

What I Did During My Sabbatical  
Rabbi Ellen Lippmann  
January/February 2007

Dear Kolot,

It has become my custom to write a bit about my sabbatical travels after I return, in part as a way for me to take note and remember and in part as a way to thank you and to involve you in these travels which are your great gift to me. This year is no exception.

I begin by reminding you of what I wrote as I was leaving: “This year, I am returning to Santa Fe, New Mexico, but for a different reason: I will be walking some part of the Santa Fe trail, the trail that brought my German-Jewish great grandfather to Santa Fe in the 1840's and decades later took him and his much larger family (including my 6 or 7 year-old to-be grandmother) away from Santa Fe and toward New York City. I will also be spending some time again at the Monastery of Christ in the Desert, the glorious Benedictine monastery where I have found quiet and beauty and models of combining prayer and work that are unrivaled. “

I will write a week-by-week letter, but continue here to say that I did walk part of the Santa Fe trail, in spite of a lot more snow than I or anyone in Santa Fe ever imagined! They had two huge storms before I arrived, and it snowed three times while I was there. It turns out that Santa Fe has six snow plows, and some streets, like the one I stayed on, never saw sanding, much less a plow! This meant that sometimes the trail was under ice, and sometimes – where it is only barely visible wagon ruts from the 19<sup>th</sup> century – it was completely obscured by snow. It also meant it was really cold and windy, which made our walking a bit more difficult – but not at all impossible or impassable. It did cut down my expectations for distance – we more often did 5 or 7 or 8 miles rather than my hoped-for 10. It also meant that the landscape at the monastery was quite changed, a new and equally awe-inspiring experience.

Having said that, I'll go on to the weeks, which I will call 1 – Connection; 2 – Question; 3 – Contemplation

1. **Connection**

Emma – our daughter – and I arrived in Santa Fe late on a Friday afternoon, having been delayed in Denver and at car rental in Albuquerque. So the first thing we did was light Shabbat candles and make Kiddush – I am thankful every trip I take for the friend who gave me traveling Shabbat candle-sticks! We combined this with Mexican dinner, the signal that we had arrived in the southwest. Over dinner, we set our intention, or our kavannah, for the time we were to be there together: What did we each plan or hope for the physical, emotional, spiritual and perhaps historical realms? My primary hopes were to connect with her (this was the longest time we'd ever had together alone!); to connect with my Santa Fe ancestors; to walk a lot; to sense the spiritual element in these

connections and in the land there; and to learn more about my family's history. Amazingly, I accomplished them all.

On the first day, we drove the Santa Fe trail in Santa Fe – about ten miles of mostly paved road, which dead-ends in what we would call a “holler” in West Virginia or Kentucky, where we promptly got stuck in a snowy ditch trying to back out of the dead end. 15 goats were delighted to see us, and began to “baaaaaaa” at a great rate, while several dogs barked their ferocious best. Not a person to be seen, though we were stuck right in front of a trailer and near one visible house. Finally, the man who lives in the trailer appeared from a walk with yet more dogs, and we introduced ourselves and our dilemma. He got a shovel and he and I both dug some, but the car was not moving. Another car appeared, and a younger man got out, and soon they were joined by a third, even younger, in a truck. All were Native American, and the first young man was the god son of the older man; all three clearly knew or were related to one another. These three men, strangers to us, spent at least 45 minutes digging and trying the car and digging and pushing and finally freed our car to our deep and much expressed thanks. The first young man returned to his car, where his family were waiting to go visit another family member, the other drove away in his truck, and the older man – Tony – calmed the goats, called the dogs and went into his trailer. We drove away, so thankful to them and so happy in an odd way that we had almost literally stumbled into a place we would never otherwise have seen. We also took note of our sense of that “holler” and how different it is from the part of Santa Fe in which we stay – a great social/economic gap in just a few miles, which of course is true in Brooklyn too, but here we hadn't seen it.

