer, when all the kids were in school for a full day, I began to commute into Manhattan three days a week. I was the Study Coordinator, helping mentors and students access resources, as well as continuing to answer questions and provide guidance for telephone mentors. I loved the work, but my kids didn’t love arriving home to a housekeeper three days a week, even if I was there in time to make dinner. I had some serious challenges with a few of my children, and they became more acute after I began commuting. So, after accepting the wise counsel of my mother, I pulled back, continuing only what I could do from home.

In 2001, the AJOP conference was only on Sunday and Monday, not preceded by Shabbos as it sometimes was. (By this time, AJOP had switched its name to the Association of Jewish Outreach Programs to be more inclusive, and to reflect their value that you need not be a professional to do *kiruv*.) I, however, did not want to miss half a day by traveling on Sunday morning from NY. So I went for Shabbos anyway, staying alone in the hotel and eating my three Shabbos meals in the quiet. In that pre-convention stillness, I had the chance to read and *daven* and reflect on my life and family. In that time, I realized that while I was asking appropriate questions about the practical applications of Jewish law, I was not asking enough questions about how I should be guiding the individuals under my care who were also under my roof.

After seeking the guidance of Rabbi Pinchas Jung, who at the time also worked for Partners in Torah, I realized that we needed to move away from Long Beach. I had been thinking about moving for quite some time, as I had wanted to move physically as well as philosophically more into the *chareidi* world. But as we had some children with learning challenges who were in special programs in the area, and as my husband was not willing to live in Far Rockaway, the nearby *chareidi* community, I hadn’t envisioned a productive move in the immediate area.

This time it was different, however. Rabbi Jung advised that we look outside the NY and the tri state area all together. And the learning challenges were smoothing out; maybe the kids could make it in a regular program. It seemed like a good time to really look for a community that would be good for us, as the kids moved into the teen years. I discussed it with Ephraim; he agreed that I could look. He and I talked about communities, our desires, our requirements, locations etc. Finally, we agreed that I should take a few kids with me over the February break (many Jewish schools break for a week in February since there is only a two- or three-day break in December for Chanukah) and check out Denver, Colorado. The kids and I liked what we saw.

After a few weeks, Ephraim and I went on a more serious pilot trip. He saw the wisdom of a preemptive change for the health of the family and felt that Denver could be the right place. On the advice of Rabbi Yaakov Meyer, who we met when we visited Denver, we called Rabbi Shmuel Kaminetsky, one of the wisest and most authoritative rabbis in America, to ask his advice on the move. A few months later, we were packing a truck and saying goodbye to dear friends.

On the way to Denver, someone called from the Denver Community Kollel, wondering if I would be willing to speak at their women’s mini-conference. Even though we were in the middle of a move, with my books packed and no quiet place to sit and prepare, I accepted. I wanted to enter Denver as a teacher, and I felt this was an important opportunity.

The talk went well, and I hoped for a continued partnership with the Kollel, but I wanted a job in *kiruv* and they didn’t have one for me. Rabbi Aharon Yisroel Wasserman, however, of The Jewish Experience, the community services branch of Yeshiva Toras Chaim, was working on expanding, and he needed help. He didn’t have a specific position that he was looking to fill, but after we talked, we figured out some ways in which I could contribute on a part-time basis.

And so began a mutually fruitful partnership with The Jewish Experience. I helped the organization grow, as it helped me grow into an even stronger teacher. I gave talks and taught short series by night and wrote letters, organized programs, met with people, and worked side by side with Rabbi Wasserman by day.  The job grew as I did; eventually I became the Program Director. I learned so much, and I feel like I gave a lot too, but my favorite part of the job was the thinking and the teaching.

I began teaching through *chavurahs*, small groups of ten to twenty friends who get together on a monthly basis for Jewish learning and fellowship. The Jewish Experience maintained several *chavurahs,* and I began teaching for most of them on a semi-regular basis. I did a lot of research for these presentations and grew both my knowledge bank and my ability to present. As I got better at it, word spread, and eventually I taught for *chavurahs* connected to different organizations all over the city.

Typically, I would send the organizer a list of suggested speaking topics from which to choose, telling them that they could combine topics or make up one of their own. One time the response came back, “I am interested in ‘The Roots of Conflict in the Middle East,’ but my wife wants to hear about ‘What Happens after We Die,’ do you think you could combine those two?”

“Of course!” I responded bravely, not quite sure how I’d manage it, but eager to please nonetheless. It worked out beautifully in the end. I did several hours of research on the Muslim concept of the afterlife and then presented the group with a comparison of the Jewish view and the Muslim view of “what happens after we die” followed by a discussion of how that impacts the politics and “the roots of conflict in the Middle East.”

