

voices

קולות חיינו

congregation kolot chayeinu •

• voices of our lives

I Am the Other

BY MIKE COCKRILL

“**T**ell Ellen I’m having a seder on the second night. She’ll know what that means.” This was my brother-in-law’s wife calling our house, where we light candles and say the blessings every Friday night. But I’m not a Jew, so what do I know?

Funny thing was, I had just come from a Kolot Passover Seder workshop. I was the only one in my house who was able to attend. When I hung up I said to my wife, “We should tell your brother that we need a meaningful topic to discuss during the seder. This isn’t just about seeing relatives and eating food.”

“I’ll try,” she said, sounding the dejected Moses. (They won’t listen.)

Holidays place all the issues on the plate — bitter herbs dipped in a bowl of tears.

In the beginning, coming from a Catholic background, I didn’t even know what a bagel was let alone a seder. When I left my home in Virginia and met Jews in Philadelphia and later New York, I found they were refreshingly unconcerned, nay amused, by my youthful scenarios of Eternal Damnation. Who are these people who seem to chuckle in the face of God? I wanted to know more.

I learned distinctions like “Cultural Jew” and “High Holy Day Jew.” Not to mention, “Anti-religion Pro-Marxist Jew.”

The landscape was vast. I was sinking in deeper and falling in love. Not with Judaism per se, but with some pretty dynamic Jewish ladies. I loved the humor, and the way they sprinkled Yiddish into conversation. I felt challenged and invigorated by the way

they made me re-examine every statement I made. (I took it as a sign of caring. After all, they wanted my brain to work correctly.)

When I met Ellen I noticed she didn’t use much Yiddish, but she was very

much a Jewish woman: A writer, super smart, strong opinions, passionate. As we planned our marriage it was clear — clear what I wanted and what Ellen also wanted. We would have a Jewish home and Jewish children; we had one, Rachel, a blessing. We

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Jews/Non-Jews

Absent Faith

BY JIM GOLDEN

I haven’t considered myself a Christian for many years. I long ago rejected the Southern Baptist tradition I was raised in. Although I don’t call myself a Christian, I still value much in that tradition. I also have many associations with Judaism, going back to my childhood, so when I met Phil, I was naturally curious about Judaism. In the 31 years we’ve been together,

I’ve come to consider myself “sort of” Jewish. On our trips to Italy, and even to Tahiti, we’ve always sought out the local synagogues, and the signs of historic Jewish life, the ghettos in Venice and Rome, the Alte-Neue Synagogue in Prague. I still recall visiting the Florence Synagogue during Succoth, when we were welcomed into the Succah and shared grapes and wine with the local members. I’ve come to look forward to the High Holy Days and Passover. We light Shabbat candles almost every week, sometimes over the telephone when we’re not together, and Kolot Chayeinu has become

an important part of our life together.

Walking to work from the parking lot recently, I was feeling in my pocket for something. I couldn’t remember what (senior moment!). Then I remembered what I was searching for — the absence of my car key. A couple of weeks back I had left my car, taking the key, and the parking attendant had to run after me to get it. On this day, I had intended to reassure myself I left the key in the car. After my momentary forgetfulness, the absence of the key confirmed that.

This may seem like a rather baroque way

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BY KATHRYN CONROY

On Saint Patrick's Day I had dinner with my friends Walsh and McGowan at an Irish pub on the Upper East Side. McGowan turned to me and said, "I can't wait to read the next issue of *Voices* and your article on being a rebbetzin." So goes my life.

What's the proper preparation for becoming a rebbetzin? Probably not 16 years of Catholic education. But here I am, rebbetzin by default. I say "by default" because this position is one I truly came to by accident. You see, I fell in love with a librarian. Yes, Ellen was a librarian before she became a rabbi. And yes, it is true, one of the first times we spent together Ellen did mention, in passing, that she had thought about being a rabbi. But I did not give it that much thought. What did I know? The main thing I know is that our getting together was *bashert*. It was meant to be and nothing and no one could have stopped us getting together. I say this twenty-one years later.