The next day, after we photographed the “end of the trail” monument in the Santa Fe plaza, and the sign for La Fonda Hotel – the Inn at the End of the Trail, we started on our first day's walk: up and out of ‘downtown’ toward Museum Hill, where we stopped to photograph the monument to the trail there – a life-size sculpture of a wagon and horses and travelers nearing the end of the trail. We continued until we saw that the trail – a road here – in front of us was a sheet of ice and cars were fishtailing down it at a great rate. We turned away and walked toward the Old Pecos Trail instead, and walked back into town on that, a much more hilly road with the wind in our faces the whole way. But were we proud of our first day's 7 miles in those circumstances. And I got my first sense of how it might have been for my ancestors, those German Jewish young men finally arriving after months on the trail on horseback, in wagons, perhaps on foot.

I had with me two booklets that were very helpful: “Without a Wagon on the Santa Fe Trail; Hiking Into History,” by Inez Ross (who I met during my second week) and “Jewish Pioneers of New Mexico: The Spiegelberg Family,” by Dr. Noel Pugach and the New Mexico Jewish Historical Society. In them, we learned where to head next to see more of the trail, and learned more about my family. For example, we learned that Solomon Jacob Spiegelberg, the first of the six Spiegelberg brothers to come to Santa Fe (and thus my great-great uncle who, some say, was the first “certifiable Jew in new mexico)) served as a sutler (provisioner) to Brigadier General Stephen Watts Kearny, who established Fort Marcy in Santa Fe as his military headquarters. By some amazing coincidence, before ever knowing this, we were staying at the Ft. Marcy Suites, on

Kearny Street! As the days went on, I also bought [A History of The Jews of New Mexico](#), by Henry Tobias, and learned more: that there had been six brothers who came, not the five I had always heard about, and that my great grandfather was only 15 when he arrived. Together these entrepreneurial young men opened a trading post selling all kinds of goods, and later also started a bank. One became the mayor of Santa Fe and his house still stands as a historical site, also the site of a major art gallery. By the 1880's, the railroad changed their lives, with Santa Fe no longer a primary trading destination, and they all – now with large families (my grandmother was the youngest of eight children) – traveled to New York for culture, education and more Jewish life. They became active, involved members of Temple Emanu-El and some had an impact on New York City life as well.

Back on the trail: In subsequent days, Emma and I traveled to Pecos and then Las Vegas, New Mexico, finding more evidence of the trail even as we recognized that, as Emma said, “This trail is sort of a mythical trail, floating somewhere above us each time we try to find it.” Our walks, as Inez Ross described in her booklet, were on roads that were near where the trail had gone or occasionally right over the old trail. They also provided us new sights and new information. In Pecos, we saw the ruins of a 2000-person Indian pueblo that had flourished in the 15<sup>th</sup> to 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, until the Spaniards and the church arrived. In Las Vegas, the trail had run right down what is now the main street of town, and we viewed the trail section of the local historical museum and ate lunch on that street at Estella's, the café where everyone came to eat good cheap New Mexican food – green chile stew and sopapilla!

In Las Vegas, walking a short, icy trail perpendicular to the Santa Fe trail, we talked about kabbalah, with Emma raising an ever-present question about mysticism and action in the world – do you abdicate your responsibility to the world when engaged in mystical activity or is there a way to understand how that practice benefits the world? It was a discussion that would come up again in the late January gathering of Kolot's Spiritual Explorations Group. My short answer is, of course you don't abdicate your responsibility to the world, but that is what some of Emma's fellow students were seeming to say. She also wondered, as do I, about the trivial way many people seem to approach kabbalah these days, when it really requires deep knowledge of the Judaism that preceded it.

We also went back to walk the rest of the trail in Santa Fe when the weather warmed up and melted the ice. That day's 8 miles felt very long by the time we walked back up and down, up and down to where we had left the car. Along the way, we saw the road to a Zen monastery, an Episcopal retreat camp, the New Mexico Academy of Math and Sciences, a Catholic convent, and more: glorious views of mountains on all sides, knee-deep undisturbed snow and evergreens, animal tracks, creeks with flowing water (I had never seen flowing water in Santa Fe: it has been in a drought for 8 years which this snow will go some way to alleviating), and that amazing high desert sun – we both got tan walking in ice and snow!