From one-time *chavurah* presentations, I moved to giving short series of presentations. The first one, a four-part series entitled *The Differences between Judaism and Christianity*, I team taught with Mordechai Mishory. A learned, widely traveled, and broadly experienced man, he and I have worked together a lot over the years. He now has his doctorate in psychology, and I refer many people to work with him.

From there, my teaching really took off. I began teaching on an every week basis for Lishmah Women’s Torah Center, and I have an ongoing solid core of students there. Lishmah’s goal is to give women both knowledge and text-based learning skills. Over the years, I have taught that group several texts: *The Art of Jewish Prayer*,*The Way of G-d* (*Derech Hashem*), *Tomer Devorah*, *Pirkei Avot*, and a several year exploration of *Sefer HaChinuch*or*The Book of* [*Mitzvah*] *Education.* In addition to that regular class, I have taught many short and long term series for The Jewish Experience, as well as for adult education programs in several synagogues and other institutions, including the Melton Mini-School.

I’ve always been a little bit organizationally challenged, and Rabbi Wasserman was a patient boss, keeping me on track and seeing to it that I finished what I started. I got better at juggling and bringing many things to fruition, but I found it took a toll both mentally and on my ability to juggle and finish tasks at home. I wanted a job that was more about brainstorming, teaching, and inspiring and less about organizing and making programs and projects happen.

I decided to stop working for The Jewish Experience and to try to concoct a way to work mainly in my areas of strength. I came up with several different paradigms, and I pitched them to a few of the different organizations I had taught for in the past. There were lots of meetings and lots of interest, and I got so close to a few, but for various reasons, none of them ultimately panned out. I was disappointed then, but now, in hindsight, I see the hand of the Master Organizer taking care of me.

A year later, I got a call from Chaya Levine, a woman I had met and made a nice connection with at AJOP several years earlier. She is the director of all women’s programs for Ner LeElef, an Israel based leadership training initiative that trains couples on a part-time basis to serve in roles of *kiruv,* community rabbinics, and Jewish education in the Diaspora. It has training programs in five different languages and helps place couples in the workforce all over the world. She was looking for a woman to follow up with and offer support, continued inspiration, and education to the North American female placements, and she wondered if I might be available for the job.

I was thrilled and thankful, especially as I could not have designed a better job for myself. This was primarily thinking, brainstorming, inspiring, coaching, and caring, with some, but not overwhelming amounts of, organizing and detail management. It included traveling to meet women in their communities, public speaking, teaching, hand-holding, and observing life in the field so that I could a) support women (and by extension, their husbands) in their work, and b) report back to Ner LeElef and its donors about what is working and what needs improvement or rethinking.

I still work for Ner LeElef and The Jewish Experience, and lecture both locally and internationally. I mentor women who work in Jewish adult education and outreach, as well as providing consulting for Jewish outreach organizations across the country. I still volunteer for Partners in Torah. (To see more biographical information about Aliza as well as articles on various subjects, and to hear Aliza’s classes, go to [www.abiteoftorah.com](http://www.abiteoftorah.com).) I am still raising a family, now of older teens and young adults, three of whom are married. I have several adorable grandchildren, may there be more. I still cook a lot for Shabbos and have many guests. I am still working to bridge Denver Jewish communities, and help them grow. I am still working on my own personal growth and even on becoming more organized. And I love and appreciate my mom more than ever. I would never be what and where I am without her.

Appendix H

Oralee’s Story

 “Grandma Oralee, are you Jewish?” Elisheva surprised me with her quizzical, upturned face. She was four, her brother, Avi, was three, and their mother had just had twins. I was in New York, taking care of these grandchildren and my daughter. I had just explained to Elisheva that her mother, Aliza, had been my little baby years ago.

“No, Elisheva, I’m not.”

“Well, did you start out being Jewish?”

“No, I didn’t.”

Now her hands went to her hips, her face was even more puzzled. “Well then, how did you have a Jewish baby?”

What a great question, I thought. A smile erupted on my face as I looked down at her.

“Well, Elisheva, that is a mystery to me!”

Aliza was fourteen when she discovered the Judaism of her soul. I was forty. Over the ensuing years, I have been a loving witness to her compelling journey. I saw her face light up the entire synagogue during her bat mitzvah. I followed her to Israel to find out what “making Aliyah” meant. I crumpled when she called to say she was joining the Israeli Army. I was the mother of the bride at an Orthodox Jewish wedding, and I had never been to one. I attended the *bris* of three babies, as well as three baby-naming ceremonies, and six bar and bat mitzvah celebrations for her children. I know how to be a “*Shabbos* *goy*,” who is someone not Jewish who does things on the Sabbath which could be helpful to others. I attend services at their shul, and participate in their holidays. I have learned how to bake challah, while my grandchildren still correct my pronunciation of the *“ch.”* I can now stop my impulse to shake hands when I meet a rabbi – to honor no touching of the opposite sex. I take a spoon from the dairydrawer when I want yogurt, and a fork from the meat drawer for hamburgers.

