

## A Conversation with Anita Diamant

*William Novak*

*I have respected and admired Anita Diamant for the twenty years or so that we've known each other as friendly acquaintances and fellow writers in suburban Boston, but until now we had never had more than a brief conversation. She is the author of ten books: The New Jewish Wedding, Living a Jewish Life (with Howard Cooper), The New Jewish Baby Book, Bible Baby Names, Choosing a Jewish Life: A Handbook for People Converting to Judaism, The Red Tent (a novel), Saying Kaddish: How to Mourn as a Jew, How to Be a Jewish Parent (with Karen Kushner), Good Harbor (another novel), and, most recently, Pitching My Tent, a collection of short, personal essays on marriage, motherhood, and many other topics (www.anitadiamant.com). What follows is based mostly on a conversation at her home in Newton, Massachusetts, on December 4, 2003. —W.N.*

*What are you thinking about these days?*

Mostly Mayyim Hayyim, the new Boston-area mikveh, which should be up and running by the time this is published.\* I'm spending way too much time on it instead of writing, but it's my choice so I'm not really complaining. I've never done a non-writing project before, or a community project. I've never been much of an activist, or an organization person. I've even written an essay on how much I dislike going to meetings, but now I'm going to them all the time. It's a complicated process building a mikveh; there's nothing about them when you look them up in the zoning ordinances.

*How did this new mikveh get started?*

For me, it began in the mid-1990s when I was writing *Choosing a Jewish Life*, a guidebook about conversion. I went to the mikveh a number of times with various rabbis as they took converts. I was also chairing the outreach

\*<http://www.mayyimhayyim.org>

committee at Congregation Beth El in Sudbury, because I thought it was important for the community to have a representative at conversions, so I would try to show up at conversions of our members with flowers and gifts. Only one mikveh in the area—in Brighton, near Brookline—has been open to the liberal community for conversions, and that's only two hours a week, which makes it tough to schedule. There are other mikva'ot which aren't open for conversion, including a new, Chabad-sponsored mikveh in the western suburbs.

*You mean not open to the non-Orthodox world?*

Yes, although I don't care for that phrase, because it seems to imply that Orthodoxy is normative Judaism in the way it refers to the rest of us as "non." But the problem with most mikva'ot goes beyond that. There's nowhere to stand, to sit, to celebrate, or even to wait. I've been to many conversions, and each time I am moved to tears by the power of the moment, but I've never seen a mikveh with an appropriate space in which to mark the hour after the immersion—or before, for that matter.

I was at the Boston mikveh one spring afternoon when candidates for conversion in the liberal Jewish community were lined up outside, waiting for their turn, and while it was inspiring to see a dozen or so men, women and children waiting to become Jews, having people lined up outside is not a very graceful or welcoming entry into Judaism. Most mikva'ot are set up only for women to come individually and privately, at the end of their periods. Traditionally the mikveh is used at night for modesty's sake, and also because of how Jews count days.

*You use the noun "convert," although many people go out of their way to avoid it, speaking instead of Jews by choice.*

I think "convert" is an honorific, a title of honor, and I see nothing wrong with it. Being a convert, or a Jew by choice, if you prefer, should be a term of the highest praise. For someone to choose this identity and to embrace it—it's a gift to the rest of us. Neither term is great: "convert" makes me think of currency, and "Jew-by-choice" is a little awkward. In the Torah and in classical Jewish writings, the word is *ger*, which can also mean stranger

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or sojourner. "Proselyte" comes from the Greek translation of *ger*, but it's far too archaic.

*Where do you think our discomfort about converts comes from?*

According to Jewish law, we are not supposed to make any distinction between someone who is Jewish by choice and someone who was born Jewish. Evidently, Jews have behaved badly toward converts for a long time: there is mention in the Talmud about Jews making fun of them and talking in demeaning ways about their "pig-eating ancestors." And yet the great majority of comments about converts in the Talmud and the Midrash are favorable, such as, "The convert is dearer to God than Israel." When a convert wrote to Maimonides, asking whether he could recite prayers that included the phrase, *Elohei Avoteinu*, God of *our* ancestors, Maimonides answered with a resounding yes, saying, "There is no difference whatever between you and us."

