

# Next Year In Jerusalem

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by Ellen Willis



*A groundbreaking chronicle of spiritual search, originally published in Rolling Stone magazine, April 1977.*

*In the book, "Anatomy of a Search", Rabbi Akiva Tatz tells a story of a young Jewish man searching for meaning in the East who was given an article by my sister Ellen Willis in Rolling Stone magazine. The monk who gave him the article, a Jew who had become a Buddhist, suggested that he read the article and go check out his own heritage first in Jerusalem.*

*I can vouch for the story, because he came first to find me in Jerusalem. And his story wasn't, because many spiritual seekers over the years found their search reflected in my sister's article. It can probably be truthfully said that no single work in English about the process of teshuva – certainly no work of journalism – has had such a profound impact on so many people since it was published in April 1977.*

*Since then, and until today, I have been stopped by people who remember my picture in the magazine. They tell me how that article played such a key role in their development when, starting on their path to Jewish observance, they came across or were given it. And invariably, they ask the question: what ever happened to your sister?*

*In fact, my sister, who passed away from cancer five months ago at 64, didn't go further into Judaism, although her article gave many logical reasons to continue. It was her ability to reflect so honestly on the struggle between a desire for the truth and a fear of change that made her article*

*such a powerful influence on others, many of whom came to different conclusions than she did.*

*Sometimes, by one act, a person can attain eternity. May the merit of those people who have had their lives changed because of my sister's honest struggle (and those who even today can continue to identify with it) stay with her forever.*

– Rabbi Chaim Willis,  
Executive Director of Aish South Africa

## I. GENESIS

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In the spring of 1975, my brother Michael, then 24, was on his way home from his third trip through Asia when he arrived in Israel, planning to stay a few weeks before heading back to New York. On April 28th, he wrote to our parents: "I've been staying at, of all things, an Orthodox Jewish yeshiva – when I got to Jerusalem I went to visit the Wailing Wall and got invited – they hang around there looking for unsuspecting tourists to proselytize. It's sort of a Jewish Jesus-freak type outfit – dedicated to bringing real Judaism to backsliding Jews. I haven't been especially impressed by the message, but it's been a really interesting week." On June 4th, he wrote me, "I've had my lack of faith shaken."

I appreciated the ironic turn of phrase. Then its meaning hit. I read on: "I've read and talked about it enough to realize that the arguments for the existence of G-d (a spelling which shows how superstitious I'm becoming) – and the Jewish version of it at that – are very plausible and intellectually if not emotionally convincing... It's frightening, because while I can convince myself of the possibility and even probability of the religion, I don't like it – its 613 commandments, its puritanism, its political conservatism, its Jews-first philosophy. On the other hand, if it is the truth, not to follow it means turning your back on the truth." He was postponing his return till the end of July.

I called my parents. My mother thought I was being an alarmist – Mike couldn't be serious about religion; it was too removed from the way he'd been brought up. "He's spelling God 'G-d,'" I said. There is a religious law that you cannot destroy paper on which you have spelled out "God."

Two weeks later they got another letter: "I haven't written because I'm having trouble describing what's happening. I feel more and more that I'm trapped into a religion whose truth I can't deny ... I've never given much thought to the existence of God – my LSD experiences had (same as with Ellen) left me with the idea that there was 'something' there, but I never thought it was knowable or explainable (& if it was explainable certainly more in terms of mystical experience & Buddhism than the 'God of our Fathers' of Judaism). But my time here has really forced me to come to terms with what that 'something' might be ... I'm not Jesus-freaking out – I haven't come to this through any blinding moment of illumination or desire to be part of a group – it's been an intellectual process (which I've been fighting emotionally all the way), and I'd like nothing better than to reject it – I just don't think I'll be able to.

"The final shock in this letter is that I may not leave here at the end of July. If I accept this as the truth, I have to take time to learn about it."

The "truth" Mike proposed to accept was Judaism in its most extreme, absolutist form: the God of the Old Testament exists; He has chosen the Jewish people to carry out His will; the Torah (the Five Books of Moses and the Oral Law elaborating on them) is literally the word of God, revealed to the Jews at Mt. Sinai; the

creation, the miracles in Egypt, and other biblical events actually happened; the Torah's laws, which are based on 613 *mitzvot* (commandments) and govern every aspect of one's existence, must be obeyed in every detail; they are eternal, unchangeable.

My parents had the same first impulse: "Let's go to Israel and bring him home." My father was already out of his chair and about to leave the house to go buy plane tickets when they looked at each other and decided they were overreacting. My own reaction was a kind of primal dread. In my universe, intelligent, sensible people who had grown up in secular homes in the second half of the 20th century did not embrace biblical fundamentalism – let alone arrive at it through an "intellectual process." My brother was highly intelligent, had always seemed sensible. What was going on?

My father is a retired police lieutenant; my mother is a housewife. They married during the Depression and now live in a house with a paid up mortgage in a modestly middle-class section of Queens, New York. They are college educated, literary-minded and politically liberal. I am the oldest of their three children; my sister, a graduate student in linguistics, is in the middle; Mike is the youngest. Mike and I were born in December, nine years apart almost to the day. The coincidence of birthdays is one of many similarities. If the prospect of Mike's becoming an Orthodox Jew was frightening, it was not simply because he was my brother, someone I loved. I felt an almost mystical identification with Mike. Our baby pictures were identical, and though Mike was now taller and thinner than I, we had the same fair skin, curly brown hair, and astigmatic, sleepy green eyes. We were (not that I really believed in that stuff – still...) cliché Sagittarians: analytical, preoccupied with words and ideas. We were inclined to repress feelings; our intellectual confidence coexisted with emotional insecurity and a tendency to depressions.

I was fascinated with the notion that Mike was what I might have become had I been a man, the lastborn instead of the first – a child of the Seventies rather than the Sixties. I wondered how much the differences between us had to do with our circumstances rather than our basic natures. For there were differences, of course. Mike was much more reserved than I; he rarely talked about his feelings, his problems or his relationships. I was more worldly, more willing to compete in and compromise with a hostile system. My friendships were central to my life; he was, or seemed to be, a loner.

The qualities we shared were more pronounced in Mike, the opposing tendencies more hidden. Next to him I always felt a bit irrational and uncool. Picture a recurrent family scene: my father and I are sitting in the kitchen, having a passionate political argument. My brother is listening, not saying a word. Suddenly I put myself in his place, become self-conscious. I hear all the half-truths and rhetorical exaggerations that in the emotion of the moment I have allowed to pass my lips. I realize, with chagrin, that my father and I have had, and my brother has listened to, the same argument at least half a dozen times before. I am sure Mike thinks we are ridiculous.

I was disturbed and mystified by what I saw as my brother's swing from a skepticism more rigorous than my own to an equally extreme credulity. How could anyone familiar with the work of a certain Viennese Jew possibly believe in God the Father? What puzzled me even more was Mike's insistence that he was being reluctantly convinced by irresistible arguments. It seemed to me that his critical intelligence could only be in the way.

**I knew that connecting with Reality was the crucial business of life, the key to freedom, sanity, happiness.**

On acid I had, as Mike observed, experienced the *something* that Westerners have most commonly called "God" – the source of all truth, beauty, goodness. Unlike Mike, I had felt that I knew what it was. "So this is what it's all about," I had marveled. "It's so simple. So obvious. And I've known it all the time. I just didn't know I knew." But when I came down it was less obvious. The ecstasy – a word that didn't quite convey a feeling as

natural as a spring thaw, as comfortable as coming home – gradually slipped away. "All God is," I would try to explain, "is reality – the simple, wonderful reality behind the abstract concepts and ingrained habits of perception that keep us from ever really experiencing it." And I would sound hopelessly abstract even to myself. Soon, whatever clouded the doors of perception in ordinary life began to invade my acid trips as well. I tried to fight that process-doggedly pursuing the right mood, the right situation – and only made things worse; finally, frustrated and demoralized, I stopped tripping. The entire experience had a permanent, profound effect on the way I saw myself and the world. I knew that connecting with Reality – I couldn't call it God; to me that word meant an old man with a white beard – was the crucial business of life, the key to freedom, sanity, happiness. I knew that if I could make the connection I would think: "How silly of me to have forgotten!" But I didn't know how to proceed.

This problem was not, of course, peculiar to me. It had been plaguing spiritual seekers for thousands of years. Many had tried, far more eloquently than I, to express what they agreed was inexpressible. Recognizing the inadequacy of intellectual analysis, religions tried to evoke the crucial connection through myths, rituals, rules of conduct. But in the end religion, like language, tried to express the truth in concrete form and so inevitably distorted it. If all religions were inspired by a common Reality, each reflected the particular cultural, political and psychological limitations of the people who invented and practiced it. Which posed another problem. If you understood that your religion was only an imperfect approach to the truth, you remained outside it, an observer, a critic. If, on the other hand, you truly believed – worshipped an omnipotent God, accepted Jesus as your savior, surrendered to a guru – you were confusing a set of metaphors for reality with Reality itself. And that put you back on square one. Or did it?

On my second acid trip I had had a joyous vision of the birth of Christ. In one part of my mind I had become an early Christian, experiencing the ecstasy of grace, redemption, the washing away of sin. But on a deeper level I had remained aloof, thinking, "Remember, you are a Jew." For the first time I had had a wistful inkling of what it must be like to be committed to a powerful myth. Maybe if you had faith that Jesus would save you, He would. Maybe the point was simply to stop listening to that observer/critic inside my head, to surrender my will, to have faith, and what I had faith in didn't matter any more than whether I took a train or a bus to my destination.

"Suppose you had faith in Hitler?" my observer/critic, that irrepressible crank, could not help objecting. Still, part of what had messed up my acid trips was doubt, whispering like the serpent: What if the straight world is right, and what you think is Reality is a seductive hallucination? I couldn't assent to the experience without reservation, following wherever it led: it might lead to insanity. So I tried to compromise. I wanted to tap the ecstasy whenever I wanted and be "normal" the rest of the time. It was, I suppose, the same impulse that makes sinners go to church on Sunday, with much the same result.

I was aware of the link between my skepticism and my Jewishness. It was, after all, the Jew who was the perennial doubter, the archetypal outsider, longing for redemption while dismissing the claims of would-be redeemers as so much snake oil. But what did any of this have to do with the kind of Jewishness my brother was talking about?

Mike had grown up in the economic and cultural slough of the Seventies. Though he had always been an excellent student, he had never liked school; he had found college as boring and meaningless as high school and elementary school before that. Since graduating from the University of Michigan in 1970, with a B.A. in Chinese, he had spent nearly half his time traveling. Recurrent asthma had kept him from being drafted. Between trips he would come back to New York and drive a cab to make money for the next trip. He had never had a job he liked. During his last stay in New York he had begun writing articles about Asia, and he

had gone back with the idea of doing more. He had had a few pieces in newspapers, but no major breakthrough, and one major disappointment: an article he'd worked hard on was first accepted by a magazine, then sent back.

Mike was also depressed about Cambodia and Vietnam. In 1973 he had spent almost two months in Cambodia and had come away convinced that as much as the people hated the corrupt Lon Nol government, they did not want the Americans to leave and permit a Communist takeover. As Mike saw it, they wanted to be left alone to farm while the Khmer Rouge made them take sides and shot those who chose incorrectly; they were religious Buddhists, while the Communists were anti-religious and would make young men work instead of becoming monks; in short, they wanted to return to their traditional, pre-war way of life, which the Communists would permanently destroy. Those premises had led Mike to what seemed an unavoidable conclusion: the Americans should not withdraw. For someone who had shared the American left's assumptions about the war, it was a disturbing reversal. If he had been wrong about Cambodia, he thought, perhaps he had been wrong about Vietnam. This past fall, a return trip to Cambodia and two weeks in Vietnam had reinforced his doubt.