So, what is it like being the lesbian, non-Jewish partner of a rabbi?

Being lesbian was a piece of cake. It was exciting. After our first year together Ellen applied to rabbinical school. She started, as all HUC (Hebrew Union College) students do, with a year in Israel; I visited twice that year and she came home twice, but it was a hard separation so early in our life together. Then Ellen was at HUC here in New York, and would regale me with stories of meeting other student rabbis who were gay, but all in the closet, as HUC would not at that time admit anyone who was openly homosexual. The gay/lesbian students had secret meetings, had many allies among the straight students, and HUC eventually changed their policy, but not by the time Ellen was ordained. We feared that she would be "found out" and expelled. When she came down from the bima at Temple Emanu-El, newly ordained, she leaned over and said to me, "We made it."

Being inter-married was never a piece of cake. There is no Stonewall for inter-marrieds, no "pride" agenda, not a lot of excitement. Even after HUC admitted openly lesbian/gay students it still, to this day, will not admit anyone who is inter-married. For years Ellen would go to events that others, now even gays and lesbians, would attend with their partners, and I could not. In her last Rosh Hashanah sermon Ellen spoke of this. It was hard — for both of us. But Ellen had chosen me, and she had chosen rabbinical life; she had to make them both work. Eventually Ellen did begin introducing me more, and amazingly, the responses were not bad — sometimes quizzical, but not bad. And Ellen's Rosh Hashana sermon was, as she said, the ultimate "coming out".

Coming out to our families was quite different. When Ellen first told her parents that she was with a woman, her mother asked, "Is she Jewish?" That translated to both of us that they were taking our relationship seriously. My parents refused to accept the fact that I am a lesbian, so, in a really odd sense, it does not matter who I am "with" because there is no relationship they were willing to recognize.

Twelve years ago Ellen started Kolot. She was determined

to find a community in which we, and others like us, could be ourselves. At the first meeting at our house, as we went around the room, I said, "I'm the rebbetzin" using a word I heard other lesbian rabbis' partners use in referring to themselves. It was quite a shock for some. Judy Kane still talks about it in the most endearing way. But I have to say, I went to the Jewish Theological Seminary library and looked into what a rebbetzin actually is supposed to do and I think we have to come up with another title for me. It is true that the only source I came up with was from the 1950s. But folks, there's no way. I have a full-time job. I cannot do what the traditional rebbetzin is expected to do. Yes, I do make all the meals at our house, but I don't make the Challah every week. I don't visit all the sick, attend every *simkha*, go to every Shiva, and I surely wouldn't lead the Sisterhood if Kolot had one.

Which may lead us to what I do do at Kolot and Jewishly. Ellen and I have observed every Shabbat since we have been together. That includes lighting candles in Ossining, Paris, Cairo, Dublin, Cordoba, Rhinebeck, Santa Fe and Brooklyn. And it includes me lighting candles at home when she is not there, partly as a means for me to connect to her while she is gone. I make our seder meal every year and am a

full participant in the service. We celebrate all the home Jewish holidays, building a sukkah, lighting the Chanukah menorah, counting the omer from Passover to Shavuot. Our home is solely a Jewish home and has been for years. Kolot members have been uniformly positive toward me (and if not, I have not heard or felt it!). I attend High Holiday services gladly, welcoming the mixture of celebration and contemplation. (I do avoid Purim and Simchat Torah. I find them personally unsettling. I don't like masks except at the circus and I don't like the anthropomorphizing of the Torah.) I love Kabbalat Shabbat for the quiet and Lisa's singing, and of course, the Rabbi's words. I like coming to the Saturday morning service when there is Torah reading.

So, what am I? I am a permanently lapsed Irish Catholic. Actually, the Irish part isn't lapsed, just the Catholic. It will always be who I am. Just as no matter where I am, I was born in Brooklyn, so no matter what I do I am a permanently lapsed Irish Catholic. I attend a number of the Kolot religious services and find them spiritually fulfilling and sometimes challenging. I also attend meditation retreats, usually in the Zen tradition, because I love the quiet and solitude. But what I am is a permanently lapsed Irish Catholic. I cannot convert to anything because I am already who I am and what I am going to continue to be. But I am one who appreciates this Jewish experience with all her heart and mind.