I set up a kosher corner in my kitchen when grandchildren visit. I supervise their observance of the Sabbath and know how to travel across country keeping them in kosher meals. I marvel at my grandchildren’s ability to read and speak Hebrew, although all their attempts to teach me seem hopeless. I understand some of the Hebrew words in *shiurum*, lectures. I love learning from my daughter as she teaches. I spent three summers in an Orthodox Jewish bungalow colony in the Catskills, New York, where the children called me “Bubbe Bulow.” I feel privileged to have an inside experience of the Orthodox lifestyle through my daughter’s family and their friends, who trust their children to my care and have graciously accepted me in their midst whenever I visit.

My life is so enriched by the experience of their life that I want you, our readers, to enjoy that too. I hope this book can give you a taste of the possibilities that await, as you embrace your children and their journey. I hope it will give you insight, despite the difficulties which will arise, and open you to the joys of growing together.

 \* \* \* \* \* \*

When Elisheva was eighteen, she spent a week with me in Oregon during the summer between her high school graduation and going to seminary in Jerusalem. She and I were driving to Seattle to stay with the family of one of her school friends for the Sabbath when she asked me, “Why are you so supportive of our family?”

“Well, Elisheva, that is an interesting question. Let me ponder that,” I answered.

This was a year I had been especially supportive. Her youngest sister, Aviva, lived with me for the first half of the school year. She was having a difficult time in her life and school, so I invited her to stay with me while we tried homeschooling. I rearranged my home to create a bedroom for us and set up a kosher kitchen within my kitchen. I made connections with the Orthodox and Lubavitcher communities in Portland so we could get help with her Hebrew studies. She did not want it. Aliza phoned her every week to give her Hebrew studies. We took woodcarving and knitting classes, reviewed lessons in textbooks, spent much time at the library, and laughed a lot at bedtime. In January, she was ready to return to her Hebrew day school in Denver.

Her other sister, Sahra, spent her winter break with me. We had a wonderful vacation time together. We tried out new ice skates, with our ankles bending toward the rink – oops. We drove to the Oregon coast to visit her grandfather and step-grandmother, and played games with her Aunt Shana.

When her youngest brother, Doni, needed “time in the wilderness,” he lived with me for a month. We set up a tent in the woods and collected kindling for the fireplace, where we roasted kosher hot dogs and then marshmallows. He went fishing with friends, and we gutted and fried the trout he caught.

I remembered times when I felt my capacity for doing all of this had little to do with me; it was possible through the grace of G-d. Something was happening for us that was bigger than I could have orchestrated on my own. The rewards in my life were larger than I could have imagined. There had been painful times when my capacity was stretched to my edges, and sometimes beyond. Compassion, acceptance, and sometimes just plain resignation grew out of these times. I often discovered I was able to offer insights and help to other people because of my own experiences.

Certainly, my loving connection with Aliza has been a big factor in my being supportive to her and her family. My two girls are great joys for me. Having them as adults in my life has been a special pleasure. They each contribute in very different ways to my joys, stretches, and growth. I continue to learn from each of them, their families, and their interests. Inherent in my motherhood is the commitment of being available to participate in each of their lives and of supporting them in the ways that I am able. While some parents can contribute financially to their children, that has not been an option for me. Perhaps that heightens my commitment to contribute with energy, interest, time, creativity, and service.

I am moved by people who are deeply committed to their spiritual life and to their religious practice. I appreciate worship in many forms. I want to be with people who are living their religion or spirituality, and who are growing in their knowledge and exploring the questions raised.

“Elisheva, my answer to your question could take a long time. I would sum it up this way: Why am I so supportive? It is because of G-d’s love for all of us, my love for my children and grandchildren, and the awe I feel in the presence of those living from the depth of their souls – that certainly includes your family, friends, and religious community.”

In the depths of Judaism, there is such a force of hope and joy. My heart aches for those who stand at this wellspring and yet are parched because they know so little of it, or are caught in the briars that grow from critical judgment about their fellow Jews. If only they knew that their own heritage could quench their driving thirst. This is the realization I have touched on occasions during these years of being a loving witness to my daughter’s journey inward toward the core of Judaism. Touching it buoys my spirit and my resolve to be the support that prompted Elisheva’s question.

**What Markers in My Own Upbringing Laid the Foundation for Where I Am Now?**

We do stand on the shoulders of the generations before us. In my case, I come from a long line of people who left their home for new ground. On my father’s side, David Stiles left England for the colonies. He fought in the Revolutionary War, and after the victory, he moved to Kentucky. There, he and his wife raised their twelve sons. Eleven stayed in the area. I am descended from the one who left home and moved to Missouri.