We did not walk all the time: we also cooked some meals, went out to eat, went to a couple of museums, saw a movie, watched some TV (Bush's speech on the war and

Condoleeza Rice under Senate questioning and OK, some Law and Order), soaked in a hot tub and had massages at Ten Thousand Waves, saw a rabbit by our front door, and talked. Mostly, we connected, able to spend such a lovely amount of time together, catching up on what was on our minds and in our hearts, asking questions, discussing everything from kabbalah to her next semester's courses to family issues. It was wonderful to have such a great companion (Kathryn was in Mongolia, where she is doing some work this year), one who understood my desire to connect to this part of my history and its spiritual side, and went along like a trooper, even when the trail seemed more mythic than real.

When Emma left, I had a couple of days alone before a friend arrived for the next phase of walking. I visited a museum, walked the last part of the trail in Santa Fe – on a dirt road that led me right back to Tony's trailer, where I had been stuck in the snow days before! And I went to shul. This second Friday night, I lit candles and made Kiddush again, and had a special Shabbat dinner at home (we stay in an apartment with a kitchen), and then I went to services. I thought I was going to the main Reform synagogue in Santa Fe, but it turned out that the place I had seen advertised was a breakaway from that synagogue, a smaller congregation now about ten years old, which until this year had met in a Lutheran church. This year they built a building, a lovely, spacious building with stained glass and beautiful hangings. They have two rabbis – an older man who is a bit ill and a younger man, neither of them present that night. Their cantor led with a member, a clearly knowledgeable man who led the service and also read and translated Torah, which they do on Friday nights. This was Beit Tikvah, the house of hope. They were very friendly to me, and gave me an aliyah! I didn't particularly like the service, but their friendliness made me feel at home and I was glad I had gone.

The next day, my friend Judith arrived, and with her my next week: Questioning.

Enough for the first installment.

In hope,

Rabbi Ellen Lippmann

What I Learned on my Sabbatical, 2  
*Question*  
Rabbi Ellen Lippmann

Dear Kolot,

The second week of my sabbatical I am referring to as “Question,” following the first week’s “Connection.” This is in part because I spent the second week with my friend Judith, who is a great questioner, and who dove right in to my Santa Fe trail project by reading the booklets and asking lots of questions. What did it mean that my ancestors were provisioners for the US Army? What did it mean they traded with the Indians? Was this fair trade, did I imagine? How DID they treat the Indians? I knew that one of my great great uncles (the one who became mayor of Santa Fe) and his wife (who met Billy the Kid and who would later have some hand in developing New York City’s sanitation system) adopted two Indian orphans and raised them. But meanwhile, how was the store called “Spiegelberg Hermanos” dealing with the Indians it traded with? Thanks to Judith’s interest, I had to think in a new way about these cherished ancestors and wonder about their life and dealings.

In addition, I was reading Amos Oz’s memoir, A Tale of Love and Darkness, that week. I highly recommend it. It raised other questions for me about the beginnings of the state of Israel, which Oz describes from the inside: He was a child among highly literate Russian “olim” and is an extraordinary observer and describer of their lives, his own life, and the life of Israel before and after statehood. As a child and teen, he was a strong nationalist, yet later changed his mind, as he also changed his name and his home, going to live on a kibbutz while still a teenager, which struck me as not entirely unlike my teenage great grandfather setting off for the strange land of America – and New Mexico!

Judith and I also had two interesting visits with people. The first was with her son-in-law’s aunt and her companion. She is a Holocaust survivor from Hungary and has lived in Santa Fe for many years; he grew up poor on the lower east side, lived in Albuquerque and moved to Santa Fe to be with her. Their home is wonderful old adobe house on a big piece of land, filled with books – both are professors. Both are also Jews, neither religious at all, but interested in me as a rabbi and in my Santa Fe history. She told me to tell him about it, and as soon as I mentioned the name “Spiegelberg,” he said, “Ooohhh. A lot of money! Where is it?” Another interesting question for which I have no answer.