**I worried that he was succumbing to an authoritarian illusion in an attempt to solve (or escape from) his problems.**

When Mike arrived in Jerusalem, he had been traveling for seven months. He was going home to uncertain writing prospects, another cab job or something similar, no close friends, isolation in a political atmosphere that took for granted the assumptions he had discarded, and a general ambiance of post counterculture aimlessness. It took no great insight to suspect that what traditional Judaism offered – absolute values to which Mike could dedicate his life; a new and exciting subject to study; a close-knit religious community; a stable, secure social structure – was considerably more attractive. Anyway, I didn't believe that people ever made profound spiritual changes for purely intellectual reasons. There had to be feelings Mike wasn't acknowledging. Not that this proved anything about the validity of Judaism. A believer could argue that Mike had been drifting because he hadn't found God, that his unhappiness was, in fact, God's way of leading him to the truth. Still, I worried that he was succumbing to an authoritarian illusion in an attempt to solve (or escape from) his problems.

In answer to my request for more details, Mike sent a seven page, single-spaced typed letter. I chewed it over, making notes in the margin. Much of it was devoted to debunking evolution. The marvelous complexity and interdependence of everything in the universe – so the argument ran – show planning and purpose and could not have come about through the random process of natural selection. Plants and animals are perfectly constructed machines; the brain has been compared to a computer. When you see a computer your obvious conclusion is that someone built it according to a plan. ("Rampant anthropomorphism" I scribbled.) Every detail of creation is purposeful. For example, ready-to-eat fruits (like apples) have tempting, bright colors; vegetables that require cooking (like potatoes) are drab. ("What about toadstools?") No one has ever seen a mutation that changed one species into another. How does evolution explain something like a poisonous snake, whose survival advantage depends on a combination of traits, each useless alone? Did its poison come first, and did it then wait around millions of years for the ability to inject or vice versa? And why did creation stop; why aren't new things constantly coming into being? ("Human chauvinism!" I wrote. "Who says creation stopped – new life forms take eons – we can't even see plants grow.")

As for the God-given nature of the Torah, when you study it in Hebrew, along with the commentaries that have been written on virtually every word, it is hard to believe that such depth and complexity could have been achieved by human beings; Judaism is such a restrictive religion that the Jews would never have accepted it if the entire people hadn't witnessed the revelation; biblical prophecies predict the Jewish exile, the return to Israel and other historical events. The prophecies were impressive, I had to admit: "Ye will be

torn away from the land whither thou goest ... and God will scatter you among the nations ... thou wilt find no ease and there will be no resting place for the sole of thy foot... And then God thy God will return ... and gather thee together..." And so on. I began to get a headache.

Finally, my brother came to the subject I had been anticipating and dreading: women. Orthodox Judaism enshrined as divine law a male supremacist ideology I had been struggling against, in one way or another, all my life. It was a patriarchal religion that decreed separate functions for the sexes – man to learn, administer religious law and exercise public authority: woman to sanctify the home. For Mike to accept it would be (*face it!*) a betrayal. Already I had had the bitter thought: "You want to go back in time, find a community where mamma will still take care of you. You're just like the rest." Under the anger was fear that my sense of special connection with my brother was an illusion. *If I were a man ... if he were a woman ...* there was an unbridgeable gap in that *if*.

From a secular viewpoint, Mike conceded, Judaism gave men the better deal, but from a religious viewpoint it wasn't so clear. For one thing, God-fearing men, though they had the power to oppress women, would not do so. And if our purpose on earth was not to do interesting work or have a good time but to come close to God, then women had certain advantages: they had fewer commandments to perform, fewer opportunities to sin, and by having children could approach God more easily.

"Power to oppress is oppressive." I wrote in the margin. "Power corrupts the saintliest man. Exemption from responsibilities is implicit insult." Yet I realized that, after all, my objections were beside the point. This God, if He really existed, had chosen to create a hierarchy of sexes. Doubtless He had some purpose in mind, some spiritual test, perhaps a lesson in conquering pride. It might seem unfair, but it had to be for the best in the end ... and I could never believe in such a God, never, it violated my surest sense of what Reality was about. When you connected there were no hierarchies, divisions, roles; all that was part of the husk that fell away. "I am the vanguard of the revolution!" I had shouted, high on acid, climbing up a mountain trail followed by two men who were truly my equals, our battle-of-the-sexes fright masks discarded somewhere down the road. There would be misunderstandings later, but that was another story.

No, I couldn't believe in the Jewish God. He had been invented by men seeking a rationale for their privileges. He had been invented by people seeking to reduce an ineffable Reality to terms they could understand – to a quasi-human "creator" with a "plan" and a "purpose," standing outside the universe and making it the way a carpenter made a table.

In August, my parents visited Mike in Jerusalem. He was still living and studying at Yeshivat Aish HaTorah. A yeshiva is a school where Jews study Torah; this one also functioned as a small religious community. It occupied modest quarters – a communal study room, a few classrooms, a library, an office for the rabbi – in the Jewish section of the Old City; several nearby apartments served as dormitories. Aish HaTorah (the name means "Fire of the Torah") is an English speaking yeshiva headed by Noach Weinberg, a rabbi from New York. Most of its students – there were around 25 at the time – were young Americans; most had been tourists passing through. Mike was taking courses in Chumash (the Five Books of Moses), the Mishna (the written codification of the Oral Law), halacha (Jewish law), Biblical Hebrew, and "48 Ways to Gain Knowledge" (talks by the rabbi on Jewish ideas about learning). His weekday schedule began at seven in the morning, with an hour of prayer before breakfast. Ordinarily, he had classes and study hours from 9 to 1, then lunch and 20 minutes of afternoon prayer, classes and study from 3 to 7:30, dinner, evening prayer from 8:30 to 9, and more classes till 10. He usually studied till around 11:30. During mother and dad's visit, he was taking some time off in the afternoon and evening.

My parents had both, in their individual ways, been struggling to come to terms with Mike's "conversion." My mother considered herself in some sense religious; she believed in God, even believed that the Torah might be God-given. But she couldn't see that God required us to observe all those regulations. Wasn't it enough to be a good person? Characteristically, she focused on practical concerns. Was Mike happy? Would religion give him what he badly needed – something satisfying to do with his life?

My father was the son of an Orthodox rabbi, but for all his adult life he had equated rationalism and religious tolerance with enlightenment. Clarence Darrow, defending Scopes and evolution against Bryan and the fundamentalist know-nothings had been his intellectual hero. To have a child of his reject those values was a painful shock. But he had been forced by his respect for Mike's mind – and no doubt by the logic of his own belief in tolerance – to reexamine his attitudes. He went to Jerusalem prepared to listen.

**In quest of truth, he was breaking with the values and assumptions of his family, his peers, American society and the entire post-Enlightenment West.**

The trip was reassuring. Mike seemed happier, more relaxed, more sure of himself. He was enjoying his studies. "He was different," my father told me. "There was a step up in emotional vibration. I'd never seen him so enthusiastic before." I remained skeptical; Mike's enthusiasm might be some sort of manic facade. I was still working on my reply to his long letter, debating whether to mention my qualms about his motives. From one point of view, Mike was doing something incredibly brave, even heroic: in quest of truth as he saw it he was breaking with the values and assumptions of his family, his peers, American society and the entire post-Enlightenment West. For me to bring up psychology would be to add whatever clout I had to the enormous pressure of conventional wisdom that Mike was probably having trouble enough resisting. And then there was my old religious question: even if Judaism confused its central metaphor with absolute truth, would it work for Mike if he believed? Judaism, I reminded myself, was a spiritual discipline that had been practiced for over 3000 years; psychotherapy had existed for less than a hundred, with inconclusive results.

For three years I had been seeing a Reichian therapist. I was seeking relief from specific emotional problems, but my larger spiritual problem lurked in the back of my mind. What, after all, were emotional problems but forms of – or metaphors for – disconnection? The Reichian method is based on the premise that muscular tensions hold back repressed emotions which the therapist can elicit by attacking the bodily "armor" directly, bypassing the treacherous intellect. I believed this approach worked; it had helped me a lot. Yet I could claim no miracles, only that I had come – slowly, undramatically – to feel better, see more clearly. For all I knew, my brother would get further with Judaism.

Still – suppose Mike was really being trapped, not by arguments but by his emotions? Suppose by bringing up my worries I could help him – by which I meant save him. For despite my theoretical conviction that we all had to seek the truth in our own way, I hoped, with guilty passion, that Mike would get off this particular path, would wake up one morning, ask, "What am I doing here?" and come home. I decided to say what I had to say. For me, Freud was far closer than Darwin to the heart of the matter.

## II. THE MIRROR

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*In America most of the time I was unhappy and bored. I couldn't find what I wanted to do or people I wanted to be with. You were supposed to be very hip and inside I wasn't. I didn't identify with hip people or enjoy being around them. I couldn't figure out where I fit in. Traveling was my escape. I would go through a lot of rottenness and boredom for the sake of some periods of happiness – experiences that really took me out of myself, like trekking in the Himalayas.*

*When I came to Israel from Jordan I was very tired out and I wanted to go home. I didn't have much money left. There was a girl I really wanted to go back and see though I had no reason to believe she would want to see me. I was really homesick. But I felt a responsibility to see something new. I went with the guy from the yeshiva looking for an interesting experience. Reb Noach gave me the usual pitch: "Stay here for a week. If you haven't seen a yeshiva you haven't seen Israel." We had a big political argument – I said things looked bad for Israel and the only reasonable thing to do was give back the occupied land and make peace. We had a talk about the moral imperative proof of God. Reb Noach asked where I got my concept of good. I said, "From my parents."*

*That week I realized Judaism was much more interesting than I'd thought. When I read Jewish philosophy I realized my mind was Jewish. I felt that for the first time I had found people who thought the way I did, who were really logical and consistent. But the idea of God was very alien to me. Then I read a pamphlet about Torah and science. I started reading the arguments about evolution. Suddenly I had a flash: "This whole theory is ridiculous!" It had a tremendous effect. I felt that my mind had been playing tricks on me. I'd been accepting this theory without really looking into it – just like Cambodia. Logically, you knock down the theory of evolution and you're stuck with – God created the world.*

*I left to do some traveling and went to Safed. I was sitting down looking at a map and two English guys, students of this Hassid who was up from Tel Aviv for the weekend, invited me to meet him. I went and we started talking. He had pure charisma. I related to Reb Noach as a good person, but this Hassid was someone with power. He said that people go all around the world looking into this and that and they know it's not true – then they're hit with Judaism and they leave because they're afraid it's true. It had a big effect on me because of my realization about evolution and because I'd been asking myself why I was leaving. I knew I was scared to stay and check it out.*

*The English guys kept telling me there are no coincidences, it wasn't an accident that I was there at the same time the Hassid happened to be visiting. I started getting scared – was all this really true? I felt lousy about myself. I had always prided myself on being open-minded. Now I had no logical reasoning for leaving, just an emotional desire to go home. I felt totally wiped out.*

*When I got back to the yeshiva I started reading Torah with the Hirsch commentaries. There was a daily Chumash [Five Books] class. I was learning some Hebrew and could feel the power of the Torah much more than in translation. And the prophecies – I kept trying to find arguments against the prophecies and couldn't come up with any.*

*After two or three weeks I was in doubt – what was I going to do? One day I was reading the prophecies at the end of Deuteronomy and I had this cold shiver – I realized that I really believed all this. My first reaction was to compromise – I would go home, read, then decide. Or I would take a few years and travel and then come back. Finally I realized my whole life would have to change.*

*The first time I went to Southeast Asia I had a lot of asthma trouble. I'd almost feel like I was having a heart attack. Sometimes my pills wouldn't work and I was afraid they would just stop working. When I got into religion I realized – how can I expect a pill to work? God controls what goes on. Your life can be snuffed out at any moment. That had a strong part in keeping me here. It wasn't that I started believing in God to conquer a fear of death. Intellectually believing doesn't do that anyway. But I realized I couldn't compromise and say two years from now I'll come back, because there's no assurance of anything.*

*I went and cancelled my plane ticket. It was painful. I was afraid my family would reject me, think I was crazy. My mind was telling me one thing. My emotions still wanted to go home.*

Around Thanksgiving Mike came to New York for a month. Seeing him was a relief. His skullcap and newly grown beard made him look less boyish, but he was still wearing jeans. I felt no distance between us, no sense that he was in any way not himself. I hugged him, wondering if the Orthodox prohibition against men touching women they weren't married to applied to sisters.