I could not finish this piece without saying something about the Kolot community. Some of you I know better than others. With some of you I have a personal relationship. For some of you I have done the social work tasks of making referrals for therapists or hooking you up with other resources. Every one of you has treated me with respect and many of you with fondness. I thank you and only hope that, as the only rebbetzin you have right now, I have done the same. ■



joined Kolot and made a start. At home on Friday nights we sing in Hebrew and bless our daughter as Shabbat candles flicker in her eyes. We say kiddush and say the motsi.

Even so, as I've grown increasingly at home with Jewish culture, at Jewish gatherings I remain the other. It is a distinction that fades a bit if not entirely when I'm with those who know me well, like my close Jewish pals or my friends at Kolot. But, in other places it is noticeable. At a recent reception in New Jersey after a Jewish memorial service, I started making an observation about kids disappearing from temple after reaching bar mitzvah age. (Nothing too startling in that statement.) The host cut me off mid-sentence and launched into a louder-than-necessary mini-lecture defining what a bar mitzvah is. I could see the wheels turning in his head — You're a gentile. You don't know.

But what if I could carry the Torah? The other night I asked my daughter Rachel (a student in the b'nei mitzvah class) if she could hold the Torah. For a second I was thinking like a Catholic, you know, pre-bat mitzvah is like pre-First Communion. Rachel practically burst. "Of course I can! I'm a Jew!" I looked at her thinking — Wow, love the conviction! But I said, "That doesn't seem fair."

Ellen offered, "You can always convert, if that matters to you."

Rachel cut in and adamantly declared, "No you can't!"

I shrugged and the discussion ended, but I thought about it later. Could I be a Jew? Would I be a different person if I could carry the Torah? That does sound like a huge difference. Would I be accepted? Would I accept myself as a Jew?

The strange thing about writing this essay is that it has been so difficult. At first I thought it would be a snap writing about my "multi-faith" relationship. After

all, isn't it easy writing about something you like? However, in the course of writing about my Jewish family, my Catholic upbringing, and the temple I attend, I realized I don't know what I am. I'm not Catholic. Those days faded with high school. I'm not Jewish, though I have become more comfortable around Jews than anyone else. That in itself is an interesting thing to realize.

So what's holding me back? Why not study and convert to Judaism? Something in me is not ready. Part of me feels I would be denying the prayers I made as a child. And I meant those prayers. Even so, disheartened by the Catholic church, and disgusted by the Christian far right, I will not return to churches (except to look at the art). I like temple. I like Judaism. On Friday night, I will light Shabbat candles with my family and sing in Hebrew. And, from time to time, Ellen will shoot a look at me when I mispronounce. But what do I know? I'm the other. ■

A Skeptical Scientist with a Christian Unconscious Raises Jewish Children

BY COLLEEN O'NEAL

My father was a Methodist minister. My mother's father was a hard-core atheist scientist with anarchist tendencies who to wrestle with established religion. My father often let him win because he'd fallen in love with my grandfather's daughter.

My parents named me Colleen O'Neal when I was born which is as Christian a name as they come. I was not baptized. When I've asked my parents why I was not baptized, they said, free-thinking products of the 1960's that they were, that they wanted me to choose my religion for myself

So I grew up in the South without any coherent religious identification. Let me tell you, there aren't many of us without religious identification in the South. Sure, my parents tried sending me to Southern Methodist Sunday School for a while, but they soon pulled me out of the school when the teacher told me that the "Jews killed Christ."

In college, despite my having become

an agnostic, skeptical scientist, I fell in love with a Jewish man. He barely acted religious until the subject of children came along. Then, he wanted to reserve the right to be religious, in the case of future children. My attitude was: "Why not let our kids choose for themselves what religion they'd want to be, as I was given the choice?"