The second visit was with Inez Ross, the author of Without a Wagon On the Santa Fe Trail; Hiking Into History. She is a retired English teacher who lives in Los Alamos and organized a group of friends to walk all 800 miles of the Santa Fe train during weekend hikes for 8 years! She took us to a small historical museum to learn about the Los Alamos area; it was smaller than the Los Alamos museum that tells the story of Robert Oppenheimer, the “father of the atomic bomb,” but interesting in its own way. She told us about a trip she still hopes to take, and wanted me to return in the spring to do it with

her before its route is destroyed by development: a train from Lamy through Santa Fe up to Colorado, and then walking the Mountain Route of the Santa Fe Trail. This woman must be 75 and is a runner and clearly had more energy than Judith and me together! The atomic bomb, development destroying the old trail routes, and the tempting idea of a train and hike way to see more of the trail – my head was spinning as we drove out and toward Ghost Ranch in Abiqui, the artist Georgia O’Keeffe’s old studio (now a Presbyterian retreat center). There we walked and stood in awe of the red rock landscape which is absolutely stunning – a feast for the eyes and one of the reasons I keep returning each year: that is also the landscape of the monastery where I spent the last days of my time away – glorious. Next week I will write about that.

In hope,

Rabbi Ellen Lippmann

## What I Did on My Sabbatical 3: Contemplation

Dear Friends,

This letter, the last from my slightly shorter sabbatical, describes my time at the Christ in the Desert Monastery in Abiqui, NM, where I have gone every year for several years for meditation, prayer, and quiet.

Before I begin, though, I want to take note of two wonderful classes coming up in March that you may have missed in the weekly calendar e-mail with all its offerings.

First, we are offering **“Training Life Transitions Counselors,”** a 14-week course beginning Wednesday, March 7, taught by social workers, psychologists, rabbis and educators, to give prospective “informed listeners” the foundation needed to serve in that role and that of ritual maker and leader for a range of life transitions. Do you want to know how to visit someone in the hospital, lead a baby-naming or shiva minyan, accompany someone through joyful and painful life changes? This requires the 14-week commitment, and a commitment to work thereafter as a volunteer life transition counselor when needed. Fee: \$140. Interested? E-mail [rebellen@earthlink.net](mailto:rebellen@earthlink.net). Class will usually run from 7 to 8:30, but the first night begins at 7:30 pm, at Kolot.

Second, as part of a Kolot effort to widen our community’s boundaries and in particular better understand the lives and needs of transgender Jews, we are offering **“A Created Being of Its Own”: Gender and Sexual Diversity in Jewish Tradition:** A three-part introductory class which will examine classical Jewish texts on gender diversity and explore their implications for creating a vibrant contemporary Judaism that includes the experiences of women, transgender, intersex and gender non-conforming Jews. **The third session will be for Kolot members only**, to give us a chance to ask our sometimes awkward questions in safety. Taught by Rabbi Elliot Kukla, and co-sponsored by JFREJ (Jews for Racial and Economic Justice). **Thursdays, March 15, 22, 29** at 7:00 pm at Kolot. Sliding Scale: \$36 - \$90. **No one turned away for inability to pay.** E-mail: [rebellen@earthlink.net](mailto:rebellen@earthlink.net)

Now, I turn back to the monastery and the conclusion of my sabbatical travels. After my weeks of *Connection* and *Question*, I call this time *Contemplation*. In addition to my desire to further explore the story of my family in Santa Fe, what I was most looking forward to was that blessed quiet. And there is no quiet quite like the deep, profound silence of the Chama River Canyon, where the monastery is located. I have written about my time at the monastery in past years, but this year, with more snow on the ground – and a day and a half of it falling – the silence was even deeper, albeit interrupted by the sounds of the canyon: the birds, the wind, the river rushing past its frozen edges, the crack of the rocky cliffs as they shifted.

As I drove in, on the 13-mile dirt (snow) road toward the monastery, a car bearing the two monks – the guestmaster and another, younger brother – came toward me. We

stopped, rolled down windows, greeted each other with a smile and a few words, and I knew I was “home.”

As soon as I arrived, I unpacked, moved my car back to the small parking lot, and went for a walk. I decided to try to engage a practice I had learned at the Institute for Jewish Spirituality (and which our own Kolot Spiritual Explorations group will be learning at our next session), called *hit'bodedut* – being alone with oneself and God, developed especially by the 18<sup>th</sup> century mystic, Nachman of Bratslav. Arthur Green, in his book *The Tormented Master*, about Nachman, explains: “The most essential religious practice of Bratslav, and that which Nahman constantly taught was to be placed above all else in his disciples' hierarchy of values, was *hitbodedut*, lone daily conversation with God. The Hasid was to set aside a certain period of time each day, preferably out of doors, if possible, and always alone, when he was to pour out before God his most intimate longings, needs, desires and frustrations. Nahman emphasized the need to do all this aloud, to bring those usually unspoken inner drives to the point of verbalization. He also insisted that one do so in one's native language (in his case Yiddish) rather than Hebrew.”