My mother’s grandparents left Germany and settled in Wisconsin. After college, my mother left home to be further educated in Oregon, lived across the country with her young husband, and later in life returned to Wisconsin with her growing children.

In my family, there is a high value placed on independence, thinking for oneself, and being willing to stand up for your own values even if it is not the norm. There are ways in which Aliza’s journey also reflects these values, even though at times, from the outside, it seems like she entered a stream of Judaism that emphasizes different values – such as, being in a community, behavior based on keeping mitzvot, andseeking rabbinic guidance.

My religious upbringing happened through a variety of Protestant denominations. I fondly call it “the Protestant bouquet.” My first remembered experiences were in my paternal grandparent’s fundamental Baptist country church, in a little town in the midst of the Ozarks in Missouri. My grandfather prayed aloud before every meal and read the Bible to us every night after supper. We attended Sunday morning services and Wednesday night prayer meetings, and any revival meetings planned during the summer months. I ached “to be saved,” but most of the circuit preachers considered seven too young. There was no tolerance of those who differed in religious or political beliefs. I imbibed distrust of Democrats and of Catholics, who my grandfather told me “plan to take over the world.”

When my father returned from the Pacific theater of World War II, my parents moved to Wisconsin, where my mother had been raised. They joined the Congregational Church. I felt confused at the end of the church services, because no one was called to the front “to be saved.” When I queried my mother about it, she told me this church didn’t do that. I was disappointed to find out they didn’t immerse people for baptisms either. Infants were baptized with a sprinkle of water on their heads. Over time, I discovered my parents had chosen a church different from the evangelical church my cousins attended in our same town. This was my initiation into religious differences.

My mother valued the beauty of indigenous people in other parts of the world and the integrity of their cultures. She was not supportive of missionaries, who imposed Western culture and mores on them when they took Christianity to their shores. She listened to people from other religions and had great respect for the one rabbi in our town. This was my introduction to respect for religious and cultural differences.

Through following my father’s increasing involvement in the church over the years, I learned the importance of commitment to the church community. The youth groups and Sunday services were important in my life. I lived with lots of questions and envied Catholic friends, whom I saw as thinking they had all the answers. I had, through my school years, played with Catholic children and to my amazement found they were, indeed, very similar to me. This made me realize that my grandparents could be wrong.

**Married Life**

I dated a Jewish boy in high school, but we broke up because we both knew neither set of parents would condone this kind of marriage. There hadn’t been much conversation about it in either of our families. We just knew. After college, I married a “fine Christian boy,” my grandmother’s description, who attended the Methodist church across the street from my church in my hometown.

We had two girls, whom we had baptized in that same Methodist church. My parents died in accidents almost two years apart, when my girls were very young. My grief seemed to be especially acute during Sunday church services, so I stopped going to church for some years.

My husband was a history professor, and we lived in university towns in the state of New York: Plattsburg, Ithaca, and Rochester. The social climate among the faculty was conducive to intellectual inquiry and debate, but not religious pursuits. We found ourselves growing away from the church community.

**Civil Rights Commitment**

We spent the academic year of 1967-8, in the Washington, D.C. area. My husband had a postdoctoral fellowship at the Smithsonian Institute. We did not know that the events of that year would shape the direction of our lives for years to come. We heard about the Poor People’s Campaign planned for the spring. There would be a tent city built on the mall. Thousands of people, African American, Native American, Hispanic, and Caucasian, would take up residence in makeshift shelters until the government was willing to make changes in its policies. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. gave a sermon in the National Cathedral on Sunday, March 31, 1968. We were there. We listened to his eloquence; we were awed by his literary allusions and his ability to reach all levels of people. He touched our hearts with the Poor People’s Campaign. He spoke against the war in Vietnam.

On Thursday, April 4, 1968, he was murdered in Memphis. We saw the smoke rising from riots in Washington, D.C. Our lives changed. A commitment was galvanized deep in our gut and in our heart. We moved into action. Even though we felt we might be risking our lives, we showed up in the heart of the city to volunteer for the Poor People’s Campaign. We were committed to social change, civil rights, and integration. We would walk our talk.

My husband was hired by the University of Rochester to help work with students who were protesting the war, staging sit-ins and demonstrations. We decided we would buy our first house in an interracial neighborhood and send our girls to integrated schools. Aliza was kindergarten age. My husband and I had a serious talk about religious upbringing for them. We agreed that at this time in our lives, while we had a minimal involvement in church life, we did feel it was important to raise our girls in a Christian context, because that was the predominant culture of our own history and of our country. It was an intellectual decision. We joined the local Presbyterian church and attended the services for a couple of years.

As the human potential movement made its way into academic circles, we joined a house church which was strong on humanistic psychology and light on religion. This gave us a social group that was exploring the edges of values, feelings, feminism, and popular psychology. We created our own services and sang songs to guitar accompaniment. It was the sixties spilling into the seventies. Civil rights and integration at home and stopping the Vietnam war abroad was the core of our social-spiritual commitments.