*That's a concept that hasn't always been honored, to put it kindly.*

There's a history of stage-whispering: "he's a convert." One reason you weren't supposed to make the distinction is that it has sometimes been mortally dangerous for the convert, who could be persecuted or even killed for apostasy by his or her original community. Sometimes the Jewish community that accepted the convert would be attacked as well. There's an entire history of conversion that I learned about when I wrote *Choosing a Jewish Life*.

But it's a different world now, we're no longer in the Middle Ages. I'm afraid people behave very badly to what are, after all, members of our family. There's almost nobody Jewish in America who doesn't have non-Jews in their family by marriage or by adoption. We're all related to non-Jews. Something like 20 percent of the Jewish community was not born Jewish.

*I love the way you started Choosing a Jewish Life with a quote from Larry [Rabbi Lawrence] Kushner. A young man studying for conversion turns to him and says, "But Fitzpatrick isn't a Jewish name." To which Kushner replies, "It will be."*

Unfortunately, that isn't the only reaction. A couple of weeks ago I was at a meeting with a convert who had been president of her congregation for three years, and is extremely knowledgeable and committed. After she shared her story with the group, another woman said, "You know, when I walked in here I took one look at your face and I *knew* you weren't Jewish." She went on for five minutes in that vein.

*Not just "You don't look Jewish," which is bad enough.*

No, "you *aren't* Jewish. That's not a Jewish face." It's obnoxious. I've heard people say to converts, "It's very nice what you've done, but you're not really Jewish."

*What should we be doing instead?*

I think we have to make it known that conversion is normative, it's part of Jewish history, and it's part of Jewish life today, and it's a great good thing. I don't think we treat conversion as a life cycle event, and we don't honor people who have made this decision in their lives, either on the day of their conversion or the anniversary of conversion. It's a simcha and should be celebrated as a simcha.

You know, if 20 percent of your congregation were from the former Soviet Union, quite likely you'd have a Russian language circle in the synagogue. And if 20 percent of your congregation were not born Jewish, it seems to me it's okay to have occasional coffees to talk about the challenges of being "bilingual."

Converts bring so much to the Jewish community! Part of it is an enormous enthusiasm, a complete willingness to talk about theology and God. The G-word is not a dirty word, and spirituality and God and what-do-I-believe are part of what they bring.

*I'll never forget the day I ran into you in Harvard Square and you told me you were working on a novel. I was so impressed that a non-fiction writer could try that. I didn't know we were allowed!*

When I turned forty, I wanted a career change and couldn't think of one. I had thought about writing a novel, and I thought the story of Rachel and Leah was a good subject. But when I kept rereading their story in Genesis, I realized that the Dinah story has a better plot. And her silence in the text inspired me to tell the story from her perspective.

*I'm speaking on that parshah next week. I thought it might be interesting to look at the figure with whom Jacob wrestles, to see how different generations of Jews have understood his identity.*

I consider that passage to be the X-Files part of *The Red Tent*. It's very unclear what's going on there, and I wanted to keep it mysterious. I give my take on it, but you never find out what happens. But that wrestling match, which occurs off-camera in my version, destroys something in Jacob,

and after that incident he loses his nerve. I see it as a turning point, after which Jacob is no longer the leader of his family. He loses it.

*You must have done a lot of research for this book.*

When I started, in 1994, I applied for a fellowship at the Schlesinger Library on the History of Women in America at Radcliffe. I was given access to the Harvard libraries and a carrel, and an office with a part-time intern, all of which gave me a kind of legitimacy when I was starting out. I was looking for information about women in that period and how they lived; I found bits and pieces and put them together. I was interested in many things from that period—roughly 1500 years before the Common Era, including food, cooking, clothing, medicine, agriculture, burial customs, jewelry, marriage, midwifery, Egyptian and Canaanite poetry, among other things. If you're writing a historical novel, you need a library. And for a period like this, it's nice to have a great one.

*When you started in on a novel after having written only non-fiction, were you fairly confident that you could do it?*

It was an experiment. I thought of it as my knitting project, my hobby. I wasn't being paid, and I had no idea whether the novel would ever be published.