Mike stayed with our parents. So that he could observe the dietary laws, mother bought him his own dishes and silverware and pots, boiled her cooking utensils and took them to a mikva (ritual bath), cleaned the oven and left it on at the hottest setting for two hours, served him kosher food, cooked him meat and dairy dishes separately in the new pots. Mike prayed three times a day, said blessings over his food and grace after meals, washed his hands on rising in the morning and before eating bread. Since the complicated Sabbath laws could only be fully observed in an Orthodox environment, he spent weekends with religious families.

He had been home several weeks when we had The Talk. We had already had a number of talks, but it was this one that sank in. We were having lunch at a kosher cafeteria on 47th Street, patronized largely by Hassidim and other ultra-Orthodox Jews in the diamond business. It was crowded with men in traditional black suits. I was insisting that it was impossible to prove the existence or the nature of God. The ultimate Reality was by definition ungraspable by reason; Mike's belief had to be based on intuition, not logic.

"It's both." Mike said. "First, you have to have an intuition that logic is real – that logic tells you something about the way the world is. Then if an idea is illogical – if it's inconsistent with what you know – you intuitively know it's wrong. Like the complexity of the world is inconsistent with the idea that it all happened at random, by natural selection."

"Not necessarily. In an infinite universe even the most unlikely combination of events can happen..."

"It's possible. But it's not probable. And when you take all the proofs together – the depth of Torah, the prophecies – maybe you can explain any one of them away, but you can't explain them all as coincidence. It just gets too improbable. Reasoning can tell you what's most probable, and when you have an overwhelming probability your intuition tells you it has to be true."

"Well, my intuition tells me the world wasn't created in six days."

Mike explained that the length of the six days of creation was open to question, since the Sun wasn't created till the fourth day; that there was no problem with the idea of a biological evolution guided by God rather than natural selection, or of humanlike beings existing before Adam, so long as you accepted Adam as the first true man in the spiritual sense – made "in the image of God." I was struck by the way he argued. He sounded like me in the early days of feminism talking to women who were unconvinced. It had been one of those rare times when I felt both sure of my ground and sure it was in the other person's interest to see things my way. That confidence had made me a good organizer; now, on the receiving end, I felt defensive.

I wasn't sure why. I did not find Mike's anti-evolution argument persuasive, but I was not, in any case, a dogmatic evolutionist. On acid I had had the strong impression that it was somehow in the nature of Reality to ceaselessly order itself into complex patterns; even before that I had been inclined to believe there was some unknown organizing principle in the universe. Once I had confessed to a friend, "I don't think the universe is absurd." "You don't?" she said. "No. I think it's basically logical," There was a pause. "Maybe," my friend said, "you need to see logic in it." Maybe. Either way, there was no need to assume a God with personality, a will or a purpose.

"But it's possible," Mike said. "You have to admit it's logically possible."

"It's based on a naive analogy. A chair is made by a person, so the world has to be made by a superperson."

"You're assuming the secular view of reality – that we created God, not the other way around. The Jewish perspective is like a mirror image. It's not God who's like a human being; it's human beings who are made in God's image. Our way of making things is *something like* God's way. We don't get the idea of God from having parents – our relationship with our parents is meant to give us an idea of how to relate to God."

"Reality isn't a being with a personality," I said. "It's just – Reality."

"You had a mystical experience that showed you there's a spiritual reality. Judaism says that on top of this experience, which all religions share, we have a revelation that tells us what that reality is, what it wants from us."

"The idea that it *wants* something contradicts my experience," I insisted.

"Not your experience. Just your interpretation of it."

"But I didn't interpret it. I just had it. That's what made it unique."

"Of course you interpreted it. You've grown up with a whole view of reality that says we're free, we can do what we want. So naturally you see God as something impersonal, instead of a God who says, 'You have to do what I want, not what you want.'"

I shook my head, but I felt the presence of the serpent. Had I experienced Reality, or just another deceptive metaphor?

"I don't do whatever I want," I said. "I try to do what's right."

"But you decide what's right."

"Not me, my ego. The part of me that's attuned to Reality decides. Reality defines what good is." Pretty mushy, my observer/critic remarked.

"All right. But in practice you don't really believe that you're required to live a certain way except for obvious things, like not killing. Judaism says God gave us a law, this is what it is, we have to obey it."

"I believe," I began, aware that I was entering a mine field of rhetoric, "I feel I *know*, from my – experience" – or was it just an *interpretation* – "that when we're in touch with Reality what's right and what we really want are the same. To love and be loved, to have a just, decent society. To figure out how to make that truth work in practice – to struggle toward it – that's what life is about. Freedom isn't doing whatever we please; it's a basic ethical value. It means taking responsibility for the struggle. Not looking to some authority to get us off the hook."

"But it doesn't work. Look at what's happening in the world; look at what Western 'enlightenment' has accomplished. Total chaos, and it's getting worse."

It was the classic conservative line. Your utopian dreams are unrealistic, against human nature. Look at the evidence. Bloody wars; repressive governments; nuclear threat; ecological destruction. And what revolution – be honest, now – what revolution has really succeeded by your standards? I was on familiar terms with this litany. Though I considered myself a radical, had been a leftist and feminist activist, I struggled perpetually with doubts (again). And if I believed, finally, in my obligation to defy a pessimism that amounted to self-fulfilling prophecy – what was that but a leap of faith?

"In a Torah community," Mike was saying, "there's no crime, the family isn't falling apart. People are serious about being good people because they're living for God, not just themselves."

"Intuitively, I can't see it," I said. "This cosmic dictator idea of God. I just don't see it."

"But you have to ask why. There are powerful emotional reasons for not seeing it. You'd have to admit that God controls your life, that you're not free. You'd have to submit to a lot of restrictions you don't like. You'd have to change. No one wants to change."

True.

"You have an incredibly complex and organized universe. Everything in it works together perfectly. The most obvious explanation is that a creator planned it that way. Everyone intuitively saw that – everyone believed in God – until evolution gave them an excuse not to. Or take the prophecies. You can explain them as a bunch of improbable coincidences but why resist the obvious answer – that they come from God, who knows the future?"

"It was the Bible predicting the return that gave the Zionists the idea in the first place," I objected.

"But it would never have happened if it weren't for the Nazis," Mike said. "Another coincidence?"

| **"I don't know" was an honorable answer. But it did not win arguments.**

I had no answer. The prophecies had bothered me from the start. And Mike had a point: why was it so important to me to explain them away? During my first session with my Reichian shrink he had poked my jaw muscles and asked drily, "Do you ever lose an argument?" With a shock I saw that I wasn't winning this one. Mike's premises were not only far more sophisticated than I had thought; they were the basis of a formidably comprehensive, coherent world view. All along Mike had been asking me questions I couldn't answer. How did I explain the creation of the world? How did I explain the strange history of the Jews – their unremitting persecution and unlikely survival, their conspicuous role in world affairs? How did I explain the Torah itself, with its extraordinary verbal intricacy, the meanings upon meanings the rabbis had found in phrases, words, even letters; the consistency with which their analyses hung together after the 1500 years or more that they had spent hunting down contradictions? I knew that "comprehensive and coherent" did not necessarily mean "true." "I don't know" was an honorable answer. But it did not win arguments.

I was suffering from acute mental vertigo. What a phony I was – glibly assuring Mike that his transformation had to be based on intuition rather mere argument, while all along my confidence in my own intuition had rested on the assumption that I had the better arguments. The last thing I wanted was to be left with only fragile, fallible intuition as a shield against a system of ideas that neatly reversed everything I believed. Like a mirror image.

I understood now what Mike had meant when he said he felt trapped, understood how his skepticism could turn against itself. My own skepticism told me that however sure I was of my perceptions, I could be wrong. Therefore, since I could not prove Judaism was false, I had to admit that it could be true. And the thought of admitting any such thing threw me into a panic. Which of course was the best possible evidence for Mike's suggestion that I rejected Judaism simply because I did not care to accept it. I wanted nothing so much as to forget the whole question, and for that very reason I was bound by all my standards of intellectual honesty and courage to pursue it.

I was overwhelmed with superstitious paranoia. This was exactly how Mike had been drawn in, Mike who was so much like me. Mike was the one person in the world who could have gotten me to listen seriously to this argument. And he had stopped off in Israel mainly because of me: I had been there earlier that year, with a group of journalists, and had written him that it was interesting. From his point of view, none of this was coincidental.

**If the Jewish God existed and I willingly rejected Him, I would be making the ultimate, irretrievable mistake.**

During the next few days my panic intensified. The one aspect of my life that I had never seriously doubted was my obligation to make my own choices and my own mistakes and if need be suffer the consequences. Since the only certainty was that the way to Reality was uncertain, I had no alternative. Now I saw that this certainty was as uncertain as any other. And so for the first time I faced a choice that was truly, absolute, that included no tacit right to be wrong – the spiritual equivalent of a life-or-death decision in war. If the Jewish God existed and I willingly rejected Him, I would be making the ultimate, irretrievable mistake. Contrary to the common impression, Jewish theology included a system of reward and punishment that operated in both this life and the next. The eternal punishment for rejecting Torah was called karait – "cutting off" – which meant, I assumed, what I would call total alienation from Reality. Only it was much more vivid and terrifying when you envisioned it as a punishment rather than an impersonal consequence, as losing the love, incurring the wrath of the ultimate parent.

And if I gave up my precious freedom, a renunciation that felt like death, for what I saw as an alien, joyless, shackled existence – and it turned out that the serpent had betrayed me again, that there was no God of Wrath or God of Love after all? And how could I ever know for sure? It seemed to me that whatever I did I was in trouble.

I had shed another layer of innocence. I would never again feel smug about Patty Hearst, Ronnie Davis, the legions of post-acid freaks who had joined mystical cults. I understood. It could happen to me. For the first time I wished I had never taken drugs, never seen beyond the scientific rationalism that might be narrow but was surely safe. I envied my father's faith in evolution. I envied everyone around me, going peacefully about their lives, taking for granted – if they thought about it at all – that Mike's brand of religion was eccentric fanaticism, nothing to do with them. I especially envied non-Jews. The 613 mitzvot were reserved for the Chosen People. Others had only to obey certain basic moral laws – mostly obvious things – like not killing.

I had frustrating conversations with friends who found it hard to believe that someone so sensible and intelligent could be wondering if she ought to become an orthodox Jew.

"Maybe it's right for him; that doesn't mean it's right for you."

"If it's true, then it has to be right for me."

"You couldn't live that way."

"That's not the point. The point is, is it true?"

"Maybe it's true for him."

"You don't understand. Judaism claims to be absolute truth. Either it's true for everybody, or it's not true at all."

"Nobody has a monopoly on the truth."

"That's the secular point of view... From the Jewish point of view there is an absolute truth, I can know it, I just don't want to accept it."

"Well, why should you accept it if you don't want to?"

"Because if it's true, then all my ideas are wrong, I'm living the wrong way, I'm totally blowing it."

"Who's to say there's only one way to live?"

"*But don't you see?* You say, 'We're free to decide how to live.' Religious Jews say, 'No, you're not free.' So you say 'We're free to reject that argument.' It's circular reasoning!"

"Why are you getting so upset?"

