

A Spiritual Autobiography: How I Found Religion

Simcha Rachmiel

WHEN MY OLDER DAUGHTER WAS BORN, WE NEARLY lost her. For two days, we would leave the hospital and just drive, aimlessly, alternating between crying and cursing, looking through the ocean of our eyes out the window, muttering “Shit!” But we learned a little bit about how to make the universe respond, and even if we didn’t find God exactly, we found a spiritual home.

Neither my wife nor I grew up in families that were religious. Now, when I hear people described as religious, or observant, I am always struck by how little meaning those adjectives carry as actual descriptions of someone’s spiritual life. To me, now, religious does not mean that someone follows the precepts of their religion closely, more closely than others, nor does it mean that involvement in religious practice is the central theme of someone’s life. For years, I have been trying to make conscious choices and compromises about my religious beliefs and practices. This struggle has shown me how impossible it is to define a single standard of religious observance against which an individual can be measured. Some people decide not to observe the rules of Judaism as they understand them. Others try to observe the practices they believe in. What standard defines one person as religious, and another as secular? In the end, being religious means, to me, having an active engagement with your religion, struggling to define one’s self in relation to it, and taking that struggle as both an obligation and a needed guide for living. By that standard, the experience my wife and I had after my daughter’s birth was a turning point in my own development as a religious man.

My father was something of a wild child, the most secular of six surviving siblings, from parents who were born and married in Russia and came here to escape life in the Czar's army. They were traditional European Jews, if not quite thoroughly Orthodox. My mother grew up in an Orthodox household in Crown Heights, and I still have distant cousins who live in that close-knit community. My uncle and two aunts kept kosher homes, were active in their Conservative and Reconstructionist synagogues, and my mom's younger sister returned to active involvement in a Reform synagogue when I was in high school. But my mother, a proto-feminist from young adulthood, resented the circumscription of the mikveh and mechitzah, and grew skeptical, then cynical, about the inconsistencies she observed in how people applied and compromised the principles they espoused. She left kashrut and observance behind after moving to Queens — the end of the earth on my grandfather's map — nine months after the week in which my grandmother died and I was born.

My parents joined a Conservative shul two blocks from our apartment so my brother and I would get a Jewish education and get "Bar Mitzvahed." But they almost never went to a service that wasn't a wedding or a bar mitzvah. Our Jewish calendar had stars marking Passover and Hanukkah, glasses of wax for *yahrzeit*, and required us to be careful how we dressed on Saturdays — clean play clothes without holes — but was otherwise empty. I have begun thinking that my mother began a kind of *converso* life, retaining some of the choreography and routines of Judaism, without much regard for their meanings. My father was pleased to follow whatever my mother wanted, as long as she cooked the familiar foods of his childhood, for which my grandmother had been renowned. For me, going to Hebrew School three times a week for five years left Judaism echoing across an empty chasm, and I grew up without a foundation in its rituals or prayers — although I knew the many varieties of its food and candles well. I have my own small reputation for latkes and brisket. Even more, I have grown far closer to her religious roots than my mother could ever have imagined. When I've asked older relatives what my parents would think of my engagement with my synagogue and my faith now, they answer confidently, "They would be proud of you no matter what you did."

I began to think about God for the first time when my father was dying, succumbing to lung cancer after extensive second- and third degree burns, diabetes, cardiovascular disease, and two strokes gradually wore him down. Having already dropped out of graduate school and studying nursing

part-time, I moved back from Pittsburgh to care for him at home while my mom continued teaching fourth grade. At night, I began to ask God to let him die, began to plead and cry for God to let him die. But I had no belief in God, and a few months later, after he died, I began to think intermittently about who this God was. I knew that I could not believe in some larger than life physical being with or without an actual shape but who was described with a very definitely human mind, a will that bent fate this way or that. At the same time, I felt there had to be some central power or force that unified the whole of life and the world we lived in. I never got further than that for a long time.

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Several years later, I found my first job as a nurse practitioner at an alcohol and addiction center, the Smithers Alcoholism Treatment Center, one of the first of its kind, with deep roots in the 12-steps of AA and an emphasis on the spiritual nature of the disease of alcoholism. I began to explore the meaning of spirituality as an expression of a basic human need to be connected, to have hope, to feel properly and deservedly placed within the universe, by seeing the consequences, in others and myself, of the lack of such connection. I would walk some evenings with my friend, the director of Smithers' Inpatient Rehab, and talk about such things, and about how we didn't see a path to such understanding in any organized religion, she in her Catholic roots or me in mine. This changed fairly quickly after she was diagnosed with an advanced stage of ovarian cancer, and told me one night, when I met her after services at the Riverside Church she had recently joined, "It's all well and good to talk about connection and the energy of the universe, but it's just not real when you need it unless you're part of a community that's looking for it." And there again I remained, until I met my wife, and we began to plan our wedding.

In the years when my mom and my aunts had gotten too old to make a seder for two nights every year, we began to attend the second night with my aunt at her Reform shul, with an Iraqi-born rabbi and his wife, singing and clapping in prayer or joy, years before B'nai Jeshurun and Synaplex brought such liveliness to services around the country. When we needed a rabbi to perform our ceremony, he was a natural choice, and he was happy to

be asked. We met with him three times before the wedding. In those meetings and at the ceremony, he had a simple message. When we talk about an altar, we mean a table, and when we talk about lighting candles and having a meal on Shabbat, we mean light candles, and sit down together, as man and wife, without distractions, to make time and space for each other, to be connected,

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to talk. Just try that, he said; it's not much, right? And so, periodically, we would light candles Friday night and talk. A door opened, and we began to understand that Judaism had something to do with joy and connection, and with our hearts.