*Was your non-fiction background a help or an impediment to writing a novel?*

Some of each, I think. There was one point when I realized, 'Wait, I don't want to become a biblical scholar. I'm writing a novel.' I set aside all the Jewish stuff early on. After reading the Genesis story a number of times, I stopped looking at it because I didn't want to write a novelization. During my research, Mark Brettler, a Bible scholar at Brandeis, taught me a great word: he said I was interested in the *realia* of the biblical account. I was interested in social history, which is not what most Jewish scholarship is concerned with. I also wanted to remove the rabbinic lens, the filter through which most contemporary Jews view the story.

*Can you give me an example of that filter?*

To begin with, the idea that these characters are Jews is a rabbinic notion. At this stage, historically speaking, there *were* no Jews, no Sinai, and no commandments. These people were the proto-ancestors of the Jewish people, but they weren't necessarily monotheists. They had *terafim*, household gods, who were represented by tiny statues that weren't all that different from little

wooden Fisher-Price figures. Taking off the rabbinic lens also meant not writing an apology for what happens at Shechem. Why would Dinah's brothers kill all the men and then ransack the town? Maybe it was anger and greed.

*Not revenge for the rape of her sister?*

In my version their rampage had nothing to do with revenge, because as I read the story, it's not at all clear that Dinah was raped. In the Genesis account, Shechem, which seems to be the man's name, goes to his father and says he wants to marry Dinah. Shimon and Levi, meanwhile, are angry that their brother, Joseph, gets special treatment while the two of them are lost in the shuffle. It wasn't my purpose to make them look good. This rotten story is the dramatic center of the novel. The story turns on the massacre. Then Dinah moves to Egypt, and we have the rest of her life.

## **What's universal is the life of women's bodies**

*Was it difficult writing the Egypt section since you didn't have the biblical story to make midrash from?*

I don't think *The Red Tent* is midrash. Other people call it that, but I don't. It wasn't my intention to illuminate the text, which I think is the point of midrash. I understand that it's being read as midrash in the Jewish community and biblical commentary in the Christian community, and I'm honored by that, but that's not what I set out to do.

*Of course the rabbis in writing midrash were also bringing to bear their own contemporary issues. Is *The Red Tent* also about today?*

Setting anything that far in the past helps to make it feel universal. And what's universal is the life of women's bodies—the whole reproductive system, childbirth, aging, coming of age, trying to control fertility, trying to survive childbirth—and that's at the center of *The Red Tent*.

*The voice you achieved in *The Red Tent* is unique. What were you aiming for?*

I think I was reaching for a kind of timeless voice. I am a fan of simple prose, which I consider very American. Relatively short sentences, brief paragraphs. I don't want to sound biblical, whatever that means, but I didn't want to use any slang that was too contemporary. I worked at it, and I had a great writing group that occasionally said, boy, is that the wrong word!

*Let's talk a little about The Red Tent as a publishing story. I know that your regular agent wasn't interested in representing the novel.*

I have such a soft spot for *Kerem*—for publishing the preface to *The Red Tent* when I was having a hard time finding a representative. I eventually wound up with a local agent, who sent it to five publishers. Bob Wyatt at St. Martin's Press called immediately. He made a modest offer, exactly the same amount I had received for my first book, ten years earlier, and I had to decide that day. It was like getting married to somebody on the basis of one phone call! Bob comes from Oklahoma and was raised Presbyterian, and I loved that somebody so different from me wanted it. The book was beautifully published, I thought, in terms of the cover and the paper, but Bob left St. Martin's the month it came out. There was no advertising budget, and there were very few reviews, but I wasn't hugely disappointed because I had published books before, and I know what happens.

*A few years ago, when I told a fellow author that I had a new book coming out in a few weeks, he said, "Ah yes, the calm before the calm."*

Exactly. *The Red Tent* didn't disappear entirely; it was reviewed in a few small Southern newspapers by male Christian Bible scholars, who liked it. There were some good reviews in Jewish papers, and in the *National Catholic Reporter*. It sold modestly, about ten thousand copies. St. Martin's had printed more than they could sell, and they were going to pulp the unsold copies unless I wanted to buy them for a dollar or two each, because warehousing books is expensive. Larry Kushner had told me about *A Blessing on the Moon*, a novel by Joseph Skibell, whose publisher had sent it to a number of rabbis, so I knew it was possible to do that. I asked for letters of endorsement from Rabbi Liza Stern, then president of the Women's Rabbinic Network, and Rabbi Barbara Penzner, then president of the Reconstructionist Rabbinic Assembly, and the publisher sent the book to a few hundred Reform and Reconstructionist rabbis, many of whom knew my name from my Jewish guidebooks. In 1999, *Reform Judaism Magazine*, which reaches something like 300,000 households, chose it as one of the significant Jewish books of the year. Independent booksellers liked it and started talking it up. Then came the book groups that made it a best-seller.