I relented, with gritted teeth, over bringing our children up in an established religion. Then, my family and Ken's family merged together for my daughter's Hebrew Naming ceremony when she was a wee 5 month old. My Christian family and anarchist, atheist, scientist grandfather had their misgivings about this Jewish ritual, I think.

I know my family was waiting to see how Rabbi Lippmann treated the non-Jew during the naming ceremony. I was treated as an equal. And my anarchist, atheist, scientist grandfather was asked to carry my 5 month old daughter into

the ceremony. Rabbi Lippman spoke eloquently in terms understood by both Jews and non-Jews. Lisa, the cantor, sang beautifully and even gave an impromptu rendition of "Alice's Restaurant" in honor of my daughter's non-Jewish name, Alice. My family's shoulders lowered a bit from their previously tense, raised position. They seemed to love the ceremony.

I now read a book about "Queen Esther" to my daughter. I love the image of my daughter as a courageous woman emerging from hiding to vanquish her foes. I've come to appreciate how being born within a religious community with a rich spiritual and moral history has its benefits for my children, especially if my children will be given the freedom to express their religious doubt with gusto.

Maybe seeing my children argue over the tenets of Jewish religion will ease my guilt over having chosen their religion for them when they were unable to choose

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Inventing a Jewish Family, Part 2

BY GRACE LILE

We gave our children Jewish names: Nathan and Elijah, prophets both. We didn't intentionally draw from the Bible, and in fact I could not have told you exactly who the biblical Nathan was until several years after my own was born. Partners ten years when Nathan was born, religion had never been a subject to either divide or unite us. Both raised in secular, liberal, suburban, middle-class homes, his Jewish, mine Protestant, Arthur and I are far more similar than different. I know many intermarried couples in which the marriage or the birth of the first child initiates a crisis of identity, the first real point of division. But this was not the case with us. And our eventual, tentative path to becoming a Jewish family has been a true partnership as well.

My first religious impulses did not begin when I became a parent, but the presence of children in my life certainly focused my mind more keenly in that direction. One day when he was four or five, Nathan, playing and singing happily in the bath, suddenly looked up at me and said, "Mama, why are we?" I knew instantly what he meant: why do we exist? What is our purpose? Why is there something rather than nothing? And I had the fleeting panic familiar to all parents when

posed the unanswerable question.

Sometime not long after that, on a day in December as we were blandly chatting about holiday celebrations at his school, Nathan informed me that "the Jews believe that Jesus was God; Christians believe he wasn't." OK, an easy enough confusion for a kid being raised in a secular home in multicultural Brooklyn, and easy to set straight; but the fact is, I was terribly disturbed. I began to become aware of some theretofore unarticulated thoughts. One was that I realized I wanted my kids to identify as Jews. Why? I didn't know, but it was something I was utterly sure of.

Arthur and I gradually began to talk about religion, belief, his Jewish identity, and how to address these issues as a family. It was difficult for him at first, for reasons it took me a long time to fully understand. But I pushed, because I realized I needed a language, an idiom, in which to talk about the deepest parts of life with our children. I needed a way to acknowledge and live the question — and others — that Nathan had posed to me that day in the bath. I was a meditator at this point, but the practices of even a westernized Buddhism did not seem particularly family-friendly. I knew virtually nothing about Judaism, but I began reading and taking Torah classes. What I discovered

in the texts, philosophical, popular and biblical, was a lack of dogma, a love of argument, an embrace of spiritual wrestling, a history breathtaking in its drama and mystery, and stories with characters so human and complex and funny and true-to-life that they were immediately real to me.

We began to light candles and say blessings on Friday nights; to read the weekly parsha as a family; and to celebrate the holidays, ones we hadn't before, and the ones we had with more intent and knowledge (which has meant, weirdly enough, not celebrating Pesach with Arthur's family). As a non-Jew pursuing the study of Judaism, married to a Jew, with no interest in my converting, I thought I was a total anomaly.