When my husband’s work as associate dean did not bring tenure at the end of seven years, we decided to leave academic life. We would continue living our commitment to integration and civil rights. We designed a three-year study of interracial neighborhood communities across the country, which was funded in part by the Ford Foundation. After a year of preparation, we spent a year on the road visiting twenty communities and living for sixty days each in interracial neighborhoods in Baltimore and Cleveland Heights, and four months in Portland. We found temporary housing, and our girls went to school in each of these neighborhoods, while we took part in community activities and interviewed hundreds of people. We found the same difficulties, and the same determination to make diversity work, repeated in community after community across the country. We witnessed firsthand the importance and power of being committed to something larger, to a cause for justice, civil rights, and integration. This commitment brought people together across different cultures and colors, economic groups, religious denominations, and educational levels. We found excitement and despair, camaraderie and conflict.

On return to our neighborhood in Rochester, we felt seasoned in the field, satisfied with our work, and strained in our relationship. We wrote a bibliography and a book, while our children re-entered the community and schools. We faced into our marriage and, after months of turmoil, came to the agonizing decision to divorce.

After our divorce, we both moved to Portland Oregon to live in new relationships with added children and start the next phase of our lives. We were learning about stepfamilies, new kinds of work, and the cultural climate of the Pacific Northwest.

**New Life in Portland, Oregon**

My sister and brother and I had longed to live closer to each other when we all struggled with our babies after our parents died. We lived on opposite sides of the country: Oregon, Florida, and New York. Our children were in junior and senior high school when I moved to Portland, and my sister and I were finally in the same city. We were hungry to be together and decided to create a business that would combine her medical training with my teaching and community work. We came up with a way to address what we needed for our own lives. It was a business to help people deal with the stresses of life. We taught relaxation techniques, led stress reduction seminars, and sold self-help books, hypnosis and subliminal tapes, relaxing soothing music, and tools to promote health and well-being.

Our business grew, as we served the community with innovative products and workshops. We became a center for culturally creative people, complementary and alternative ideas in medicine, spirituality, education, recovery, and metaphysics. We were pioneers in these areas for twelve years, from 1979 to 1991. The impact on our families, the community, and us was profound. Spiritual exploration gradually became my central theme, and it took me outside the Christianity I had lived with for the first forty years of my life.

**Aliza’s Move into Judaism**

During this time, Aliza engaged in a study of Judaism. When she returned from a summer Jewish camp experience and told me proudly that no one guessed she was not Jewish, I was stunned that she had wanted to pass as a Jew. This interest was much more serious than I thought. Then she told me the rabbi wanted her to wait a year before converting. This IS serious. When she began her study and experience of Judaism, I felt it was a great way for her to learn more about the Old Testament. I knew she was not interested in going to church. I also knew she was very intellectually curious about many religions. I was glad she was not intrigued with a Hare Krishna group.

I was taking a seminar in energy work in the Findhorn Community in Scotland when she actually converted to Judaism. She told me about it when I returned. It took some time for the impact to sink in, actually probably years. We were stunned again when she informed her father and me that she was planning a bat mitzvah. In my mind, that was something that happened at age thirteen – she was sixteen. I also knew from hearsay that such celebrations cost a lot of money. We did not have it, and it was not our tradition. We agreed to each give her $40 to spend as she needed.

We watched from the sidelines with utter amazement at how she orchestrated her friends, family, resources, and goodwill in the Jewish community into a glowing event. She studied Hebrew with the rabbi and the cantor. She listened to Hebrew tapes daily through a long family trip to the Midwest. While she listened, she sewed tiny purple beads into the lacework of her great-grandmother’s white dress undergarment. It had long sleeves, a high neck, long skirt, lots of tucks, and lace. She found it in an old family trunk and loved it. She remade it to fit her and declared it her bat mitzvah dress.

Aliza used her $80 to buy art paper and watercolors, postage stamps, shoes, and baking ingredients. She handmade her invitations and mailed them. She enlisted the help of friends to bake cookies and cakes, and froze them.

The Rabbi helped her schedule her bat mitzvah on the same Friday as a baby naming. There would be food and a festive atmosphere provided by the new parents, who would share the *simchah* with Aliza. She talked a friend and her stepsisters into taking part in the service. The whole room was alight from the glow of her countenance. I was in awe of what she was doing and what it meant to her.

Afterward, a woman in the synagogue approached me and said, “How could you *let* your daughter become Jewish?” I was stumped. I had not thought about “letting” her become Jewish. She was so determined and so clearly on her path. It seemed more to me like nothing could get in her way. I thought the woman and I must have different ideas of parenting. I thought about her question for a long time. Finally, I realized that if Aliza had been interested in a cult like the Moonies, I would have stepped in to do what I could to prevent it. So from that perspective, I guess I did “let” her become Jewish. I also realized that neither Aliza nor I really knew what the commitment to become a Jew meant over a lifetime. This woman’s concern was about the difficulty of being a Jew.