Then I talked to a woman who understood. She had grown up Catholic and lost her faith. It seemed that losing your faith and losing your lack of faith had much in common. At some point you were suspended between two competing, self-consistent realities, knowing you had to go back or forward, with no one to help you and no net. And once you were out there, you realized that skeptic and believer were mirror images, reflecting a vision of logic in the universe.

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Judaism teaches that God's rewards and punishment operate on the principle of *mida k'neged mida* – measure for measure. For example, a friend of Mike's had asked to borrow 100 Israeli pounds; Mike had lent the money, but grudgingly; shortly afterward he had 100 pounds stolen from his wallet, though there was more money in it.

During my panic I had become obsessed with the thought that this principle might explain a central irony in my own life. I had come of age at a time when sexual liberation did not yet mean groupies and massage parlors, when it was still a potent metaphor for liberation in general. At the core of my feminism was rage at the suppression of female sexuality and a romantic vision of sexual freedom as joyous, unreserved acceptance of my body, my femaleness, my partner in love. Though I hated the way this vision had been perverted, co-opted and turned against women, I believed no less in the vision itself.

The irony, of course, was the contrast between ideal and reality. Part of that reality was historical: feminism had transformed women's consciousness without, as yet, transforming society, leaving a gap between what many of us demanded of a relationship and what most men were willing to give. Yet there were ways of making the best of this situation while I tended to make the worst of it. At 34, with a marriage and two quasi-marriages behind me, I felt, all too often, like an awkward teenager. My distrust of men fed a prickliness that provoked rejection that confirmed my distrust; worse, I was still afflicted, on some level, with the adolescent notion – no doubt the result of all those real and symbolic fights in the back seat – that to give in to sexual pleasure was to lose a power struggle. In general I thought of myself fairly sane, but my conflicts about sex and men felt out of control – and thinking in those terms was undoubtedly part of the problem. For the sexual dilemma was the same as the spiritual one: to try harder was not only useless but self-defeating.

I had come to see my predicament as a sort of cosmic mockery, deflating my utopian pretensions. But from the Jewish standpoint, what could be a neater measure-for-measure punishment for refusing my ordained role as wife and mother? The symmetry was perfect: feminist consciousness had inspired both my sexual aspirations and the defensiveness that undermined them. It was the message one might expect from a

cranky, conservative – Freudian God, out to show me that feminism was the problem rather than the solution, that all this emancipation claptrap violated my true nature and would deny me the feminine fulfillment I really craved.

Another mirror image, more powerful than the rest, it exposed my most private pain, doubt and vulnerability. I knew then that I had to go to Israel and confront my terror at its source – to put myself in my brother's place and see if I reached the same conclusions. I also knew that I had to write about the process. I was not sure these imperatives were compatible. When I decided not only to write about my trip but to write about it on assignment – which meant committing myself to come home and deliver a manuscript – I felt a bit like Ulysses tying himself to the mast. The difference, of course, was that I could cut myself loose if I chose. And in its perverse way, my very need to hedge was evidence of my good faith. At least it would have to do.

### III. FIRST ENCOUNTERS

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I left New York on March 22nd, 1976, on an overnight flight packed with Jewish tour groups. Here and there I saw religious men in beards and yarmulkes (skullcaps). At dawn they began getting up to form a minyan (ten-man quorum) for morning prayer. The Israeli flight attendants gave them dirty looks for blocking the aisles.

We arrived around noon. I wandered outside, past clumps of armed teenage soldiers, looking for Mike. I was beginning to wonder if we had missed each other when a tall, thin boy wearing a yarmulke approached me.

"Are you Ellen?"

Chaim was a student at my brother's yeshiva; he had come to meet me because Mike had a bad cold. He explained that we would stop first at Rabbi and Rebbetzin Weinberg's, where I would leave my bags, then go to find Mike. We took a cab into Jerusalem, talking sketchily about the experiences that had brought each of us here, and caught the bus for Kiryat Zanz, a religious neighborhood nestled in a rocky hillside. In contrast to the gorgeous landscape, the rows of identical low apartment buildings were dreary, housing project modern. Block 5 Building 2 housed the Weinbergs and their nine children.

The rebbetzin invited us into an apartment that conveyed a sense of busy warmth. It was crammed with books and artifacts – menorahs, vases of flowers, bright fabrics, pictures of wise men, a colored-glass chandelier.

Dinah Weinberg is a striking woman. Slim, fair, blue eyed, in her late 30s, she looks like a picture-postcard of the ideal Jewish matriarch – one part strength and competence, one part motherliness, one part a modest, almost austere beauty accentuated by the kerchief that covers her head. (When an Orthodox woman marries, her hair becomes private, seen only by her husband.) I immediately craved her approval without quite knowing why. We sat in the kitchen chatting about my brother while children wandered in and out. I mentioned that I wanted to find out more about women's role in Judaism.

"Good!" the rebbetzin said. "People misunderstand it."

| **"I don't want to devote all my time to children," I said. "I want to write."**

"Suppose I don't want children," I began, "or anyway no more than one or two..."

Mrs. Weinberg's reply threw me. "If someone gave you money, would you turn it down?"

"I don't get the comparison." Money buys freedom; children take it away: the instant I had the thought it seemed unbearably crass.

"Children are a blessing," said the rebbetzin firmly. The conversation had taken a depressing turn. I could no more imagine having nine children than contemplate climbing Mt. Everest.

"I don't want to devote all my time to children," I said. "I want to write."

"You can do both. A Jewish woman shouldn't spend all her time with her children. We can do much more."

"If I had a bunch of kids I wouldn't have any time and energy to spare."

"The Almighty wants us to use our talents. He wouldn't punish you by not letting you write. You'd find the time."

Well, maybe so. I wasted so much time, after all. No doubt a disciplined person could raise half a dozen kids in the time I spent day-dreaming, reading junk, sleeping late. But I would never be that person; I knew my limitations. Or was that just an excuse for laziness?

The rebbetzin kissed me goodbye, and Chaim and I took a bus to the walled Old City. The Jewish Quarter, which had been largely destroyed by the Jordanians in 1948, was still being rebuilt; the smell of dust and the sound of drilling were pervasive. Mike emerged from his dorm looking pale and tired from his cold. We walked over to Yeshivat Aish HaTorah, which was on a side street called Misgav Ladach tucked beside a huge construction site. To the northeast the yeshiva overlooked some of the most spectacular sights in Jerusalem – the Mount of Olives, the Valley of Kidron and the golden Dome of the Rock. It was a short walk from the Western Wall ("Wailing Wall"), the sacred remnant of King Solomon's Temple.

We found the rabbi in his office. Like his wife, Noach Weinberg has a compelling presence. He is in his mid-40s, but with his white beard, black suit and air of authority he seems older. He regarded me with a friendly smile and eyes that suggested he had my number but liked me anyway. I thought he looked like God the Father in His more jovial aspect. After we had been introduced he told Mike that a kid who had been staying at the yeshiva was about to leave.

"You know why they leave?" he said to me. "They leave because they're scared they'll like it." He shook his head. "Insanity! Do you how Jews define sin? Sin is temporary insanity."

For instance, he explained, he had a bad habit of wasting time; who in his right mind would want to waste time?

"What about more serious sins?" I said.

Reb Noach raised his eyebrows. "Wasting time," he said, "is very serious. It's a kind of suicide."

**| It was a commandment to be happy; unhappiness in effect denied God's love, dismissed His gifts.**

For the first few days I stayed with one of Mike's teachers, Shimon Haskel, and his wife Chaya. I began to unwind from my trip and settle in. I was feeling close to Mike, and we talked more openly than ever before about our family, our childhoods, our fears and hang-ups. Mike told me that I seemed so confident he had always been afraid of me: I told him that I'd felt he was Mr. Cool, secretly putting me down. "But now," said Mike, "I'm not afraid of you anymore." I was pleased with the change in him. He was not only more confident but more willing to face his emotional problems – the split between intellect and feeling, the distance from other people, the lack of joy. He was obliged to face them, for they were also religious problems. It was a commandment to be happy; unhappiness in effect denied God's love, dismissed His gifts.

Mike was also absorbed in his work. He found the yeshiva completely different from all the schools he had hated. Both teachers and students were deeply involved in learning; they had no doubt that what they were doing was important. Universities, Mike felt, were dead; Aish HaTorah was alive. For several hours every morning he studied Gemara (the voluminous rabbinical commentaries on the Mishna; Mishna and Gemara together constitute the Talmud). In the afternoon and evening he studied Rambam (Maimonides). Somehow he found the time to talk with new people, listening to their problems, answering questions, and out of this had come another project: he was writing a group of papers arguing various proofs of God's existence and the Torah's divinity. His persuasiveness and intellectual skills had made him something of a star at the yeshiva.

Aish HaTorah is a yeshiva for *ba'al teshuvos* – delinquent Jews who have "returned." It is the fourth such yeshiva that Noach Weinberg has started in the past decade. Recently, others have picked up on Reb Noach's vision and started their own yeshivas in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv.

In America, the most conspicuous Jewish evangelizers of Jews have been Hassidim. Hassidism, a tendency within Judaism that stresses joy, prayer and mystical experience, began in the last century as a revolt by poor and uneducated Jews against the elitist intellectualism of the yeshivas of Eastern Europe, particularly Lithuania. The *ba'al teshuva* yeshiva movement in Israel comes from the latter tradition, that of the *misnagdim* – rationalist opponents of Hassidism – who emphasize learning Torah as the highest value and chief means of approaching God. A yeshiva like Aish HaTorah operates on the premise that the best weapon against unbelief is rational argument. It follows that the crucial first step is to get people to listen. Boys are urged to come for a day, an hour a meal, a bed. (No one has to pay unless he can afford to; the school is supported mostly by contributions.) A beginner's program runs for three months and then repeats; a student can start at any point. Those who stay can advance as fast as their ability allows to study of the Talmud and biblical commentaries.

There was a major hitch in my plan to replicate Mike's experience: I could not go to Aish HaTorah. Orthodox education is sexually segregated, and opportunities for women are limited. Learning is a religious obligation only for men; among tradition-minded Jews the issue of whether women should study Torah and Talmud, and if so how much, is controversial. None of the women's schools in Jerusalem offers a comprehensive intellectual and religious experience like Aish HaTorah's. Nor do they cater to transients. [*Thankfully, this is no longer the case. Ed. Note*] Still, I decided to check out a couple of schools and visit a student Mike knew.

Lorie Bernstein was 19 and the product of a rich Long island suburb; her divorced parents owned clothing stores. Mike had first met her at the airport on his way back from New York. During the cab ride into Jerusalem she had told him that she had been a Hassid for a while but had reverted to existentialism; Mike had urged her to give Judaism another try. Since then she had become a fervent *ba'al teshuva*. When I introduced myself she hugged me excitedly. She was small and bouncy, with dark hair tucked in a bun, she wore a long-sleeved blouse, a long skirt and gold-rimmed, blue-tinted glasses.

I had found Lorie just as she was about to do some errands in Mea Shearim, an old, poor, fanatically pious community noted for its anti-Zionists (they believe there cannot be a legitimate Jewish state until the coming of the Messiah), its Hassids in medieval caftans, and its signs demanding that female tourists conform to Torah standards of modest dress. We walked there together. Lorie stopped several times to give coins to beggars, all the while keeping up a passionate monologue.

"God gives us so much, you just have to do something back. I love doing mitzvot and helping people. A few *agurot* mean nothing to you, but you're giving someone food, making him happy. This religion is so *beautiful!*" She was bubbly, breathless; energy rolled off her in waves. "Whether there's a God or not, the Torah helps you live up to your potential it's like tripping – you get an awareness of everything you do. I really have to

*think* about food now – what's milk, what's meat, my mother-love side and beast side? Every day I have to thank God for all kinds of things. Thank God I'm awake. (Think of all the people who aren't awake.) Thank God for commanding me to wash. Whenever I wash I'm aware of my hands and how wonderful they are. Thank God for clothing the naked. How many people think every day about how they have clothes and other people don't? There's even a prayer for the bathroom – thank God for my ducts and orifices, that they're working properly."