*Had you been thinking for years about some of Genesis stories?*

At Beth El, I had been learning what Torah study is. One of the many things I learned from Larry Kushner is that to be a serious Jew, you don't have to be a scholar—just a student. And the more you study Jewish



texts, the more freedom you uncover. The freedom exists on the page, and the debates that are enshrined in the Talmud are loud and noisy. The text may be sacred, but it's not sacrosanct. This is such a different approach than you find in Christianity. One of my first speaking engagements was at Mt. Holyoke College, where a nun asked me how I had the "audacity" to treat the biblical story of Dinah as I did. But she didn't mean it in a hostile way, not at all.

*She may well have been envious.*

I think she was. I said, "It's my birthright as a Jew to be that audacious, to turn the story on its head, to shake its pockets and see what comes out." That's an amazing freedom we have, and it's one of the reasons people convert to Judaism. "You mean I can fight with the rabbi?" Not only can you fight with the rabbi, you can fight with *God!* You can bring your reservations and your anger at the text, and that's not only permitted, but encouraged.

*We don't always realize what we have.*

This openness expresses an enormous respect for the individual. Jews believe that everyone, potentially, has something to add to a conversation that's been going on for centuries. The text is alive, it's *really* alive, and for me, that's where its sacredness lies, in the conversation that the text both permits and encourages.

*In some ways it must have been an advantage to come to all of this as an adult.*

Yes, I didn't have to overcome years of Hebrew school. Having access to the world of midrash was especially wonderful as I realized that the rabbis made things up! You find yourself asking, Where did they get *that*? They had permission in their own minds to just run with it.

*Did the nun's envy at St. Holyoke prefigure a lot of Christian interest in the book?*

Oh, yes, you don't sell two million books to Jews. For a lot of women with a biblical background, Christians as well as Jews, there's a sense of validation, of "I'm in there," that the story might have happened this way, and that the female characters are multi-dimensional. It has made a lot of women realize how excluded they felt, even if they weren't aware of that feeling. Sometimes, in Jewish venues, people come up to me and say, "I'm probably

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the only non-Jew here”—and of course that’s not true. Or readers will tell me, “I don’t think of *The Red Tent* as a Jewish book, or even a religious book.” They see it as a book about women and their relationships.

*How surprised were you when the book became so successful?*

The book’s success wasn’t sudden; it was incremental. It was selling well at independent bookstores, and it kept growing, until there were articles about the book’s success, which only added to its popularity.

*I gather that some readers have urged you to write another biblical book—about Ruth, Esther, Miriam, or one of the other major female characters.*

Yes, but I can’t imagine doing that. I’ve already written this genre, and even if I could do it again, I know it would disappoint those readers. Instead, I’ve written a book about women’s friendships, *Good Harbor*.

*Does The Red Tent have some connection to the mikveh project? Maybe it’s obvious, because the red tent was a place for menstruating women—*

Just about everybody assumes that connection, but my interest in mikveh has almost nothing to do with *niddah*, with monthly use. I’m glad that others are exploring monthly use in creative ways, but it’s not my issue. My interest in mikveh started and remains focused on conversion, and other healing and creative uses. Jewish families need a place to mark a conversion with the same joy and seriousness that we bring to weddings and bar or bat mitzvahs.

*Let’s get back to Mayyim Hayyim.*

I’m always glad to talk about Mayyim Hayyim! So, I was struck by the fact that there was literally no room at the mikveh to hold a celebration. The mikveh in Brighton was a place where you’d show up for your conversion, and you’d leave with the knowledge that you would probably never be back. Sometimes you were welcomed, sometimes not. Either way, you were greeted by the sounds of washers and dryers for the towels.