Aliza knew she could not provide a Kiddush for those attending on Saturday morning so she scheduled the second part of her event for Sunday morning at the morning minyan*.* Aliza provided an orange juice with bagels and cream cheese breakfast for thirty people at this service. She had a special connection to these older men, who met every morning for prayers. They were the pillars of the synagogue. All summer long, Aliza had taken two buses across town to be there for prayer time. They adored her. She was just what they wanted their own grandchildren to be. She was bright, energetic, engaged, and so excited about the Judaism she was learning.

She read all the Hebrew for the entire service. At the end, Rabbi Stampfer said, “There are very few people in our entire congregation who could do what Aliza has done this weekend. Truthfully, I am glad she made a few mistakes.” She was glowing, and we were captivated by the mystery of the whole event. She did it! She was now a “bat mitzvah,” a daughter of the commandments*.*

During her sophomore year in high school, she yearned to spend her junior year abroad – in either Africa or Israel. Her school did not have exchange programs, so she hunted for some way to go on her own. She found a high school program in Israel that accepted students from American high schools. She applied and began to prepare for the year abroad. Her grandmother, who knew her clothes were minimal and hand-me-downs, gave her money to buy a wardrobe and the things she needed for the year in Israel. The school was an agricultural high school and required overalls, jeans, and blue blouses.

Rabbi Stampfer returned from a trip to Israel and called us into his office. He told us he felt strongly that Aliza should not go to this school. When he checked it out, he discovered it had no religious education and was a holding school for American kids in trouble. He advised Aliza to finish high school in Portland and go to Israel for college.

She was three weeks from leaving for Israel, and she was determined to go. He suggested a *kibbutz* (working collective), or a seminary(school for Judaic studies)*.* She lit up at the idea of seminary. She did not know there were religious colleges for girls. She applied immediately. The response was that they would not take her in the high school program, because it was for girls from Hebrew Day Schools. They did have an opening in the college program and that was for girls from English speaking countries whether or not they went to Hebrew schools. She said “YES.”

They said she had to have modest clothes – skirts below the knees, sleeves below the elbow, and definitely no slacks or jeans. She had no money left for other clothes. She took apart her jeans and overalls and sewed them into skirts and a jumper. She lengthened her sleeves with material from the hemline. She was ready to go.

I was filled with anxiety. She knew no one there. The school did not have an orientation program or any form of reassurance for parents. At that time, 1980, making long-distance calls to Israel was very difficult. It was a week before I was able to reach the school and find out she was there. They would not get her out of class to talk to me. It was another week before she figured out the phone system and was able to call me. She had been physically sick; I had been emotionally stretched. We were so relieved to hear each other’s voice.

At one point in the year, she wrote about finding a program to help pay her tuition. I was pleased. She wrote using the word *Aliyah*. I had no idea what that meant, which was probably a good thing. She loved learning, even though she felt swamped. I was mystified that she could understand or read any of the Hebrew. It was so far from anything I could do.

As the year wore on, she wrote about wanting to continue another year. She could get tuition help from the Youth Aliyah program. She also wanted to travel in Europe on her way home for the summer. I wrote back that she had to have friends to travel with, and we would talk about her returning when she was home for the summer. The decision to return had to be made before the end of the school year. Her friends could not go to Europe.

I decided I needed to go to Israel and assess the situation myself. Then she and I could travel in Europe. We could visit the Greek family I had stayed with as an American Field Service student, twenty-five years earlier. We could stay in the Findhorn community in Scotland, a place I wanted to revisit. The European trip was as much for me as it was for her.

When I got to Israel, I was pleased to see how good she looked and how happy she was. She took care of me. She fixed a bed for me in her dorm and cooked for me. She had learned to bake in a pan on top of the stove. Much to my astonishment, she was known to her dorm mates as the health food cook – she used whole wheat flour and vegetables, and made yogurt and tofu. While I had been a health conscious cook for many years, she had been disdainful of much of it. Here she was **known** for it. She also had our family’s mealtime prayer – “May this food be used to our highest good and we give thanks” painted in watercolor and on the wall above her table. Tears of emotion and surprise filled my eyes.

Her teachers hoped she would return for another year. She had made good progress, they told me. I had a hard time imagining her returning to the dance magnet program in high school for her senior year. She was clearly in her element in the seminary in Jerusalem.