I asked her how she felt about Judaism's view of women.

"I'm *dying* to get married and have children. Right now I'm doing *teshuvah*, repentance. What could possibly be more important than having children?"

I mumbled something about wanting to write.

"Writing!" Lorie said scornfully. "I used to write, I used it to get rid of energy. What's writing compared to creating a human being, a soul?"

"It happens to be what I want to do."

"What you *want!* I used to be that way. The most important thing was to be authentic – to do what I really wanted to do, even if I hurt someone. My ideal was Meursault in *The Stranger*. Life was meaningless so why pretend it wasn't? Anyway," she said, "most things you think you want to do you don't really want to do. *Other* people want you to do them. The only thing I really miss is getting high. I *love* getting high – I love it! If there was one thing that could get me off religion it would be that."

On the other side of the street – we were now in Mea Shearim – two touristy looking girls passed by, transgressing the modesty laws by wearing jeans. "If I weren't with you," Lorie said, "I'd go over and yell at them."

"I don't think it does much good to yell at people," I said, feeling resentful about the anti-writing remarks.

"You can't tell," said Lorie. "Sometimes one little thing can change you around. What got me to join the Hassidim was that someone told me how low their divorce rate was. If I just explained about modesty – why it's not good to wear pants..." She stopped. "I'm being too heavy, aren't I? I'm sorry. I get carried away when I meet a new person."

We walked past stalls selling fruits and vegetables, down a narrow, cobbled back street, to visit a friend of Lorie's who might help place some students with families for Shabbos. Leah, a vivacious, middle-aged Hassidic housewife, insisted on serving us vegetable soup, bread and cream cheese. She supervised the washing ritual, showing me how to pour from the two-handled cup, how to cup my hands, making me do it over until I got it exactly right, while Lorie bounced up and down, protesting, "Leah! You'll discourage her! You've got to start out easy!"

I began hanging around Lorie's school, sitting in on classes – which mostly centered on Hebrew texts and made me feel as if I'd stumbled into the middle of a foreign-language movie with inadequate subtitles – and talking with Lorie and her friends. There was Frieda from Brooklyn, strong, blunt, a scrapper, a woman with a vision: she intended to start a *ba'al teshuva* organization in the States. There was Cindy who had identified with black people so intensely that she still spoke with a trace of a pseudo-Southern accent, who had decided to convert to Christianity and had joined a black church, but then – *boruch Hashem!* – praise God! – had realized where she belonged. There was Sarah, who had been born Protestant in Chicago and had converted after investigating every philosophy there was and deciding that only Judaism made sense.

But at the psychological center of my life in Jerusalem were the rabbi and the rebbetzin. Noach Weinberg, the youngest son of a Hassid, grew up on New York's Lower East Side; Dinah came from Long Island. They met and married in the late Fifties, and emigrated to Israel in 1961. Reb Noach was determined to do something to reverse the Jewish drift away from Torah. For six years he studied with his goal in mind and in 1967 he started his first yeshiva. Aish HaTorah has been going since 1973. Reb Noach runs the school, teaches, and makes periodic fundraising trips to the States. The rebbetzin mothers their children, runs their household, studies, teaches, does charity work and acts as counselor and friend to the yeshiva students and other young people who seek her out. During Aish HaTorah's first year she was also its chief administrator.

On Monday nights a group of women met at Rebbetzin Weinberg's for her class on the 613 mitzvot. The rebbetzin was currently discussing the mitzva to do good. Doing good, in Jewish terms, involves a constant struggle between the two sides of our nature: the *yeitzer tov* (good inclination), which arises from the soul and desires to serve God, and the *yeitzer hara* (evil inclination), which stems from the body and craves unlimited material, sexual and egotistical satisfactions.

"What's the difference between a war against people and the war against the *yeitzer hara*?" the rebbetzin asked. "A people war has an end – there's no end to the *yeitzer hara* war. A people war doesn't go on 24 hours a day. In a people war, you win something limited. If you win the *yeitzer hara* war, you have everything. And if you lose..."

It was an incongruous image for a Jewish mother of nine but I couldn't help thinking of Joan of Arc.

"You have to develop a strategy. For instance, suppose you know that when you meet a certain person you're going to talk *lashon hara*."

*Lashon hara*, slander, is an important sin, the subject of a formidable body of law. It is forbidden to say anything disparaging about someone – whether or not it is true – or to say anything that could be construed as disparaging, or to listen to such talk. It is even forbidden to praise someone in front of an enemy who might be tempted to argue. The Haskels had a sign in their kitchen that said, "Is that *lashon hara*?"

"You should try to avoid the person," said the rebbetzin. "But if you can't, then you should think, how can I avoid the bad conversation? Is there some other way I can make her feel good?"

"Why not take the direct approach," one of the women asked, "and just say, 'Let's not talk *lashon hara*'?"

"Not everyone can take that," said the rebbetzin. "You might just put her on the defensive."

To be good, Mrs. Weinberg summed up, was to emulate the Almighty, to become as perfect an image of Him as possible. To be infinitely patient, to return insult with kindness – and without self-congratulation. How to do this? "Know the 613 mitzvot. There is no other way."

**Secular enlightenment was the brew that provoketh the desire but taketh away the performance. We still craved perfection... but we had no law to guide or reassure us.**

It occurred to me that if Talmudic logic had made Mike realize how Jewish his thinking was, Jewish ethics made me realize how Jewish my feelings were. I was beginning to understand Jewish guilt. Unlike Christian guilt, which assumed one's inherent depravity, it came from the idea that one could and should attain perfection. Jews who took their religion seriously had no need to feel guilty. They knew the 613 mitzvot were the way, and if they backslid they could catch themselves and carry on. For Jews like me it was different; secular enlightenment was the brew that provoketh the desire but taketh away the performance. We still

craved perfection, and so we pursued utopian politics, utopian sex, utopian innocence. But we had no law to guide or reassure us. With the law, one could have patience with one's shortcomings. Without it, if we were not *there* we were nowhere at all "To live outside the law you must be honest" – Bob Dylan, a Jew, said that.

Since the Haskels had three little children and another guest in their crowded apartment, I moved in with Chaya's stepsister, Abby Ginsberg, and her roommate, Sharon Weitz. They shared a large apartment – inherited from Abby's parents, who had gone back to the States – on Shimoni Street in Rasco, an attractive residential neighborhood that was not predominantly religious. Like the Haskels they were from the Midwest. Abby was studying at Hebrew University, Sharon at a seminary. Both women were more religious than their families.

I felt immediately comfortable with Sharon and Abby, in part because their sense of female identity did not seem radically different from my own. They had not grown up isolated from secular life. They had gone to public high school, dated, worn pants; they had not married at 18; they were serious about learning; the man Abby was seeing pitched in with the cooking and played blues on his guitar. Unlike Lorie, they were not reacting against their past; because their religious commitment had deepened gradually rather than come through sudden conversion, they had none of the *ba'al teshuva's* dogmatic intensity.

"Of course I feel a conflict between Judaism and feminism," Sharon said. "It's harder to accept if you've been exposed to Western ideas than if you grew up in Mea Shearim. But if you're committed to Judaism, other principles have to adjust. To me a Jewish life offers so many satisfactions..." She smiled and shrugged. Intellectually she knew where she stood, but emotionally she was still struggling. "The thing I really care about," said Abby "is being able to learn. If I thought the halacha wouldn't allow me to learn – then I might have a problem."

Abby was ebullient; Sharon had a quieter warmth. They were ten years younger than I, but I often felt as if our ages were reversed. They projected a balance, an un-self-conscious maturity symbolized for me by the way they cooperated in maintaining their cheerful apartment. The Shimoni Street place was just an ordinary middle-class apartment, conventionally furnished by the absent parents, serving as a way station for two young, transient students. But Abby and Sharon made it feel like home. They were, for one thing, enthusiastic cooks. Almost every afternoon I would come back to find them in the kitchen discussing recipes; since Abby was experimenting with vegetarianism they were always trying new concoctions – cheese-and-spinach souffles, vegetable pies, fruit salads.

Often Abby's friend, Joshua, would be there too. He was leaving for the States in a few weeks, right after Passover; in the meantime he and Abby were trying to figure out how they felt about each other. Orthodox Jews do not play sexual games: a man and a woman are either compatible or they aren't, and if they decide they are they get married. So Josh was at Shimoni Street several nights a week. He and Abby would study and argue points of halacha, and then we would all help with the dinner and eat together, talking and joking about the events of the day, what this or that teacher said, my latest argument with Lorie. I would go to bed and read, or write in my notebook, and when I padded to the kitchen or the bathroom at 2 or 3 a.m. I would, as often as not, hear the pacific murmur of one of Josh and Abby's marathon conversations.

## IV. TRUTH AND CONSEQUENCES

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The first commandment," said Reb Noach, "is to know there is a God." We were resuming a conversation we had started a few days earlier. "The disease of Western thought," he had said then, "is: 'There is no absolute truth.' But it's intuitively obvious that either something is true or it isn't. Listen – 'There is no absolute truth.' 'Are you sure?' 'Yes.' 'Are you absolutely sure?'" I could afford to laugh. I believed something was true or it wasn't; I just didn't think we could know for sure which was which. "They call us fanatics. But a fanatic is

someone who won't listen to reason. I say, let's reason together. Let's find a premise on which we can both agree and reason from there. The purpose of reason," he had concluded, "is to get someone to the point where his intuition will say, 'Yes, you're right.'"

"Know there is a God," Reb Noach repeated. "Not 'have faith.' Understand! Reason! But reason can only tell you what you already know. It's a servant, like your hand." He held his hand out. "Hand! Come to my nose!" The hand did not move. "What's this? Revolution? Don't be silly! No, your hand acts on what you really want, not on what you say you want. Reason will tell you what you really know – what are your perceptions. Not other people's, not society's."

For the next hour or so, Reb Noach tried to persuade my intuition. If my father on his deathbed asked me to say a mourner's prayer for him, would I? Of course. If he asked me to say a bunch of nonsense syllables, would I? Probably not. Why not? What's the difference? Well, I think religious ritual is meaningful, worthy of respect; that doesn't mean it represents absolute truth. If someone ran in front of my car and I hit him, wouldn't I feel guilty, even if I couldn't possibly have stopped in time? Yes, I would. What did that tell me? "Even if it's not technically my fault, someone has suffered because of me. It's irrational, but I'd think, 'If I'd just done something different – taken the bus, stayed home...'"

"The reason you would feel guilty," Reb Noach said, "is that it really *would* be your fault. If you hadn't done something wrong, God wouldn't have chosen you as the instrument of someone's death."

I appreciated Reb Noach's technique. I realized that I had on occasion, used it myself. (Don't you and your husband both work? Suppose you lived with your sister, and you both worked, and she wanted you to cook dinner every night because she was tired – would you do it? Why not? Well, then, what's different about doing it for a man?) But my intuition was unconvinced. I still couldn't see the ultimate Reality as a being who cared, willed, intervened in our lives and – might as well bring it up – decreed separate functions for men and women.

"You don't think men and women are basically different?"

"*Basically*, no," I said. "*Basically*, I think we're all human beings."

"One of the craziest ideas in this crazy modern world," said Reb Noach, "is that men and women are the same. Men and women are two different species!"

I insisted that whatever the differences – and who could tell at this point which were inherent, which imposed by a patriarchal culture? – they did not require women to devote themselves to as many babies as chose to make their appearance. Reb Noach shook his head.

"Children are the greatest pleasure," he said, "but people today are so decadent they prefer their material comforts to children."

"It's not just material comfort!" I protested. "People have a right to some freedom – some time for themselves..."