I remember one time when I watched as the woman who converted had to come out and dry her hair in front of the three rabbis. *Ess passt nisht*, it’s not right. Here was this incredible, powerful ritual for somebody who had made a profound choice, who had cleansed herself, who was naked in the water while three rabbis who constitute a *bet din* stood outside the room to hear the splash, as aural witnesses to the event. Sometimes the rabbis have to open the door a crack to hear that sound, which can be a bit disconcerting to the person in the water. At Mayyim Hayyim, we put a transom over the doors

to the two pools, so the rabbis can hear the splash and the blessings without any discomfort or embarrassment on either side.

*You said that many women who convert in a traditional mikveh know they'll never return. What might bring her back, other than the laws of niddah, which most non-Orthodox women don't observe?*

Some do return for monthly visits, but these days there's also a growing practice of using the mikveh for various transitions in life. You might go before your wedding, or when you decide you want to conceive, to mark the separation between one kind of sexuality and another. That's not common yet, but it becomes less unusual every year. A woman might go in the ninth month of her pregnancy, which is a traditional time to visit the mikveh, to pray for a healthy baby and an easy birth. She might go after she finishes nursing, to mark that transition. I know people who have gone to the mikveh prior to chemotherapy, or after a year of chemo, or before an adult bar or bat mitzvah, or before their sixtieth or some other landmark birthday, or before their ordination.

And it's not only women. Men have traditionally used the mikveh before Shabbat and holidays. I've learned that men have used mikveh as a place of healing in traditional communities. It's not uncommon for a man facing surgery to go to mikveh beforehand to pray for himself, body and soul, to marshal whatever resources he can before undergoing the knife. That's a part of our tradition that's not widely known.

The connection between bodily integrity and mikveh is an old one, but we are reinventing it, reconstructing it. It's not reclaiming it purely—what's exciting is the creativity being applied to Jewish tradition. I recently became aware that some alcoholics have used the mikveh to mark periods of sobriety into their lives. Jews are very into counting days, and so is the Twelve-Step movement. We are trying to re-invent the mikveh for a population that hasn't used it before. The institution has pretty much been

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rejected by liberal Jews, but we're now seeing a reclaiming of traditions and a discovery of what's meaningful in ancient rituals.

*It's clear that you were dissatisfied with the local mikveh, but not everybody who's dissatisfied builds a new institution.*

I kvetched about it to all the rabbis I met, and I meet a lot of rabbis. I said, "This isn't right. Wouldn't it be great if there was a place where the family of a person converting to Judaism would walk in and say, 'Well, of course she wants to become Jewish. Look at this place.'" The mikveh is an entry point, and it should look beautiful and feel welcoming.

*Did you travel around to look at other mikvehs?*

I saw the one at the University of Judaism in Los Angeles, which everyone talks about as the great mikveh. It's very open and is run by warm, welcoming people who have collected various rituals, prayers, and poems that pertain to mikveh. But even they didn't have a room that could be used for a celebration. I'm not an objective observer, but there is no place like Mayyim Hayyim.

*You had to get involved in zoning issues, plumbing issues, architecture, fundraising, and so on. How did you know how to do all of this?*

I didn't. I had a lot of help from many, many people, starting with my friend Barbara Penzner, a Reconstructionist rabbi, and Paula Brody, head of outreach for the Reform movement in the Northeast. We met with Barry Shrage, president of the Combined Jewish Philanthropies, as the Boston federation is known, who said, "If you want this to happen, you'll have to do it." I guess I had been wishing for someone else to please, start the mikveh. But his response was, 'No, you start it.' Of course I had no idea what I was getting into. It had to be a kosher mikveh, so we hired a halakhic consultant.

*How do you find a mikveh consultant?*

You talk to people who have built a mikveh. The plumbing is what makes it kosher, so you need somebody who knows what they're doing to build the *bor*—literally, a pit, the place that natural water, in our case rainwater, is collected. We are working with Rabbi Ben Zion Bergman, who is both a Talmud scholar and a civil engineer, who supervised the building of the mikveh at the University of Judaism. He's been in touch with our architect and has come to Boston, where he met with many area rabbis to teach about mikveh and to consult about the kashrut of the pools and the plumbing.

*I know you mean the kashrut of the mikveh, but will there also be food involved?*

There's a kitchen, because if you convert, you might want to hold a reception. Or brides and grooms might want to celebrate their simcha. There are all kinds of reasons for going to this mikveh, including meetings and classes. A person can come to Mayyim Hayyim a hundred times and never get wet.

