

DIVE-BOMBING IMTO AN EMPTY POOL

BY EMILY BERLINER

RAISED IN A SECULAR home flavored with tidbits of Jewish culture, I recognized the Jewish calendar as a menu. Each Jewish holiday brought the opportunity to eat special foods we didn't eat any other time of the year. Rosh Hashannah was a celebration of apples and honey, so we dipped and crunched to our hearts content. Yom Kippur was bypassed entirely (no good food there) in favor of the banquet that accompanies Passover. For one month of the year, my family schmearred everything we owned on boxes of different flavored square *matzohs* including topping them with slices of ham and cheese. We ate *hamantaschen* on *Purim* but we saved costume making and candy eating for Halloween. Hanukkah was fried potato and applesauce time; for me, getting to eat latkes was sometimes even more important than receiving presents. Had my family known that *Shavuot* could be celebrated by eating cheesecake, we would have been adamantly observant.

The little I knew of Jewish history had nothing to do with Middle Eastern politics. I remember coloring Biblical figures in my "Jewish Stories" coloring book; Moses was all blue but Samson had long, pretty rainbow colored hair. The extent of my Jewish education was reciting the four questions year after year (I am an only child) and attending a Conservative summer camp where *Shabbos* was celebrated with a short service, pizza bagels and French fries.

And for two decades of my life, this was fine. Judaism was a familial operation tied to foods and a few ancient words and hugs all around. My beloved grandparents made sure to light a pair of tapered candles for everyone's birthdays but never thought to light them any other time. They would hide our version of the *afikomen* - a tiny piece of *matzoh* topped with a twenty-dollar bill wrapped in aluminum foil - in the same place every year: under the piano cover, on the right-hand side. I never thought for one minute that any of this could be considered "wrong," much less by an entire community of "my" people.

Then, on a school trip upstate last year, I met A----. Going to Queens College, he was obviously not the first Orthodox Jewish guy I had ever met but he was the first one to ever be interested in me. I was a girl whose uniform consisted of jeans and a T-shirt and I was still reeling from my break-up with my high school boyfriend, an Italian Roman Catholic who believed more in the power of Ayn Rand than in any organized religion.

After a few weeks of talking and hanging out, he offered to plan a picnic for my upcoming birthday. "What kind of food do you want?" he asked. I started listing off deli meats, salads, string cheese sticks. "Okay, first we have to decide if this meal is going to be meat or dairy," he said. I chose dairy (I had to have my string cheese), but that was my first real decision in the Orthodox Jewish world. It excited

and frightened me a little bit; it was a choice I had never had to make before. But after a few happy weeks of seeing each other every day, we started dating. I was ecstatic but almost immediately there were more questions to be answered.

Shomer Negiah? Tzitzis? Shul? As an English major, this world of new vocabulary fascinated me and I quickly picked it up. The first time I attended services in an Orthodox synagogue I panicked and teared. I was so far away from the cantor! As the eternal tomboy, I was terrified of wearing a skirt and being surrounded by girls. During *Shabbosim* on campus or at my boyfriend's house, I mumbled along during prayer, recognizing a few songs from camp, a few prayers I had picked up over the years without knowing what they were. I recalled the *Shema* as an old friend, one I had known in my youth and had now decided to get back in touch with. I told time in *shul* by the *Shimoneh Esrei*.

In a matter of months, I changed. I morphed so quickly that my close friends became worried. "Do you actually believe in this stuff?" one friend asked. I really didn't know. All of a sudden, I had a closet full of skirts, *siddurim* next to the Harry Potter series on my bookshelf, a *mezuzah* on my door. I joined the Chabad board, I babysat (I was never a "child person"), and I was happy; indeed, much happier than I had been for most of my time in undergrad. I was part of something bigger than myself and instead of that making me feel small and insignificant, I felt that I could do anything. I could say "Good *Shabbos*" to random people I passed on the street in a neighborhood I had never lived in. With a change of clothing and a different diet, I gained a family, a large one, one that extended back thousands of years. To me, that was especially meaningful considering I lost both my grandparents within four months of each other earlier that year. I could start talking about my future in terms of marriage and children, ritual and tradition. I had a confidence in my heritage for the first time, truly calling it "mine." Instead of saying "I was born Jewish," when someone asked me about my culture, I said "I am Jewish."

But as those who study Torah and Talmud know well, appearances are both nothing and everything. I literally woke up one day as if from a pleasant dream only to discover it was a nightmare. I was a self-made fraud. I adopted a religion for personal reasons, not for any G-dly ones. People told me that the way I had been raised was a lie and wrong on so many levels and I had agreed with them. But now I was angry. Why shouldn't I say *Kaddish* for my grandparents, even if they are now ashes in a crematorium? Why should I agree to be in a relationship with someone who was physically comfortable with me in the privacy of my house but would refuse to give me a peck on the cheek on a street corner? The more I tried to learn about Orthodoxy, the more frustrated and confused I became. Who was the hypocrite? My boyfriend? The New York State Orthodox Jewish community? Those who followed the "no sex before marriage" rule but did everything else? God?

No, it was just me. By dive-bombing into an empty pool of what I wished was mine, I lost it . I

internalized all the social norms of the Orthodox community but none of the genuinely holy laws. What's worse is that I cut myself off from all that I had been before – the type of Judaism I had known as a child, my real personality quirks, my individual preferences of equality and universal tolerance. In adopting the idol of personal desire and rejecting who I was because of others, I broke the key laws of Judaism.

And so I started again. A---- and I broke up, allowing me to more objectively decide which aspects of Judaism I loved, which I disliked, and which I simply didn't know enough about to make an informed decision. By forcing myself to be alone, to sit down, pen and paper in hand, and reevaluate every religiously affiliated decision I had made in the last year of my life, I discovered something wonderfully surprising. There was nothing wrong with the way I had been raised, nothing even patently non-Jewish. The values of love, family, education, and modesty were all there and they were already a part of my daily life. What was missing, I soon found out, was God.

One afternoon, while I sat lost in thought on my comfy sofa, I fell asleep. I dreamed that a big hand reached down from above and stuck a hole puncher through my body. With a sharp metallic pinch, the hand punched out a small round circle of my heart. "You'll get it back," a soft voice in my head said, "when you find it again." The voice sounded like my own. Dazed by the real pain in my chest and confused by what I had dreamt, I heard my roommate ask quietly as if from a distance "Are you awake?" I didn't move or speak. "I guess not," she said, walking away.

When I woke up fully, I was stunned. I had had this dream before, about a year ago, and I never understood what it meant. Then I remembered a fragment of a story the Chabad rabbi at Queens College had once spoken about. "Everyone has a God-shaped hole inside him or her," he had said, "that only God can fill."

I spent a year trying to fill that hole with everything but God – people, money, knowledge, food, sex, drugs. And in the end, I came to the conclusion that to truly find Judaism, you cannot find it in another person or in a community. You have to find it in yourself.

And to be honest, I'm still looking. At least now I know what I'm looking for.