"Decadence, Ellen. I'd have 50 children, a hundred. Every child is a lesson in love!"

"My parents aren't decadent! They've worked hard to bring up three children – to educate us all..."

Suddenly I found myself weeping.

"Ellen!" The rabbi's voice vibrated through me, alarmed, caring, soothing as a touch. "I'm not condemning *people!* Who knows who's better than who? I'm talking about actions. Mistakes, Ellen."

I wasn't sure why I was crying – except that if my middle-class family-centered parents could by any standard be accused of decadent behavior, then I was completely hopeless. My loss of control took me by surprise. I suppose it was my first overt symptom of culture shock.

How long was it since I'd landed at the airport – eight days? Nine? It felt much longer. My sense of time had changed, along with my perspective. I was, in crucial ways, an outsider – a reporter, at that – in a strange culture. Yet because I was Jewish, I was also family. Whatever anyone might think of me, whether I was religious or not, so long as I was living in the Orthodox community I was on some basic level accepted as part of it. And so I began, almost imperceptibly at first, to identify with that community and feel weirdly estranged from the secular world. I found myself thinking of non-religious people as "they." When I had an errand in downtown Jerusalem I felt assaulted by its frenetic, noisy, garish urbanness, by the crowds of Israelis who milled along Jaffa Road without a care for the subtleties of Jewish law.

Even the ever-present political tension began to seem part of that other world. A deep belief that God controls events tends to cool political fervor, and only a minority of Orthodox Israelis fit the stereotype of the militant religious nationalist; Mike and his friends were critical of the rabbinical establishment for what they saw as its readiness to bend the Torah to the demands of the state. I had arrived in Israel at a volatile time: Palestinian students had been demonstrating in the Old City; Israeli Arabs were protesting the expropriation of Arab land in the Galilee. I read about it all in the Jerusalem Post, feeling, absurdly, that Israeli politics had been much more vivid to me when I was in New York.

A religious universe enveloped me. I was surrounded by people who believed and, more important, lived that belief every minute. Conversation among Orthodox Jews never strays far from questions of ethics, points of law, one's religious activities; even small talk is inescapably religious: "I'm feeling better, *boruch Hashem!*"; "I ran into so-and-so on Shabbos"; "She's going to have a *milchig* [dairy] wedding." Orthodox life has its own special rhythm. There is the daily rhythm of prayer and the weekly rhythm of preparations for Shabbos: rushing to clean and cook before Friday sundown, when all work must be suspended; setting lights to go on and off automatically; taking turns showering, hoping the hot water won't run out; dressing up; lighting the Sabbath candles. There is Shabbos itself: making *Kiddush* (blessing and sharing wine); washing and breaking bread and sitting down to the traditional European-Jewish Friday night chicken dinner; the men going off to *shul* Saturday morning, coming home to a meal of *cholent*, a stew that is made before Shabbos and left simmering on the stove; studying, walking, visiting or napping in the afternoon; the light supper and finally the *havdalah* ("division") ceremony with which Shabbos ends.

**Living with Orthodox Jews was like being straight at a party where everyone else is stoned; after a while, out of sheer social necessity, you find yourself getting a contact high.**

Although the process was less dramatic, my immersion in Jewish life was having a far more potent effect on me than my confrontation with Jewish ideas. I could argue with ideas, but I could not, without being an abrasive nuisance, refuse to adapt, in important respects, to the customs of my hosts. On the most superficial level this meant not washing Abby and Sharon's dairy dishes in the meat sink, but it also meant shifting mental gears to participate in conversations that took a religious outlook for granted. Living with Orthodox Jews was like being straight at a party where everyone else is stoned; after a while, out of sheer social necessity, you find yourself getting a contact high.

There was, for instance, the afternoon I spent talking with Lorie and Frieda. Frieda had recruited Lorie for her *ba'al teshuva* organization; they were planning to go back to New York in July to get the project moving. I started giving advice. If they wanted young, educated women to take Judaism seriously, I argued, their

organization would have to engage women's minds the way Aish HaTorah had engaged Mike's. That meant ... and then I heard myself: I was telling them how to seduce me.

I had always thought of Orthodox Judaism as a refuge for compulsives: not only did its ubiquitous requirements and prohibitions seem to preclude spontaneity, but since the halacha, like any body of law that applies basic principles to specific situations, was open to interpretation, it provided endless opportunities for what outsiders would call hairsplitting. For example, it's Shabbos and Sharon and Abby have a problem: they have, as usual, left a kettle of boiling water on a burner they lit Friday afternoon, and now the flame has gone out. Is it permitted to switch the kettle to another lit burner? If the water has cooled off, heating it up again would violate the rule against cooking on Shabbos. If it's still hot, moving it should be okay. But it must have cooled off slightly. How hot does it have to be? Under the kettle, covering both burners, is a metal sheet, there as a reminder not to turn the flames up or down; does this make both flames one fire, which would mean that switching the kettle is allowed in any case? Abby, Sharon and Josh debated this issue for half an hour – it remained unresolved, and they did not move the kettle.

I understood now that to call this sort of behavior compulsive was to assume that religious observance was a distraction from life, while for believers it was the whole point; secular concerns were the distraction. If doing mitzvot – all of them, not just those you understood or liked – was the way to serve God, to connect with Reality, then it was crucial to do them exactly right. For the people around me Torah was not a straitjacket but a discipline, shaping and focusing their energies toward the only meaningful end. It was an arduous discipline, but one that was no more inherently compulsive than my own search for the precise adjective, or the care with which feminists analyzed the minutiae of sexual relationships.

And what was so sacred, anyway, about the arcane customs of my hyperurban, freelance existence? For all that I was so attached to it, I had to admit that it was, in the context of human history, more than a little strange. Sociologists liked to talk about how rootless and mobile Americans were, but most Americans at least had families. Despite my reluctance to assume the burdens of motherhood in a sexist society, it disturbed me to think that I would very likely never have children: I felt that child rearing, like working and loving, was one of the activities that defined humanness. Even my work – my excuse for so much of what I did or didn't do – sometimes struck me as ridiculous. What was the point of sitting home scratching symbols on paper, adding my babblings to a world already overloaded with information? And what of my belief in the supreme importance of connecting with Reality? Orthodox Jews acted on their version of that belief; did I? Well, there was my therapy. It occupied all of 45 minutes of my week – less time than it took me (speaking of compulsive rituals) to read the Sunday *Times*. Did I really have my priorities straight?

If my traumatic talk with Mike had shocked me into realizing that Judaism was a plausible intellectual system, living in Jerusalem was making me realize that Judaism was a plausible way of life. And that realization slid relentlessly into the next: that it was plausible even for me. My rapport with Abby and Sharon weakened my defenses against this frightening idea. I experienced Shimon Street as a kind of halfway house. Much as I admired the rebbetzin, she was too unlike me to be a model. Lorie, in an entirely different way, was also from another world. But Abby and Sharon had the psychology of modern intellectual women. If they found Orthodox life exalting and full of purpose – if they had been exposed to the freedoms I had, yet did not feel deprived – perhaps I did not need those freedoms as much as I thought.

Yet even as I was drawn into the Orthodox subculture, I also resisted it. My resistance took an embarrassing form, it surfaced as a spoiled brat yelling, "I won't!" If I had come to Israel to experience Judaism, it made sense for me to try to observe Jewish law. I had resolved, for instance, to eat only kosher food during my stay. For a month this would scarcely be a major deprivation; I had stuck to reducing diets that required much more discipline. Yet I found that I couldn't keep away from the junk-food stands on Jaffa Road; I stuffed myself with suspect brands of chocolate; under my modest dresses I was puffing out at a disquieting rate.

Then there was the synagogue issue. Though communal prayer was not required of women, I felt that I should, at least once, attend services at an Orthodox shul. But I was afraid to face what I saw as the total humiliation of sitting upstairs in the women's section. Some journalist, I mocked myself. Lucky no one ever sent you to cover a war.

I began to realize that I was depressed. The weather, still wintry and raw, depressed me. The city itself depressed me, which was a surprise. On my first trip to Israel I had reacted very differently. I was not thinking about religion then; I was preoccupied with politics, war history, the tragic clash of nationalism. But I had been awed by the radiance of Jerusalem. Perhaps it was just the combination of natural beauty and antiquity, but whatever holiness was, the city breathed it. Standing before the massive stones of the Western Wall, submerged in a crowd of people praying, I had felt the pain and ecstasy of millions of pilgrims course through me.

A friend had arranged for several members of our group to have Friday night dinner with a religious family, and all evening I felt the way I had at the Wall. Everything had a preternatural clarity and significance. When our host said the blessings over the bread and wine, I marveled that I had been so obtuse as not to see. Blessing one's food – appreciating the miracle of food – what could be more fitting? And the whole idea of the Sabbath, one day a week when you were forbidden ordinary distractions and had to be alone with yourself and Reality ... I imagined myself back in New York City, spending a Saturday without writing, eating in a restaurant, taking the subway; a whole day with the phone off the hook and the record player silent. A fantasy, of course, I could never live that way, didn't even want to, and yet I felt a pang: isn't this what it's all about, the acid peace, the connection you say you want, getting rid of all the noise?

Now, though I remembered those feelings, I couldn't recreate them. I went to the Wall, saw weathered stone spattered with pigeon droppings, left quickly because of the cold wind. And Shabbos, with all its restrictions, was simply oppressive, like a tight girdle. "Last time," said Mike, "you could be open to it because you weren't seriously thinking about it as a possibility."

It was during Shabbos, the second since I'd arrived, that my depression hit full force. A friend of Mike's had invited us for the weekend. He and his wife were warmly hospitable and I struggled guiltily against my gloom. I felt suffocated by domesticity, by the children calling for mommy, the men leaving for shul and the women staying home, the men sitting at the table and the women carting away the dishes. I wanted to tear off my itchy, constricting stockings. I wanted to write in my notebook, turn on lights, eat without going through half an hour of ritual first.

The next day I went to El Al to confirm my return reservation. The flight I was booked on left April 22nd, but my excursion ticket was good for two extra weeks if I wanted them and I figured it was time to decide. I was always superstitious about switching flights; now, looking over the timetable, I felt irrationally certain that if I changed my plans I would end up staying in Israel. *Something* would trap me here. When Lorie first came to Jerusalem she had dreamed she was in prison, supervised by a mean lady; she had wanted to get out, but by the time they were ready to let her go, a month later, she loved it and wanted to stay. On the strength of that dream Lorie had decided to stay a month and, sure enough she was still here... This is ridiculous, I lectured myself. If you want to go you'll go; if you want to stay you'll stay; and if God is really controlling your life it's useless to second-guess Him. I debated staying at least a few extra days, but that would mean going through another Shabbos. I decided to stick with my original flight.

As soon as I left the office, a new wave of paranoia hit: God would punish me for my rotten attitude toward Shabbos. My plane would crash or be attacked by terrorists. *Mida k'neged mida* – measure for measure. Later that day, I realized I couldn't leave on April 22nd: it was the last day of Passover, and I had been invited

to Reb Noach's. The prospect of having to change my reservation after all solidified my conviction that I would never make it back to the States. I had received a sign. There were no coincidences.

When I told Mike about my scheduling mix-up, he looked as if I'd punched him in the jaw. "You're leaving early," he said. "I thought you had six weeks."

"I planned on staying a month. I'm just doing what I was going to do all along."

"It's not just that. You want to leave because you're depressed. You're reacting exactly the same way I did."

My gut contracted.

"Mike, I'm not you. We may be alike in a lot of ways, but we're two different people." Under the panic I had to remember that, hold on to that. "If I want to go home I'm going home, and I'm not going to feel guilty about it."

"But you can't postpone these questions..." He shook his head. "When you first came, you were really relating to what was going on. Now I feel as if you've withdrawn."

Do you really have to go back?" the rebbetzin asked. I had come over for another talk with Reb Noach.