In 2003 we found our way to Rabbi Lippmann and Kolot. It was clear that we'd found a place that would have room for my non-Jewish status, for Arthur's resistance to organized religion, and for family observance that is evolving and fluid. Do I want to convert? I don't know yet. But at Kolot it's not an either-or question.

Now on Friday nights Nathan lights the candles, Eli says the Kiddush, we all recite the motzi together, and then I bless the children: Y'simcha Elohim k'Efraim v'ky Menashe; May God make you like Efraim and Menashe. Sons of Joseph, blessed by Jacob, Efraim and Menashe were the progenitors of two of the twelve tribes of Israel; their mother, Asenath, was an Egyptian. Whether or not she "converted" as the later midrash holds, is unimportant to me. What matters is that the emerging truths of the Israelite religion withstood Joseph's exile, his wife's "foreign" birth.

And so it is with us. ■

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Religious

BY LANCE LUCKOW

Some of my best friends are . . . religious.

Trisha Arlin is not my friend because she is religious. Rather, Trisha is my friend because many of the same things (including one another) make us laugh. She ranks among the greatest known foils to my organic misanthropy, which often runs amok. Trisha is a go-to person when cultural phenomena have become too bewildering. Or, when one has grown weary of having lived alone for a good while, or pines for a lover long gone.

I did not know that Trisha was religious when I met her. She took her time telling me.

This is probably because I am not religious. In the Upper Great Plains of my youth, if one was religious, one was typically Catholic or Protestant (usually, Lutheran). Reformation intrigue thrived well into the last century. A “mixed” marriage (one Catholic and one Lutheran) commonly precipitated generational rifts. My religious training was charitably superficial, brief—and Lutheran. In the early 1970s, with fashion striking my homeland a minimum of five years behind schedule, all female congregants, especially the little girls, looked like Nancy Sinatra. As I was

even then an apparent budding deviant, this is my principal memory.

Oh, and one other thing: I just didn’t buy it. It was cultural phenomena—curious, strange, and definitely not mine, indeed bewildering. We consumed the minty-fresh artifice of my family’s suburban Protestantism the same way my father traded each of our two cars alternate years. Our Jesus was Thorvaldsen’s, that is, Jesus looked a lot like Sean Cassidy. My pre-adolescent aesthetic was more KISS Army.

As my adolescent political sensibility evolved during the 1980s, “Christian” became synonymous with troglodyte. In the 1990s, I let go of wanting bad things to happen to Nancy Reagan: I was too busy working, I had taken refuge in New York City, and different people were running things.

When my last grandparent died in September, 1999, a Lutheran parson cut from the old cloth officiated at her funeral, where I was a pall bearer. I simply had forgotten what Lutheran parsons cut from the old cloth were like. See Ingmar Bergman’s “Fanny & Alexander” (the second half, where Bergman takes representational revenge on his evil stepfather, a Lutheran pastor). The sermon’s theme? My grandmother died because she sinned. The simile deployed? Sin is like groundwater pollution. Absurdly stupid and offensive, this outraged me. Bitter indignation flew with me all the way back to New York.

I promptly called Trisha, for there are

few better persons to call when you are feeling bitterly indignant.

Trisha had previously (though only in passing) mentioned Kolot Chayeinu. I had met her friends, Arthur and Lisa, whom I liked immediately, but did not know were a part of the congregation. That evening, on the phone, and for whatever reason deeming the time right, Trisha invited me to Kol Nidre. When I learned that one could wear special clothes, i.e., an outfit, I immediately said yes.

I was curious and Trisha was both solicitous and nervous the evening of the service. I liked it immensely, though I shall resist offering a review.

Rather, something happened. At the point in the proceedings where congregants turned to one another (and to God) and asked for forgiveness, I found myself thinking of Pastor Kramer, and those terrible things he said about an old woman whom I happened to love. And I forgave him for it.

This is, of course, secondary to my enhanced knowing of Trisha, that is, my getting to meet Kolot Trisha.

