

Making Peace With My Religious Level of Jewish Observance

by Hannah M. Heller

The cozy, warm feeling of a heated home on a cold, rainy day. The togetherness and unity with my family and synagogue. The joy of singing Zemirot together at a festive meal on Shabbat. This was the Orthodox Judaism I experienced as a young child. My father was an Orthodox Rabbi in small towns. We were the family people admired for our dedication to being observant Jews in a secular environment.

Gradually, over the decades, I have observed several changes in the Orthodox community. The dominant form of Orthodox Judaism today is far more stringent than the orthodoxy I knew. The Orthodox Judaism I knew growing up has been greatly challenged by an increasingly stricter and more isolated Orthodox Judaism. When I first encountered Orthodox communities where customs and traditions felt so much more restrictive to me, it felt like a personal attack on my background and my family. It felt like others were challenging my family's identification with Orthodox Judaism.

Some of my fondest memories of my childhood home include the Zemirot we all sang together at the Shabbat table. Over the years, we learned many different tunes and we sang them with different harmonies. It was around this time that a group called The Rabbis' Sons came out with their first and second records (yes, it was the era of record players - that's how old I am!). I became very excited when words that were part of our prayers were now popular songs, which made davening more meaningful. When my sisters and I would help clean up from the Shabbat meals, we would often sing some of the songs on The Rabbis' Sons albums. My father used to say perhaps we should have a record called The Rabbis' Daughters.

My first experience with a Jewish community that challenged my identity with Orthodox Judaism was at a cousin's family celebration. There was a large group seated at many tables that Friday night. They started to sing Zemirot and my sister and I joined in. Suddenly, loads of men wearing black hats opened their mouths and stared at us. My sister said that somehow she had the feeling we were not supposed to be singing. I noticed also that the women had long skirts and long sleeves and the men and women were not sitting together. The people in the extended family by marriage didn't understand how my sister and I could be in public school and manage without a Bais Yaakov in town. We were happy to return home to our own way of life, a life with a way of practicing Judaism where we felt more included.

Fast forward to my junior year of college, which I decided to spend at a seminary in Israel. I had several friends at Touro College (an Orthodox Jewish college in New York City) who were also planning to do this or who had done it the previous year, so I knew I would have to wear skirts all the time and get used to the more stringent environment. I felt it might be worth the effort to be able to have the experience of being in the Holy Land for a year and increasing my Jewish education and knowledge of the Hebrew language. What I did not anticipate was that people would challenge my identity and my sincerity again.

Someone asked me if my father was really an Orthodox rabbi. A girl told me I should not wear red clothing because it excites men. For the first days of Sukkot, the seminary placed us with different families. In the home where I was placed, there was a curtain in the Sukkah. The men's side had most of the food, singing and joy of the Yom Tov. The women were in a small section behind the curtain with a limited amount of food and we served the men. The man of the house told his wife to tell me not to help serve because he felt my dress was too short (my dress was a little above the knee).

Later in the year, I was at another Shabbat table with two other seminary girls and three guys from a local yeshiva. One of the guys was making conversation with us and asked us where we were from. I started to engage in the conversation only for the husband to say, "Umm, there's a mechitza at this table for a reason." It wasn't an actual mechitza - the men were on one side and the women were on the other side but there was no wall between us. Another time, I was invited to an Oneg Shabbat on a Friday night. Being a social person, I engaged in conversation. One of the guys wanted to go out on a date with me. A short time later I was called into the office of one of the administrators at my seminary. He said that someone inquired about a shidduch for me and he asked me if I was ready to think about marriage. I was puzzled that if a guy wanted to go out with me he didn't just ask me out directly. The administrator explained that background checks were required and dating didn't work that way in this kind of community. We did go out, but the match didn't work out. I thought the whole experience was odd although I was flattered that the guy wanted to spend more time talking to me. I started to wonder, was something off with me or had the Orthodox world gone crazy?!

Something that had bothered me even in my comfortable Jewish experience of childhood had become even more intense as I noticed the movement towards more stringencies in the Orthodox Jewish world. I never did get a satisfactory answer about why women didn't take an active part in leading services. I remember my parents being puzzled when the Reform movement ordained Sally Preisand, its first female rabbi.

In 1989, my husband and I moved to Highland Park, NJ. A year or two later, a group of women in the Orthodox community started a Women's Tefillah Group, which met once a month and on special holidays. We would pray together with lots of singing and chant from a Torah scroll. It was from these leaders that I learned how to chant the Torah and Haftorah. I was amazed at how quickly I learned the notes and the patterns. When we moved to Baltimore in 1996 for my husband's job and there was no Women's Tefillah Group, I found out about a Conservative egalitarian synagogue that was walking distance from my home. I could go there and still keep Shabbat. I have been there ever since and I have been Torah Reading Coordinator for the past several years. When I give Divrei Torah there, read Torah and Haftorah and lead services, I feel that I am living a vibrant Judaism, one that includes everyone. While my lifestyle may be more traditional than most of the people there, I always feel welcome and included.

It took several years for me to stop feeling guilty about not wanting to be on the more stringent side of Orthodoxy. Over the years I have met people who are stricter with Orthodoxy and still do everything they can to help me feel comfortable. While I am never going to live the way they do and they will not be taking on my lifestyle, we can still be friends and find common interests in Judaism. I think my experiences living among more right-wing Orthodox Jews has made me so much more passionate about finding meaning in Judaism. It is important to me that a Dvar Torah be shared at a Shabbat table. My Modern Orthodox friends here often expect me to come prepared to share words of Torah with everyone.

The latest trends of erasing photos of women, not allowing women to speak in public, having excessively high mechitzahs, and other ways of restricting women's visibility and activities have awakened many people to the realization that things have gone too far. I am grateful to the leaders among us who are taking a stand against some of these extreme behaviors.

We are all created B'tzelem Elokim, in the image of God. It does not matter that people practice Judaism differently from one another. Instead of trying to persuade others to be more like us, perhaps it is more important to show that everyone can be included and everyone has a voice. Life would be boring if we were all the same in every way. There is room for all of us and we all play an important role in being part of Jewish communities throughout the world.