"Theoretically," I said, "I could throw over my entire life and stay. But I don't want to."

"Do you think it's important to find out if there's a God?"

"Well..." *Leave me alone! Get off my back!*

"If there is, and we don't find out, are we culpable?"

*I don't have to listen to this! It's brainwashing, that's what it is!*

"I can find out in New York," I said.

"If I offered you a \$200,000 business deal," Reb Noach put in, "you wouldn't say, 'I can make the same deal in America.' You'd say, 'Let's talk.'"

"I have a whole life to get back to," I insisted. "I *like* my life."

"Then you *won't* really try to find out," said the rebbetzin.

"I didn't say that."

"Well, will you?"

"I don't know," I said, feeling miserable.

**| The opposite of pleasure is *comfort*. Pleasure *involves* pain. Decadence is opting for *comfort*.**

I was not in the best mood to face Reb Noach. During our talks, he had been going through the proofs of God one by one. His theme this time was: "A design must have a designer." I had by now had this argument with several people. I still didn't buy it. Finally, Reb Noach said, "Ellen, think for a minute: is there a reason you don't want to believe the proofs?"

"Well, I can't deny that," I said. "I don't want to change my whole world view. But..."

"Look at it objectively! If you accept *one proof* it doesn't mean changing your whole world view."

"But I don't accept it. I don't see that the order in the universe has to be created by a personal God."

"There seems to be a wall here," said Reb Noach. "I don't want to pursue this unless you want to."

He started on another tack. "Why was the world created. For our pleasure. What is the one thing we are capable of doing? Seeking pleasure. So how can we go wrong? Insanity! Tell me – what's the opposite of pleasure?"

"Pain." I said.

"No! No! The opposite of pleasure is *comfort*. Pleasure *involves* pain. Decadence is opting for comfort. For example, what's more important, wisdom or money? Ask most people, they'll say 'wisdom.' 'Okay, stay here six months and I'll give you wisdom.' 'I can't – I have a job, a girlfriend, I'm supposed to take a vacation in the Greek islands.' 'Stay six months and I'll give you \$20,000.' 'Fine!' 'What about your job, your girlfriend?' 'They'll wait.'

"The soul wants wisdom; the body wants money. The soul wants pleasure; the body wants comfort. And what's the highest pleasure? The aim of the soul? God, Ellen. That's real happiness – ecstasy, Ellen! Find out what you're living for! Take the pain – pleasure only comes with a lot of pain. I'm your friend – I'm with you. Give up your life of striving for success, for identity, your name up there..."

*Unfair!* "Do you really think I write just to get my name in print?"

"I think you do it to have an identity. To be 'a writer.'"

"I do like having that. But would you believe that I write mainly because I enjoy it, and I'm good at it, and" – defiantly – "I think it's useful work!"

"Shakespeare's okay," said Reb Noach, "but unless you know the real meaning of life, you're a zombie, a walking dead man. Find out what you're living for, Ellen. Clarity or death!"

There began to be moments – usually early in the morning, before I forced myself to get up and face the day – when I was more inclined than not to believe that it was all true, that I was only resisting because I couldn't stand the pain of admitting how wrong I was. *What about the prophecies ...* and the way modern history seemed almost a conspiracy to drive the Jews back to Israel ... and the Bible... Mike and I had been going over Genesis, along with the Rashi commentary, and I had had a sudden vision, like an acid flash, of a Garden, and a Presence ... and my personality, my Sagittarian compulsion to aim straight at the cosmic bull's-eye... "*The blessing and curse of being a Jew,*" said Reb Noach, "*is that Jews are thirsty for God, for the absolute. A Jew can never have peace. Whatever he does he'll be the best at, whether it's being a radical or being a criminal. It's all misplaced searching for God. Every Jew is a neurotic...*"

**Insanity, decadence, call it what you please, I could never be a traditional Jewish mother. But maybe I didn't have to be.**

And if I became religious, what would I do? Insanity, decadence, call it what you please, I could never be a traditional Jewish mother. But maybe I didn't have to be. Actually only men were subject to a specific mitzvah to marry and have children. And not everyone took the Weinbergs' hard line on procreation – according to one rabbi I'd met, a psychologist, the halacha permitted contraception when necessary to preserve a woman's health, including her emotional health. Nor were the role divisions in the family absolute, no law actually forbade women to work outside the home, or men to share housework. Even within the bounds of

Judaism I could be a feminist of sorts, crusading for reforms like equal education, perhaps contesting the biased halachic interpretations of male rabbis. And my experience would put me in a unique position to reach women like me and bring them back.

In private I could have this fantasy, even take it seriously. Which would not stop me, an hour or a minute later, from getting into a furious argument with a man. It was one thing to consider the abstract possibility that women's role in Judaism was not inherently oppressive, another to live in a culture that made me feel oppressed. Once when Mike and I were dinner guests of another of his teachers I complained, "You know, it makes me feel like a servant when you sit there like a lump while I help serve and clean up."

"It isn't customary for the men to help," Mike said, "and if I got up I'd make everybody uncomfortable, including the women." He had a point – when in Rome and all that – but it was a point he was not exactly loath to make. The fact was that for Mike, moving from Western secular society to Orthodox Judaism had meant an increase in status and privilege; for me it meant a loss.

One night Mike and I got together with Dick Berger, one of his best friends at the yeshiva. Mike was very high on Dick, who, he said, was an unusually perceptive person with a gift for sensing someone's emotional blocks. He had been encouraging Mike to get more connected to his feelings. I had met Dick once and he had told me a little about himself. He had been a newspaper reporter in Pittsburgh, had written an unpublished novel, had been into psychedelics and Transcendental Meditation. Later he had told Mike that he felt I had seen him only as material for my article. I didn't think that was true, but I worried about it anyway. I hated it when people claimed to know my motives better than I did, but I always worried that they were right.

The conversation that night was pleasant enough until Dick and I got into an argument about men sharing child care. Dick suggested that 3,000 years of tradition shouldn't be tampered with, and I started getting angry in a way I knew from experience led to no good. Then he really pushed the wrong button.

"You're so emotional! Can't we talk about this objectively?"

"You're hardly being objective. It's in your interest as a man to think what you think."

"I'm feeling detached," Dick insisted. "By that I mean attached to my basic essence. You're reacting out of your conditioning in Western culture."

"You're reacting out of your male-supremacist prejudices, only you have 3,000 years of tradition on your side."

"But I'm not being aggressive and hostile – you are!"

"You can afford to be 'objective' and 'detached'! You're happy with the system – I'm the one who's being oppressed by it! Why shouldn't I be hostile – what right do you have to demand that we have this conversation on your terms..." My sentence went hurtling off into the inarticulate reaches of un-God-like rage.

Another time, another friend of Mike's: Harvey, a tall, dark, intense South African. "I'm not here because I want to be," he said. "I want freedom and money and the pleasures of the body. I was happy in my non-religious life – I miss it. But once you know there's a God..."

We started arguing about design and evolution. "Either there's a God," Harvey said, "or all this harmony and purpose is a coincidence."

"Those aren't the only possibilities..."

"And there are vast odds against coincidence. If you had a dart board that had lots of red and just a little white, where do you think your dart would hit?"

"That's a silly analogy," I said.

"What if you had to lay money on it?"

"I'm not going to play this game! It's ridiculous! It's irrelevant!"

"Answer me," the prosecutor insisted. "Would you bet on white or red?"

"I'm not Pascal!" I yelled. "And I'm not about to change my entire life because of some *abstract intellectual decision* about what the odds are on there being a God!"

"The Torah isn't only a carrot, you know. It's a stick, as well. There's punishment – you get cut off..."

*And I'm not going to play your guilt game, either! You men are not going to cram your sexist religion down my throat!*

**| There it was, the dirty little secret: I might be persuaded to return to Judaism – but not by a man.**

There it was, the dirty little secret: I might be persuaded to return to Judaism – but not by a man. After one of our encounters, Reb Noach had declared, "You are emotionally committed to rebelling against the male sex!" He was right, of course, and in principle I agreed that one ought to be wary of such a priori commitments. But whenever I clashed with a man I seemed to end up with a renewed conviction that my rebellion was a matter of simple sanity. Men with their obnoxious head trips! Men with their "objectivity": "Let's discuss this rationally – should I remove my foot from your neck or shouldn't I?"

## V. EXODUS

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*And it shall be when thy son asketh thee in time to come, saying, What is this? That thou shall say unto him, By strength of hand the Lord brought us out from Egypt, from the house of bondage. – EXODUS 13:14*

*You know her life was saved by rock and roll. – VELVET UNDERGROUND*

Mike and I were walking in Mea Shearim talking about happiness. My revised departure date was nearly two weeks away, time for plenty of changes, but I knew that I would not, at least for the present, become an Orthodox Jew. My decision had involved no epiphany, no cathartic moment of truth; my doubts remained and perhaps always would. But to put it that way was looking at it backward. The fact was that only a compelling, inescapable moment of truth could have made me religious. Nothing less could shake my presumption in favor of a life that made me happy.

From Mike's point of view, I was refusing to accept the truth because of a strong emotional resistance; though he too had resisted, his unhappiness with secular life had made it easier to give up. On the other hand, he kept suggesting, I might be a lot less happy than I thought.

"Dick sees you as a very unhappy person," Mike said. "And Reb Noach thinks you're really unhappy."

I felt a twinge of resentment – who were these people, who hardly knew me, to call me unhappy? – mixed with anxiety. Was I fooling myself? I didn't think so. I was not perfectly happy, or as happy as I wanted to be, but in spite of my unresolved problems I was happier than not. Having problems, even serious ones, was not the same as being unhappy. I knew the difference because I had experienced it. For about seven years,

beginning the year I started college, I had suffered from a severe depression. At the time I hadn't called it that, I didn't know what to call it. I wasn't especially sad; I just had this puzzling sense that nothing was quite real, that my life was, as I put it to myself, all procedure and no substance. Most of my activities, however theoretically enjoyable, secretly disappointed me. Reading my favorite poets, camping in Yosemite, marching on CORE picket lines, making love, somehow I nearly always felt like a spectator. When I got married I knew I was making a mistake but felt powerless to act on that knowledge; no matter how a movie may horrify you, you don't yell "No!" at it or smash the projector. I was conscious that all was not well, but then I thought, perhaps everyone felt this way, perhaps this was just the way life was. In the beginning that thought jibed neatly with the spirit of the time – the tail end of the silent Fifties.

My depression had begun gradually, for no obvious reason, and ended the same way. But over the years my memories of descent and recovery had crystallized around a few symbolic events. The first occurred when I was a Barnard freshman infatuated with a Columbia sophomore, an old friend from high school. One day I ran into him on the street and casually suggested – we were friends, right? – getting together some time. He looked uncomfortable and mumbled a non-answer. To my surprise I felt almost no pain. I noted that fact with detached interest. How sensible, I thought. Why cry over a situation I have no power to change? Four years later, when I was living in Berkeley, I heard Bob Dylan for the first time and was an instant fanatic. Dylan's voice got straight through to me, and what it said was, No, this is not just the way life is. Then a friend lent me Wilhelm Reich's classic, *Character Analysis*. I had never heard of Reich, and the book was a revelation: among other things, it contained a precise description of my emotional state. Other people had been in the same condition and been cured! I was not hopeless! It took me a while to pick up on these messages but eventually I left my husband, returned to New York, became a journalist, decided I thought I was really a radical, and fell in love. Somewhere along the line I noticed that my strange remoteness was gone.

**| My emergence from despair had ultimately depended on what religious people call the grace of God.**

I had had bouts of depression since then – the worst one had driven me to my therapist – and in occasional moments of stress I had reverted to staring at the movie. But I felt certain that I would never again lose myself in so terrible a way. In retrospect, it was clear that what had done me in were my conflicts about growing up female – conflicts I still felt. The difference was that I had decided to engage and struggle with life rather than withdraw from it. And making that decision – as often as necessary – was what happiness was about. I agreed with the Jewish insistence that happiness was a choice. Yet how I had gained the strength to choose remained a mystery, part of the larger mystery of how one connected with Reality. Like the inexplicable, ineffable liberation I'd experienced on acid, my emergence from despair had ultimately depended on what religious people call the grace of God.