And here is the extraordinary thing about communities like Kolot. And about people like Trisha: Kolot is not my community. One, I am not a Jew. Two, I do not believe in God (which one hears is not a problem at Kolot, in any event). But, in Kolot (once so far) and in Trisha (on numerous occasions), I have found sanctuary. ■

I Married Lisa

BY ERNST MOHAMED

I have a lot of Judaism around me — mezzuzot on every door in our house, Lisa being on the board, Lisa being the President, the Brooklyn Jewish Community Chorus, Lisa chanting and learning trope, the kids practicing their Hebrew, planning b’nei mitzvah. But I don’t feel that we are in a Jew/non-Jew relationship. This wasn’t in our lives when I met Lisa. I didn’t marry Jewish Lisa. I married Lisa.

And I still feel that way even though it’s all around us.

Judaism folded into my life very gently. There was no sudden revelation, no upheaval. It was just Lisa saying I have to go to a meeting this morning or I’m going to so and so’s home (that was when Kolot first started) or Sierra and I are going to shul.

It’s brought Shabbat into my life. I look forward to Fridays because it’s the end of the week, a little bit of ritual, good

food and good company. I like walking into Kolot, seeing all the people in the yard, knowing that my wife is a part of this community and that I am also a part of this community. I always feel welcome. I never feel that I am treated as other.

I’m glad that we didn’t have the battle of the religions when deciding the children’s religious upbringing. In my family, at any given time, many religions were represented — from Seventh Day Adventist to Catholic to Methodist. But I wasn’t brought up in any of those traditions. That’s made it easier for me to be myself — not a non-Jew or anything else. Ernst. ■

My People

BY MICHAEL WILSON

Why did I take the formal step of converting to Judaism? Because calling myself a “lapsed Catholic” who lights Shabbat candles on Friday night didn’t cut it. Because I got tired of explaining why I’m not eating the shrimp. Because I wanted to be able to say, unequivocally, “I’m Jewish.” Because the Jewish people are my people.

This transformation had its foundations in my Catholic upbringing in suburban Detroit. Our family was a committed Catholic one, and I attended parochial schools. We all served in the parish in different ways; my mother was a Eucharistic minister, my father worked in the St. Vincent DePaul society, and I was, yes, an altar boy.

My break with Catholicism did not come until I was on my own in college, as I stopped going to mass, and I started hanging around Jews. In particular, my mentor was an atheist Jewish professor who paradoxically loved religious films such as “Diary of a Country Priest” and Ingmar Bergman’s “Winter Light”. Without my realizing it at the time, arguing with him and his friends about books, movies and politics was for me a form of Jewish cultural education. “All intellectuals eventually become atheists,” declared this professor, and I pretty much believed him.

Another Jewish encounter began when a certain Bradley Smith placed a full-page ad in The Michigan Daily, the college newspaper where I was an editor. The ad was entitled “The Holocaust Story: How Much is False? The Case for Open Debate.” I had never heard of the concept of Holocaust revisionism. Feeling complicit in allowing the ad to run at all, I guiltily (Jewish guilt or Catholic guilt?) embarked on a self-imposed program of Holocaust education. Still, at this point my interest in things Jewish was merely a quirk of my personality, and conversion was the furthest thing from my mind.

That was still true years later after I married Amanda, a Jew. Our wedding service was led by a Reform cantor, under a chuppah, in a library. Such a neutral

space, with Jewish accoutrements, summed up Amanda’s family’s attitude toward Judaism. Amanda’s parents were secular, and there was never any question of my conversion for the sake of the marriage. Given my lack of attachment to Catholicism, I passively agreed to raise the children Jewish, though neither of us really had any concept of what that would mean. My own parents were accepting of Amanda — the only overt prejudice in my family came from my Polish-American grandfather who, though seemingly incapacitated in a nursing home, greeted my entrance one day with the words, “Hey Jew boy!”