Then our daughter was born. After three years of trying, we realized, with the concurrence of a deeply ethical (and Jewish) infertility specialist, that we were going to be able to make our family only through adoption. Using an amazing web of coincidence and association, we found a birth mother in Arkansas. We spoke to the young woman, formed a bond, flew to meet her with homemade chocolate chip cookies, called, showed friends her ultrasound picture, and finally, got a call that our baby was born, five weeks before her birth mother expected, and eight weeks before the obstetrician's expected date. We extricated ourselves from our work lives and flew to Little Rock, drove through the night two hours to the hospital, arrived twenty-three hours after she was born, saw her for the first time through the nursery window alongside another father, who was falling down drunk. Our daughter was healthy but weighed only five pounds at birth, less than a forearm long. Even the premie outfit we ran to buy for her at Dillard's was too big. She was losing weight because the energy needed just to keep her body warm was more than her little lips and stomach could suck in, making her so sleepy that we had to keep tapping her feet to wake her to drink more; she couldn't leave the hospital until she weighed at least five pounds again.

The nurses were openly committed to getting this tiny child bigger and stronger and sending her home with us, a family they liked more than some others. But every evening, they warned us, after we would leave our all-day visit, our birth mother and her friends and cousins would come, watch

our baby through the glass, ask the nurses questions, and, instead of letting go of the bond between them, clutch it more tightly, the smaller and more fragile our baby seemed. It was not a good sign — especially the timing of the visits, clearly meant to avoid contact with us. The nurses even changed the name on the bassinet, which they hid in the back of the nursery, but in their fervor to protect our baby and us, added fuel to the birth mother's feeling that this tiny, beautiful infant needed her protection.

And then, six days into the eight-day period allowed under Arkansas law for the birth mother to change her mind, we got word that she had, indeed, withdrawn her consent to give up her baby for adoption. Our lawyer was not optimistic. Don't call her, she warned; I'll speak with her attorney. But once a birth mother changes her mind, she said, I've never seen her change it back again.

Shit! We cried as we drove through the Arkansas hills around Lake Ouachita. Neither of us had ever felt pain like this before, and I hope never to feel it again. Honestly, I can't remember now exactly how bad it felt; just as mothers seem to forget the pain of labor, but recall it as a story of both agony and delight, so do we remember our daughter's birth. It hurt so much, we could hardly bear to go back into the nursery to see her. Legally, without the consent, we had to give up our daily routine, washing and dressing her, feeding her, tapping her soles, watching her open one eye and suck, sleep, open the other eye, suck, sleep, rock with us in the chair while we watched old movies on cable, sleep, while we cooed and oohed and aahhed and laughed. We went once to view her and my wife left in a flood and storm of tears. Shit! And stronger curses, more tears, as we drove.

After thirty-six hours or so of this, we sat in our motel room, overlooking the lake, and talked. What's going on, we asked? Our fragile birth mother saw this fragile baby, a baby who needed protection just as her birth mother needed protection, and who felt there was no one except her who loved that little girl as completely. She had lost her feeling of connection to us, once she had signed consent and was expected to silently just disappear. We knew she was in crisis. Who in Arkansas was as qualified and ready as we were, a nurse and a psychotherapist, to help our birth mother reconnect to us and feel more supported, more whole despite her loss? Our lawyer's expertise and advice were appreciated and respected, but this was our life, not hers, and we knew what we needed to do. We decided that night not to leave our lives in the hands of experts. We real-

ized that no one would ever have our interest at heart the way we do. Being the braver of the two of us at the time, I picked up the phone and I called.

Hi! How are you guys doing? she asked. Um, we're really sad. You changed your mind. What happened? I didn't change my mind; I wish people would stop saying that. All I did was take back my consent. Uh, if you didn't change your mind, why did you take back your consent? I just need some room to think. Everybody here is pressuring me: keep the baby, you can't take care of another child now, but she's so pretty, but you agreed, but she's so small, she needs you. I need to go sit by myself up in the hills and talk to God. I told her my wife wanted to say hello, too. We knew that the bond between

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the birth mother and the adoptive mother, woman to woman, heart to heart, was crucial. And I married a woman who knows how to talk and reach across all kinds of chasms to help. They talked for almost two hours. And then, our baby's mother got in her truck, went up in the hills, and talked to her God. That evening, we called her back, as we said we would. And we knew. I realized, she said, that I needed the baby, but she needs you.

We walked down the hill to the lake, a warm September evening, bathing suits under our clothes. The sky was clear, full not only of stars, but with three brighter and larger lights we knew were planets, that were visible that night. We slipped into the hot tub our motel maintained along the lakefront. And we talked. We talked about how you can put energy out into the world, and how it's returned, that keeping a positive spirit actually can shift the universe, in ways we don't understand, and in interpersonal ways we understood well. We called on the spirits of my father and my wife's grandmother, because we felt them there with us. We weren't sure who or what God was, but we felt God with us. And we promised, if we had a new consent to adopt in the morning, we would find a synagogue and join, not for the sake of joining itself, not so we'd have a school for our baby, but because we were grateful, because we wanted to keep the feeling we had that night, because we wanted to be connected, to be part of a community, and we knew that whatever we found God to be, we would find it through connection and in community.

And every now and then I remind my 15-year old daughter within our cherished community, where we know almost everybody, where we feel at home, where we have deep roots, where our friends and family come and remark how joyous and warm our service feels, how warm and authentic and heartfelt we are, in our prayer, from the bimah, with each other, where our daughters have grown up, where I am a religious man, engaged with my religion as a frame for my striving towards spiritual connection and understanding — I remind my oldest child how her birth mother went up into the hills and spoke to God, and how we found each other.



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