*So kashrut is the first concern?*

Well, halakhah is the first of Mayyim Hayyim's seven principles. Making it kosher means that the *bor* has to be built into the ground. The concrete is about ten feet thick, because any seepage would keep it from being kosher. The second principle is *tzniyut*, modesty. People who want to use the mikveh in the traditional way, with privacy and discretion, will be able to. This applies in a different way to battered women, who require secrecy. The building is constructed with these concerns in mind. Next comes *klal Yisrael*, which means that we recognize one Jewish people. Some people say we're post- or trans-denominational. I prefer to think of us as un-hyphenated. The fourth principle, *ahavat Yisrael*, means that we don't just "tolerate" differences in people's practice or affiliation; we respect them. I believe this is the first mikveh to be built specifically for the entire range of Jews, from unaffiliated through Orthodox, and for a wide variety of uses.

Then comes *hinukh*, education. Among other things, we're planning to set up institutional memberships so congregations and Hillels and day schools will be members. I hope that Jewish schools will be challenged to write curricula about the idea and the institution of mikveh, which would be a new step. I can imagine teachers bringing in a group of twelve-year-olds for a tour. They'll see the *bor*, where the rainwater is collected, and they'll learn that this is a place you might come to before you get married, or where your beloved might convert to Judaism, or maybe it's the place where Mommy converted to Judaism. They'll learn about the history of the mikveh, its contemporary uses, about water, about transitions, and so on. The sixth principle is *hiddur mitzvah*, making it a beautiful place, and finally, *petichut*, openness, which means that the mikveh will be both geographically accessible—we're in Newton, near a subway stop—and handicapped accessible. Barbara Penzner drafted these principles, and a group of rabbis helped us expand them and elaborate on them.

*I would imagine that ahavat yisrael is the toughest one to apply, perhaps more now than ever.*

It's very tricky, the question of the legitimacy of different forms of Judaism. We knew from the start that Orthodox women would be coming on a monthly basis, whether they tell their rabbis or not. A lot of Orthodox women don't care for the existing mikveh, and simply don't go. I think that's a secret in the modern Orthodox world.

*It seems so obvious when you lay it all out.*

Mikveh has been off the table all these years, but it's on the growing edge of Jewish practice in America. Things change. Twenty or thirty years ago, for example, almost nobody who wasn't Orthodox signed a ketubah, and if you did, you wouldn't necessarily remember where you had put it. Reform Jews didn't use one, and with Conservative Jews it was often a last-minute addition where the rabbi said, "Oh, here, sign this." It certainly wasn't a work of art. Today, a ketubah is part of virtually all Jewish weddings. Even if you're not affiliated or you don't believe in God, it's one of the things you do to get married.

*One of the things you're doing now is raising money for Mayyim Hayyim, which I gather is new for you. What have you learned about that?*

I've learned that I knew nothing about it. I grew up working class, and I absorbed a distrust of money, and of people with money, so I've had to examine my own prejudices about money and the people who have it. The Torah of money is very interesting. If you have a religious approach to it, the money you have isn't really "your" money. Money flows like water. You get to shepherd it for a while, and then you die. You don't get to keep it. The question is, what do you want to do with your money, with the money that flows through you?

I have gained an enormous respect for people who are philanthropic, and who think about what they're doing with their money, which isn't to deny themselves what they need and want, but to put their wealth to work for others, too. There's also a larger context here. Jews have a complicated history around money, in part because among the few things we were allowed to do in Europe were trade, finance, and money-lending. This is heavy stuff, deep and painful, and we haven't unpacked it yet. I'm trying to unpack my own relationship to money, and about how to ask for money, which isn't easy. I'm still struggling with it.

*Are you the only one raising money?*

Not at all. There is a dedicated group of people working on this. It's not *my* mikveh. I'm just the public face of it because of *The Red Tent*, but I was thrilled to see, in a recent story about Mayyim Hayyim in the local Jewish newspaper, that my name did not appear once.