We traveled around Israel together before taking a boat to Greece to stay with “my family.” They were so welcoming and glad to see us. Aliza and I stayed in the same bedroom I had used in the summer of 1955. All the furnishings were the same, even the pictures on the walls. It was a déjà vu experience for me. In that home, we had a hard time explaining kosher food. Language and experience were barriers. We realized people want to feed their guests, and it is hard on them not to be able to do that. If I were doing something like this again, I would tell the hosts ahead of time and give ideas of what kind of food would work, for example fresh fruit and vegetables.

As we traveled on our own to England and Scotland, it was easier to handle the kosher food. We ate lots of cheese, and tuna and crackers, which we bought in Israel. We stayed for a week in the Findhorn community in northern Scotland. It is a vegetarian spiritual community that grows most of their food and bakes their own bread. I had been there the year before and was anxious to return. Sharing the community with Aliza was a treat for me. It represented much of what was important to me.

The time we spent together that summer was a deep way of entering each other’s life. We each had time in our own element, which we were able to share with the other. Then there were the travel adventures that happen in other countries and cultures. As I look back now, I realize that this trip served to set the tone for our new relationship. We were companions, each on our own journey and yet able to travel and grow together with mutual respect. We have continued to be this way with each other even through major tests. There were many ahead of us after that summer.

Aliza did return to Israel for another year at her seminary. I found out that the *Aliyah* she had talked about was a program **to become a citizen of Israel**. Oh my, I had to breathe deeply. When I investigated, I discovered that Israel handled their citizenship in a way that allowed Americans to keep their American citizenship. That helped me. I did not want Aliza to give up her U.S. citizenship.

At the end of the year, she wanted to stay in Israel and attend Hebrew University. She needed a high school diploma to apply. Since she skipped the last two years of high school in the U. S., she did not have one. She called me in January and said she was coming home for three weeks. She wanted to take the tests, to get a Graduate Equivalency Diploma, get her driver’s license and a sewing machine, and go back to Israel.

Again, I had to breathe deeply. I investigated the procedure for the GED tests, set an appointment, and got the books for her to review for the tests. I gave her driving lessons, and she passed the driver’s test the first time. My sister and I gave her a sewing machine for her eighteenth birthday, which we celebrated together just before she returned to Israel. Again, she garnered the support to accomplish her very clear intentions. This ability is one of her gifts.

The next deep breath, very deep breath, was the phone call telling me she wanted to join the Israeli Army. That was over the top for me. “THE ISRAELI ARMY!! What did you say? Did I hear you?” I flashed back to her birth and the birth of her sister. I had been so thankful I had girls, because if I had a boy, I could not handle him being in the army. My father fought in World War II. The impact on me as a child, and on our family long after his return, was profound. I felt I just could not have a child of mine going off to war. Now my daughter was telling me SHE wanted to be in the army, and not our army but the Israeli Army. Too much. Too much. I needed recovery time.

A week later she called with what she hoped would be helpful thoughts. “Think of it like the Peace Corps. The religious units help with settlements. We would be paving the way for civilians to start living in the West Bank.” She explained again why it was so important to her to join the army. She wanted to be an Israeli citizen, and everyone here wants to know what you did in the army. It is a rite of passage.

A male friend of mine explained to me that armies in developing countries were different from our army. They did work to help the development of the country. He encouraged me to lighten up and be supportive of her. I began to think that if she was going to be an Israeli citizen, she should have the skills she would learn in the army.

After painful soul searching and discussions with her father, we finally both agreed to back her decision. Then this surprising turn: She called and said she knew her decisions over the last years had been hard on us. She appreciated all we had done for her, and if we really did not want her to join the army, she would not join. I was dumbfounded. Another deep breath. I had come around, I told her. The decision was in her hands. She should evaluate her direction and interests, and make the best decision she could.

She joined. She was the only non-Israeli in her unit. Because of this, the army provided a support family for her in Israel, since her own was so far away, as well as money for monthly phone calls home, plus extra money for personal items. I was glad I didn’t know until later all the things she learned in boot camp. Her unit was stationed near the border of Jordan. She took her sewing machine and began a cottage industry for the settlement they were starting. A shirt factory in a nearby village provided cloth scraps, and she used them to make baby quilts and clothes. She learned a lot about cooking. Making meals in large quantities for the unit helped her as a hostess later in life when hosting large Passover and Sabbath gatherings.

During her time in the army, she met her future husband. He was visiting Israel to attend his sister’s wedding. She happened to be living in Aliza’s Jerusalem apartment while Aliza was in the army. From my point of view, this was good news. He was an American and going to law school in New York. This connection brought her back to the States, and my grandbabies were all born in New York. I was so thankful I did not have to fly all the way to Israel to have time with them. In their teen years, some of them have gone to school in Israel, and one or two hope to live there as citizens. Now it is the next generation that is fulfilling Aliza’s dream of a life in Israel.