A few years later, three momentous events occurred within a short time: the death of my mother, the attacks on 9/11/01, and the news on 9/12/01 that Amanda was pregnant. It seems hard to speak about without slipping into cliché, but taken together, these events changed my perspective on life and made me ripe for some kind of religious rediscovery.

The impending arrival of a baby demanded that we genuinely confront the question of what it would mean to raise a child as a Jew, so Amanda signed us up for Rabbi Sue Oren’s Introduction to Judaism class. Within a couple of weeks, my old interest in Jewish culture had been reawakened; after a couple of months I had taught myself to read Hebrew; and the following spring (a month before the birth of our child), I began the conversion process — all without any pressure from Amanda. Judaism began to provide the framework through which I could begin to understand life. The fact that I could engage in religious life without suspending my intellectual side was critical. It was eye-opening to me to read of the possibility of “a mature and believable faith,” as Arthur Green puts it.

Still, I was racked with doubts as I entered the conversion process. How, I once wondered, can someone convert to join a people? It’s as nonsensical as trying to convert to become, say, Italian. Though less so now than a couple years ago, I am still self-conscious about my blond hair, blue eyes and very non-Jewish surname, a feeling that was reinforced by experiences like buying Shabbat candles at a Jewish bookstore and being asked by the salesperson, “Are these for you?” Though unable to change how I look, when I started the conversion process I did think it was

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my job to purge myself of any vestige of Catholic thinking. Three years later, I’ve come to better accept who I am, both old and new self together.

I still sometimes have trouble reconciling the image of myself in an altar boy’s white robe with that of me in a tallit. How did I get from there to here? What am I doing wearing a kippah in a shul? But Judaism has become an inextricable part of who I am, a fulfillment of me and who I was raised to be. I remember my mother telling me once that “You need to have God in your life.” At the time, I rolled my eyes, but now I think I understand what she meant, and in Judaism, I have found my own way to live her advice. The irony is that I found God by marrying an atheist secular Jew who didn’t feel comfortable in a synagogue before she met me. ■

Puerto Rican Jewish Family

BY BERNARD VELEZ

I thought my first attempt at writing about being part of a Jewish Puerto Rican family was fine. But my wife said it was too schmaltzy. Funny how much Spanish she's learned over the years.

I love my family. I'm proud that my daughters are being raised Jewish. I still consider myself a good Christian. I only want my daughters to understand my religious beliefs as I have come to understand theirs.

I admit that early on I was concerned

about being left out of a very important part of my children's lives. But with the support of my wife and Kolot I have been involved in every step of the process. My oldest daughter's Bat Mitzvah was one of the proudest and most joyous moments of my life. I can hardly wait for my youngest daughter's.

As for my neighbors and friends, they see me as an honorary Jew. At work they always wish me a happy Hanukah and Rosh Hashanah. I fast with my wife on Yom Kippur as a form of moral support.

I'm what some people would call a non-practicing Catholic. On a good day some might even call me spiritual. I believe in God. I just don't think any one group has exclusive copyright to the concept.

I have attended Kolot services with my oldest daughter. I wish more people could know how amazing it is to feel the level of spiritual energy that's generated from those services.

The fact that I'm not Jewish and feel it all the same proves to me that Kolot is a very special community. And when I think that my family is a part of it — well it's like experiencing the joy of my daughter's Bat Mitzvah all over again.

As we say in San Juan the whole experience of being part of this Jewish Puerto Rican family is a real mitzvah. ■

ABSENT *continued from page 1*

to get my Voices writing assignment done, but in truth, I immediately thought about what I would write in this article, when I realized I was searching for something not present. My relationship to Kolot Chayeynu has something to do with absence. Absence of the corrupted Christianity I grew up not believing. Absence of the faith that made tears come to my eyes during a visit to St. Peter's in Rome in the mid-80s. I had walked apart from Phil, and was looking at a bronze panel on one of the doors into the basilica. On the panel was depicted the crucifixion of Jesus and two thieves. Jesus was speaking to one of the men beside him; I believe the Latin inscription was "Hodie mecum eris in Paradiso" (Today, thou shalt be with me in Paradise). I understood an old idea anew in that instant. That statement was true for me in that moment. I will always remember it, and I'll always wonder whether what I felt was a real spiritual connection, or just a fantasy, or perhaps only the stimulation of my mind by the mere musicality of the word "Hodie," a favorite word since my choir days in college. It was probably all those things and more, and less.