*This mikveh is quite an achievement for Boston.*

To me, Boston is a kind of Yavneh. It's an extraordinary place, and I think that who I am and what I write are very much reflections of this place at this time. Wonderful leaders and teachers have made their home here, and now there's a whole crop of interesting younger rabbis moving into town. Boston has Harvard and MIT, and the great hospitals, and many other institutions of knowledge and research. It's a city that embraces the idea of life-long learning, but where people are open to innovation and change. I feel so fortunate to be living here.

*Let's talk about your early years. You come from Newark, and lived there for a while...*

I was born in Brooklyn in 1951, and we moved to Newark when I was two. We were middle class in a Jewish neighborhood, consisting of single-family homes with small back yards. I would have gone to Weequahic High School, made famous by Philip Roth, but we moved to Denver in 1965 because my father had a bad arthritic condition and New Jersey was too humid for him. He was a typesetter, but he couldn't get into the typo-grapher's union in New Jersey. He got a union job at the *Denver Post*, setting hot type, which doesn't exist anymore. When they switched over, he worked for a while as a proofreader.

*It's tempting to make assumptions about the daughter of a printer who becomes a writer.*

Well, like many printers, he was a very literate man. He was a big reader, and in a different universe he might have been a teacher. He was born in Germany, and moved to Italy as a boy. My mother was born in Poland and grew up in France. They survived the war in internment camps. My father's immediate family survived, although his extended family was wiped out. I grew up in the shadow of the Holocaust.

*And what were they like Jewishly?*

They weren't observant. We were cultural, ethnic, political, and ethical Jews. Back in Newark, I have a vague memory of my father storming

out of a shul on Rosh Hashanah because they were asking for tickets. "I'm not going to the theater!" he said.

*It would be hard to think of a more damaging practice in American Jewish life than the widespread insistence on High Holiday tickets. Were your parents political?*

Definitely. They were out on the left edge of the Democratic party, and were big Adlai Stevenson supporters. I remember my parents arguing in favor of socialized medicine, which is now called universal health care.

*At what point did your Jewish involvements begin?*

When my brother turned twelve, we joined Temple Emanuel, one of those huge classical Reform congregations in the Midwest, with a big organ and an invisible choir. But I had a couple of very good teachers. Rabbi Raymond Zwerin, who was active in Jewish education in Denver, was an important early teacher, and I joined NFTY, the Reform youth group. Soon I was taking trains and buses to Kansas City, Omaha, St. Louis, and other exotic locations, and falling in love with boys from those places at NFTY conventions. I was a song leader, and played guitar. It was mostly American folk music, but we sang Hebrew songs, too. I recall loving "Eli, Eli."

*I know that you went to college at the University of Colorado, and finished at Washington University with a degree in comparative literature. And then, at some point, you moved to Boston.*

I moved after getting an M.A. in English at SUNY Binghamton. I moved to Boston to become a poet, of all things, and got a job writing grant proposals. I started freelancing as a journalist for *In These Times*, a democratic-socialist weekly with a national circulation, and *Equal Times*, a feminist paper in Boston, and then *The Boston Phoenix*, the city's alternative weekly. I had no Jewish involvements at that point. When I met Jim, who wasn't Jewish, I realized that if we got married and had children, I would want our kids to be Jewish. But I had no idea how that would happen. I didn't even know why it mattered so much, because Judaism wasn't part of my life.

I had written a couple of columns on where to go on the High Holidays if you're not affiliated, but when I went to one of the services I had recommended, I felt ranted at—about Israel and about intermarriage, to the point where I wondered, What am I doing here? In the late 1970s I wrote a piece about what is now called Jewish renewal. I visited Havurat Shalom, although the founding generation was gone, and I interviewed Larry Kushner



on the phone. Jim and I joined a Jewish book group, and started lighting candles on Friday night. Jim, who was born in Iran and grew up in New Jersey, had a Presbyterian background and had considered becoming a minister, although most of his girlfriends had been Jewish.

*Joining a Jewish book group together sounds like a conscious step toward Judaism.*

It was another step in my journey, and Jim was happy to be part of it. When we started talking about marriage, I remembered Larry Kushner and called him to ask if he performed intermarriages, although I could barely get the words out. He said, "No, but let me explain why I don't," and he did. Then he said, "But if your fiancé wants to talk to me about the possibility of converting, have him call me."