There were other deep breaths. Some of these stories weave into other parts of the book. Her wedding was one. Each grandchild presented us with their own unique joys and challenges. Several grandchildren are now married, and starting their own families. The others will follow, and the spiral of life continues.

**My Continuing Professional Life**

All these experiences have enriched my professional life as well as my personal life. When my sister and I sold our bookstore in 1991, I had no idea what I would do next to support myself and contribute to the world. I spent most of the next Rosh Hashanah, Jewish New Year*,* with the Bulows in New York. I returned to Portland just before Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement*,* which is a very sacred day of fasting for Jews. I decided I would also fast and pray that day. During the prayer time, I remembered learning about a training program for spiritual directors. As I prayed about this as a possibility for me, I felt a clear pull in that direction. I called the Catholic sister in charge of the program. She informed me that the two-year program was beginning the next week. She was willing to interview me and consider my application.

That set my professional direction for the next years of my life. I completed the training in the spring of 1994 and began seeing individuals in a private practice. Since then, I have taken additional training programs in other aspects of this work – using the expressive arts and the enneagram in spiritual direction, the sacred art of dying, and the art of spiritual direction. Through this time, I have worked with individuals, men’s and women’s groups, and with the employees of a construction company.

Aliza has been my mentor and consultant about the Jewish perspective, practices, and community. The power and support of community is so apparent in her life. I have always longed for a community that would work for me. Over a period of twenty years, I had attended a variety of churches and groups. While they were inspiring in their own ways, none felt like my spiritual home. I wondered if I would be able to find this in the church. In November 2005, I was at the Shalom Prayer Center of the Benedictine nuns in Mt. Angel, Oregon. During the five-day retreat, I had a profound emotional and spiritual experience. It happened while I was reading a book given me by the spiritual director of my retreat. For me, it was an epiphany. Deep inside my being, I knew I would now find my home.

Saturday night, I was back in my own house. I looked in the yellow pages and saw a church within four miles of my home, which is out in the country, south of Portland. What attracted my attention was that it was the denomination of my youth in Wisconsin. The Congregational Church had united with other denominations to become the United Church of Christ. I went to the Sunday service and felt at home with the woman minister and the church members. A few months later, I joined the church, working part-time as the pastoral care associate and, on occasion, leading the worship service. It was a great joy to be in a worshipping community and be “back home.”

The impact of experiencing the Sabbath in the Bulow home and in the Jewish community influenced me to honor the Sabbath in my tradition on Sundays. There is nothing in our secularized culture that supports Sabbath observance. Without my experience in the Jewish community, I do not think I would be able to make it a part of my own spiritual practice. I have written more extensively about the importance of the Sabbath for me in the chapter on the Sabbath.

A few years ago, when I attended one of Aliza’s classes, I heard her describe the path many Jews followed when they came to this country. I saw the similarities in my own journey. Religious affiliations grew tenuous, and social causes became forefront. Aliza called people caught in this phenomenon “cut flowers,” because they had been cut off from the roots of their religious heritage. They were beautiful flowers in water vases, but what they had to offer died in a generation, because they lacked the roots in the soil.

Out of this background, Aliza found her roots in Judaism, learned Hebrew, lived in Israel, and eventually married an American Jewish man, whose parents are Modern Orthodox. My other daughter is most comfortable in secular settings, learned Spanish, traveled in South America, is passionate about soccer, and works in the world of soccer referees. She married and divorced a man from Mexico, and is now married to a man from Ohio, and the two of them love living in Mexico. I was afraid I would have Hebrew speaking and Spanish speaking grandchildren and wouldn’t be able to talk to any of them. My learning disability is in foreign language and music. Fortunately for me, all my grandchildren also speak English and humor me in my language deficiency and inability to carry a tune.

What a privilege to be alive to watch the next generation find their way and tap into their roots. I am so thankful for the richness, the complexity, the depth, and the soul-searching that have been in my life because of having a convert to Judaism in my family.

As I take stock of my life, this is how I would describe it:

I have always had a very strong commitment in my life and in my professional work as a spiritual director and teacher to living and working with compassion, acceptance, and goodwill. I am traveling that direction even though I have times of falling “off course.” Since I am clear about the direction, it is easier for me to make course corrections.

I approach people with interest in their well-being, respect for their beliefs, and appreciation for their contributions to the whole of life. I have compassion for the difficulties we all face and create. I want people to see the goodness in each other. When people behave badly, I think about how much pain they must be holding to act that way. I want to be forgiving of myself as well as others and experience a spark of G-d in everyone.

I want the kind of peace in the world that embodies wholeness or shalom. More than an absence of war, peace allows us to live fully and expressively as the magnificent beings we are. Each of us plays our own unique note in the symphony of life. Our families can be difficult and disharmonious, and yet it is in our families that we most need to practice our notes. Together we carry the possibility of a symphony of shalom and harmony. This is the music I want to hear.