I received another "gift" during the High Holy Days several years ago. I had disconnected from the service and my mind was literally absent, when I was suddenly brought back. The congregation started singing the Shma. It was hauntingly beautiful. I was shocked into consciousness of something that felt so important, I've kept the memory for years. Perhaps it was only

the group, the community, singing a beautiful melody, perhaps the sound of something we call god. I don't know.

Phil and I were married in a civil ceremony in Canada last summer, then in a Jewish ceremony last fall. Out of our government's denial of our right to be married, our society's lack of recognition, out of the absence of a way to do what all heterosexuals can, we were able to create our own day — a day that brought the many threads of our lives together for the

first time. The absences in my life have given me the opportunity to receive many gifts. That ceremony, and the public affirmation of that day, was another.

As fundamentalist religious fervor grows across the world, I think the only way to practice faith, at least for me, may be not to practice a formal one at all. Kolot Chayeynu gives me the freedom to do that, and is a place to take the spiritual part of me when I want. But those special moments remain unpredictable and mysterious. ■

SKEPTICAL *continued from page 3*

for themselves. I've been reassured by my Jewish husband and friends that our children could not choose a religion for themselves right now at such a young age. But, why not wait until later when they're old enough to choose for themselves? My Jewish friends would argue that it's important for children to be born into a community that supports them and helps them develop their Jewish identity from birth on. I worry that despite having a clear Jewish identity from a young age that my kids will lack the identity development process of discovering religions knowing that you have to choose one of the religions for yourself.

Yet, not having an identified religion, at times I have felt a sense of spiritual and community loneliness. And I'm reassured by a vision of my children having a comforting knowledge that no matter what city or country they move to, they will

have their fellow Jews to turn to. No matter what stress they experience, they will have spiritual comforts of Judaism to use as another way to cope with those stresses. I'm just guessing, though, about how having Judaism imposed on them at an early age may help them. I can't help but be a skeptical scientist and be concerned that a religious upbringing under the restrictions of one organized religion will constrict their freedom and thinking in some way.

A part of me resents being in the role of imposing a religion on my children before they can choose for themselves. And my resentment makes me wonder if my children will resent me later for depriving them of a sense of religious choice. Yes, they could choose another religion for themselves later. But, my son's been circumcised and my daughter has a Hebrew name. It's hard to create a religious tabula rasa after you've been branded with one religion from such a young age, isn't it? ■

VOICES
 Congregation Kolot Chayeinu
 1012 Eighth Avenue
 Brooklyn, N.Y. 11215

קולות חיינו

718-390-7493

www.kolotchayeinu.org

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KOLOT CHAYEINU WORKING GROUPS

GEMILUT CHASIDIM

Acts of Lovingkindness

gemilutchasidim@kolotchayeinu.org

KEHILLAH & CHEVRA

Community & Membership

kehillahchevra@kolotchayeinu.org

KESHER

Connection and Communications

keshher@kolotchayeinu.org

MISHKAN

Space

mishkan@kolotchayeinu.org

SHABBATOT V'HAGIM

Shabbat and Holiday Planning

shabbatotvhagim@kolotchayeinu.org

TEFILLAH

Prayer

tefillah@kolotchayeinu.org

TZEDAKAH

Social Justice

tzedakah@kolotchayeinu.org

TERUMA

Fundraising

teruma@kolotchayeinu.org

TORAH

Adult Learning

torah@kolotchayeinu.org

YELADIM

Children's Learning

yeladim@kolotchayeinu.org

CAFÉ COMMITTEE

cafe@kolotchayeinu.org

EDUCATION ADVISORY COMMITTEE

schooladvisory@kolotchayeinu.org