*So even though he said no, it didn't feel like a rejection.*

It was the nature of the "no"—it was "no, but." I can't tell you how many stories I've heard about the secretary biting the caller's head off when someone calls to make an appointment with the rabbi. "No, he doesn't do that, click." I told Jim what Larry had said, and he called. We started studying, which included an Introduction to Judaism course offered by the Reform movement.

*And you were learning along with him.*

Absolutely. It was my first Hebrew class. We became part of the Beth El community. Jim converted, and we went to the mikveh with three rabbis, who had a serious conversation with Jim. The purpose of the bet din at that point is to ensure the person's sincerity: that's the essential requirement of the convert.

Around that time, while we were planning our wedding, I asked Larry, "What should I read?" He looked around his office and said, "You know, the books I've seen are pretty bad. You should write a book about Jewish weddings." I hadn't written any books yet, and I was looking for an idea. I looked through the existing books, which were either Orthodox, or about etiquette. None of them explained, in a way that was accessible

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to me, what *yichud* was, or what *huppah* meant. None of them covered anything creative, or explained how to use traditional language in a way that was egalitarian. I remember when Larry Kushner suggested *yichud*, I thought: what a good idea that is! To sit still for ten minutes with your bride or groom seemed so astute, so smart, so right.

I wrote *The New Jewish Wedding* the year after we were married, while I was still a bride, because one is a bride or a groom for a full year. I was at the beginning of my Jewish learning, it was all fresh and wonderfully new. While I was working on the book, I put an ad in *Moment Magazine* asking for new wedding traditions, and that's how I met Barbara Penzner, who was a rabbinical student at the time. I wrote a proposal, found an agent, and we sold the book to Arthur Samuelson at Summit.

*Arthur was a brilliant publisher.*

I agree, and I followed him from one publishing house to the next. He did a great deal for the Jewish community in the books he published. *Back to the Sources*, which he developed with Barry Holtz, is a wonderful resource—beautifully written and very complete. Anyway, *The New Jewish Wedding* came out to a thunderous silence. You think your world is going to change after you publish a book, and it doesn't.

*What makes it worse is that your well-meaning friends will tell you that your book will be a best-seller, and a part of you believes them, even though you know better. I remember giving your book a blurb, and I still remember what I said: "I wish this book had been around when I got married."*

So do I! That's why I wrote it, because it wasn't there. I went to my first Jewish Book Fair, in Houston, and eight people showed up. But years later it's still in print, and it still sells, although it took seven years to earn out its modest advance. My Jewish books aren't big sellers, but they're steady. A couple of years later, when I was pregnant, I forgot about my earlier vow not to write any more Jewish books because I didn't want to be typecast. I went ahead and wrote *The New Jewish Baby Book*. The Jewish books have more or less followed my own development, except for the one on conversion, which is out of sequence, because for that one, which is a bit more prescriptive than the others, I felt that I had to attain a certain level of knowledge and confidence. I wrote *Living a Jewish Life* after teaching a couple of courses at Beth El to families who were trying to figure out how to incorporate Judaism into their lives. I didn't think the existing books were friendly enough, and most

of them assumed too much knowledge. I assume curiosity, interest, and intelligence, but I don't assume any background.

*For many people, one of your titles may be the first Jewish book they've ever read.*

Sometimes, and it's a great honor to hear from readers who tell me that I opened a door for them.

*But that gives you a kind of responsibility that you probably never imagined. When you look at your oeuvre, if you'll forgive such a pretentious word, they're gateway books. You've become the introduction to Judaism author for many people.*

My responsibility is to write clearly and accurately. This is a great tradition filled with choices. My agenda is that I want people to make Jewish choices that are meaningful to them, period. Not everybody understands this: I've sometimes been asked whether *The New Jewish Wedding* and *How to Be a Jewish Parent* are humor books! But it's up to the reader to decide where to enter and what choices to start with. No one ever knows where that will lead, but I try to open the door to this great, rich, wise tradition. And then I hope that readers will find the communities they deserve, the rabbis they deserve. My mantra is: Start wherever you are, explore, and find yourself a community.



William Novak is the former editor of *Response and New Traditions*, and co-editor, with Moshe Waldoks, of *The Big Book of Jewish Humor*. Previous issues of *Kerem* have included his interviews with Richard Israel, Moshe Waldoks, Arthur Green, Blu Greenberg, and Lawrence Kushner.