This is not something I can do every day, but when I arrived at the monastery, I had time and aloneness and a certain yearning to speak to God. I know this may sound preposterous to some of you, but it was true for me, and so as I walked I spoke out loud, telling of my yearning and of whatever else emerged. We were taught to do this with constant speaking, a sort of verbal form of continuous writing, which somehow enables one's inner truth to emerge as the words remove inhibitions. So I walked and walked, and talked and talked, softly so as not to mar the canyon's music, but loudly enough for me and, I hoped, for God, to hear. It was a highlight of my time there, and allowed me to quiet down for prayer, reading and contemplation.

I arrived on a Friday, so my Shabbat began with Vespers at the monastery chapel, which itself begins with a half hour of quiet, followed by the now-familiar chanting of psalms, in English, in Gregorian Chant. It is itself quiet and contained, and while unquestionably Catholic, it allows me some room. On some days, I brought Hebrew psalms and compared them to the English translation used; on other days, I just listened. After the service, I had dinner with the monks and other guests in the dining room. And then I returned to my room to light Shabbat candles and make Kiddush – a little backward, but it did feel like Shabbat in my small, simple “monk's cell.” I usually listen to some Jewish music on a CD player with earphones (no noise in the guesthouse), but realized I had forgotten batteries, and took it as a sign that I meant to be even quieter there than usual.

On Shabbat morning, I prayed the Shabbat morning service in my room, then went for a walk in the stunningly beautiful landscape, stopping to breathe it in. After the walk, and lunch, I stopped to “bench” – to say the blessings after the meal, the *Birkat HaMazon*. That evening, I concluded Shabbat with *havdallah* – recognizing the need to “book-end” the day in that unlikeliest of Shabbat environments.

The days that followed were filled with delicious, simple meals; long walks with many stops for deep breaths of gratitude for this place and occasional singing prayers out loud

(most often “*mah gadlu ma-asekha Yah*” – How great are Your works, how deep are Your thoughts – from Psalm 92); and a few conversations with other guests or the brothers.

One delight each year is seeing again the caretaker of the place, a man named Fred, who is Lebanese by origin, and who greets all guests with enthusiasm, who carves the wooden plaques that are sold in the gift shop, and who has learned a good deal about Jewish history and practice, in part from my colleague Rabbi Dan Fink, who also goes to the monastery each year, now for 10 or more years. I asked Fred how it was for him last summer, during the fighting between Israel and Lebanon, and we had a brief conversation, not always in agreement, but glad to be able to talk about it – he thanked me for asking.

Another conversation took place entirely on paper: I received in my “napkin box” a letter from the interim abbot, sent to the whole community, about the two recent movies about 9/11, which he had recently seen and which he was recommending. It was also a pastoral letter, commenting on relations between people, and how much caring had been seen on that day. It provoked me – made me a little angry, actually, in its simplicity and because of his distance from here – and I wrote a long response which I gave to the guestmaster to give to him. At a later meal, I received a note back from him, and we smiled our recognition of each other. When I returned home, I sent him several articles and poems I had recommended, in part to say that for me, at least regarding the vents of 9/11, reading allows greater thought and imagination than film. I still await his next response.

Reading was a highlight of my time there, too: I read a book of short mysteries by Peter Tremagne, featuring his wonderful character, Sister Fidelma, an Irish nun of the 7<sup>th</sup> century, who is also a lawyer and who helps explain how much more liberal the Catholic church in Ireland once was. I read the wonderful essays in the back of the Conservative siddur, *Sim Shalom*, about Shabbat, and God, and prayer. I read Annie Dillard, and The Best Spiritual Writing of 2006, this time introduced by Rev. Peter J. Gomes, the African-American and gay minister and professor at Harvard. And more I can't recall now. But in a room without electricity, and only a rechargeable lantern for light, reading in bed is a great and early evening pleasure, leading to early and cozy bed time as snow falls, wind sighs, and the Chama River pushes past the ice on its way through the canyon.

What a gift you have given me. I am very grateful.

In hope,

Rabbi Ellen Lippmann