Not that external circumstances were irrelevant. Things might have been very different if it had not been for the Sixties – and especially for rock & roll. Rock had been a major factor in my recovery; it had had the power to move me when almost nothing else did. I had been an ardent rock 'n' roll fan in high school. (Sometimes I thought this was why my depression hadn't hit until I arrived at Barnard where – this was 1958 – you were still supposed to dance to Lester Lanin.) But by the early Sixties I had largely abandoned pop for folk music. Still, when Dylan released his first rock album I was excited. I felt he had brought it all back home in more ways than one. After my marriage broke up in 1965 I started listening to AM radio again. The Sixties renaissance had begun; the pop charts were dominated by the Beatles and Stones and their epigoni, by Motown and folk rock. My new love was not only obsessed with the music but self-conscious about its cultural significance and its influence on our lives in a way that was new to me. I began to make my own connections. My first serious article was a long essay on Dylan.

Mike had once been a rock fan, but since becoming religious he had come to see rock as a drug, an escapist distraction. He also considered my writing a suspect activity; he and Dick Berger agreed that journalism, like traveling, was a way of observing life rather than participating in it.

"Do you think you would have gotten more out of being here if you had just come and gotten involved instead of having to think about your article?" Mike asked.

"I don't know," I said. "But if I hadn't decided to write an article I probably wouldn't have come."

Without the protection of my writer's role – my license to observe – I might not have had the courage to come. But more important, my overwhelming urge to write about a subject that touched every major issue in my life had routed a powerful impulse to repress, sit tight, let inertia take over; my decision to face up to my spiritual crisis was inseparable from my compulsion to observe and analyze it, to pursue every last connection. Anyway, writing was not just observing – it was sharing one's observations, a social act. It was also hard work. My identity as a writer might, as Reb Noach had suggested, be a prop for my ego, but it also had something to do with taking my work seriously. I had not begun thinking of myself as "a writer" until I had changed my attitude from "Right now I'm writing, maybe next year I'll study psychology" to "I'm going to stop playing games and commit myself to being the best writer I can be." Now, looking back on that change, I saw it as another crucial step toward happiness.

Clarity or death! Reb Noach insisted, and if there was one bit of clarity that emerged from all my confusion it was the conviction that my happiness was not illusory. As I tried to explain that conviction to Mike, I felt suddenly disgusted with my current funk. No wonder Dick and Reb Noach thought I was unhappy. I was a mess. I had gained ten pounds and developed a cold. I was sleeping later and later. If I had a serious talk with someone it exhausted me so much I would run back to the security of Shimoni Street and take a nap. "When we act out of fear of pain we're choosing death," Reb Noach was always saying. "The Torah says, 'Choose life!'" I had been running from the pain of uncertainty and conflict, had even thought, "I can't stand any more of this – I'm going to kill myself." How absurdly self-important!

Perhaps it was sheer determination to prove Mike wrong but my mood slowly began to change. I began, finally, to respond to the beauty of Jerusalem, to the hills and the peculiar atmospheric sparkle I had noticed nowhere else. I felt as if I'd been let out of prison.

Passover was approaching. I had deliberately scheduled my trip so that I would be in Israel for the week-long holiday. The Passover Seder – which was supposed to be celebrated on each of the first two nights – was the one Jewish ritual my family regularly observed. Most years we had our Seders with my mother's sister's family; my uncle, who was observant though not Orthodox, presided at the ceremony. For the rest of us Passover was less a religious occasion than a family party, a spring version of Thanksgiving. Still, it was impossible to retell the Exodus story year after year and be unaffected by it. It was, after all, a story about escaping oppression for freedom, and I was fond of thinking of it in contemporary political and psychological terms; to me the Seder's concluding invocation – "Next year in Jerusalem!" – expressed hope for both kinds of liberation. To Orthodox Jews however, Passover meant something very different – as I had learned attending Lorie's classes, the traditional definition of the freedom the Exodus represented was a mirror image of my own.

Passover commemorates a historical event – the deliverance of the Jewish people from slavery in Egypt, the prelude to the revelation of the Torah. But for the religious Jew it is also an ongoing reality. The Haggadah (The account of the Exodus read at the Seder) says, "In every generation each individual is bound to regard himself as if he personally had gone forth from Egypt." According to tradition, Egypt represents materialism, hedonism, amorality. To relive the Exodus is to affirm one's liberation from bondage to the Pharaoh within –

the *yeitzer hara* – and one's readiness to live in true freedom, that is, under God's law. This theme is made concrete in the central symbol of Passover, the matzah – unleavened bread. Because the fleeing Jews did not have time to let their bread rise, it is forbidden during Passover to eat or possess bread or any food made with leaven: symbolically, leaven represents the expansion of the *yeitzer hara*.

Reb David, a young teacher at Aish HaTorah, and his wife Ruth had invited Mike and me for the first Seder. In the morning we went over to help with last-minute preparations. Ruth put me to work hemming her older son's new holiday pants. Later I played with the kids, who had been sent out on the porch with a bowl of nuts to crack. A week ago their noise, mess and bickering would have driven me further into myself; now I was actually having fun.

The Seder began at around eight. The idea of the ceremony is to teach everyone – especially the children present – as much about the Exodus and its meaning as possible. Reb David went over each page of the Haggadah, asking questions, discussing various rabbis' interpretations, and by the time we reached the end of the first part – which we had to do before we could eat – it was almost midnight. After dinner we carried on for two more hours. The Seder ended – I had wondered about this beforehand – with the traditional words: "Next year in Jerusalem."

Later in the week, Mike and I were guests at the Weinbergs', along with several vacationing students of both sexes. I was very conscious of the rebbetzin, who seemed continually busy – though her admiring female guests competed with each other for jobs, there was always more to do – and continuously serene. Occasionally one of the kids gave her a hard time, balking at some little chore. Long after the average parent would have been shrieking with frustration, the rebbetzin would calmly repeat her request – or else, with no visible resentment, she would do the task herself.

Feeling guilty about my own lack of patience and selflessness, a lack I was sure was obvious to everyone, I slinked around trying to be inconspicuous. Finally the rebbetzin cornered me.

"I think," she began, "that you think you have to hide your femininity to be taken seriously."

For a moment I was speechless. "Why do you think that?"

"Well, for instance, the way you dress, the way you wear your hair."

Oh, if that's all she means, I thought. She doesn't realize, I'm only looking this way because I've been depressed. I knew I had been neglecting my appearance. Most days I stuck my long hair under a scarf so I wouldn't have to bother with it, and I couldn't wear anything with a waistline because I'd gained so much weight. On the other hand, the baggy dress I had on was actually quite fashionable in New York, and besides, since my normal jeans-and-T-shirt wardrobe was halachically unacceptable, what was I supposed to wear, and anyway, wasn't this the same old oppressive business of always judging a woman by her looks... Nice try, but it won't do, I admitted. Face it: she's right.

**The rebbetzin, staunch apostle of traditional femininity, did not appear to doubt for a moment that she could be both a woman and a serious person.**

The big lie of male supremacy is that women are less than fully human; the basic task of feminism is to expose that lie and fight it on every level. Yet for all my feminist militance I was, it seemed, secretly afraid that the lie was true – that my humanity was hopelessly at odds with my ineluctably female sexuality – while the rebbetzin, staunch apostle of traditional femininity, did not appear to doubt for a moment that she could be

both a woman and a serious person. Which was only superficially paradoxical, for if you were absolutely convinced that the Jewish woman's role was ordained by God, and that it was every bit as important spiritually as the man's, how could you believe the lie?

I was too much the product of Western libertarian values to travel the rebbetzin's route to self-acceptance, and so far I had not succeeded in finding my own...

On my last night in Jerusalem I went back for a final visit with the Weinbergs. Reb Noach was talking to a young visitor named Ron. Ron was explaining that he had come to Israel to get his head straight, figure out what to do with his life. Did he want to take over his father's diamond-polishing business, or what?

"Come to our yeshiva," Reb Noach said. "Find out what Judaism has to say about these questions. For instance, why are we here? What are we here for?"

"To serve God?"

"No. The world was created to give man pleasure. The Torah tells us how to get it. The Almighty didn't want us wandering around like chickens with their heads chopped off."

Ron was obviously interested, and Reb Noach began urging him to come to Aish HaTorah for a week.

"I can't," said Ron. "I've committed myself to work on my kibbutz till the end of July. And my girlfriend is there."

"Don't worry about the kibbutz. They can get someone to take your place. What are you there for? You won't find the answers to your questions on a kibbutz."

"I can't come now," said Ron. "But I promise in three months I'll be back."

"Come now," Reb Noach persisted. "Who knows what could happen in three months? A man should never say, 'When I have time I'll study.'"

"I can't," said Ron, "but my mind is really blown by your concern."

I made my goodbyes. Reb Noach gave me some parting advice: "Jews say, whatever else you do, be happy. Even if you're a lawbreaker, just fulfill that one commandment."

In the morning Mike went with me to the airport. We stood there awkwardly, unable to say most of what we felt. For the first time since this long trip had begun, I had the old flash that he was my male mirror image.

Judaism teaches the conventional patriarchal idea that men have more of a bent for abstract reasoning, women for intuitive understanding. I believe that this split is social, not biological – that in a society where men rule and women nurture, it makes sense for men to develop their intellect at the expense of their emotions and for women to do the opposite. Still, I agree that although the difference is probably not innate, and certainly not absolute – I, for one, am more cerebral than most of the men I know – it does exist. And at the moment Mike and I were a study in contrasting male and female sensibilities. I was leaving Israel, with all the intellectual questions unresolved, because in the end I trusted my feelings and believed in acting on them. Though I might use logic as a weapon against uncertainty, I did not, finally, have Mike's faith that it would lead me to the truth.

**I still did not know whether my refusal to believe was healthy self-assertion or stubborn egotism; the Jews, the Bible tells us, are a stiff-necked people.**

Mike had been 24 when he became religious. I had been 23 when I came out of my deadly depression. It seemed to me that both changes represented the same basic decision to be happy. But mine had been a purely intuitive decision, to allow myself to feel; his had presented itself as an intellectual decision, to go where his logic led. Perhaps our paths were equally valid. Perhaps not. As I kissed my brother goodbye I still did not know whether my refusal to believe was healthy self-assertion or stubborn egotism; the Jews, the Bible tells us, are a stiff-necked people.

I arrived exhausted at Kennedy, retrieved my baggage, slogged through customs and went outside to wait for my parents to pick me up. Only then did I allow myself a moment of enormous relief. I had made it after all. No crash, no bomb, no hijacker, no unexplained delay. I was here in New York, body and soul intact. And then I thought, so what? Suddenly I was quite unable to understand what I had been so anxious to come back to. The airport was bleak and sterile. The weather was unseasonably cold, and a freaky windstorm was making everyone run for cover. I huddled in the doorway of the terminal watching the cars go by like an endless procession of anti-American cliches. When my parents drove up I felt another surge of relief, but on the way back to their house my confusion returned. Where did I belong? What did I want?

The following evening my father drove me home to my apartment in Manhattan. The windstorm had blown away the smog, and from the expressway we had an unusually clear view of the harbor and the skyline. It was dusk, the lights of the city were beginning to blink on, and I was seized with an almost religious tenderness for New York and its special beauty. Yet at the same time, staring at those glittering lights, I saw something else: the temptations of Egypt. My eyes filled, and I thought – groping for irony I could not quite reach...

*How does it feel  
To be on your own  
With no direction home,  
Like a complete unknown?*