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Book of Jonah

5 years ago, before we joined the New Shul, I would never have guessed that I would have been asked by Niles to deliver this D'var Torah on Yom Kippur today. When I joined New Shul, I was a lapsed Catholic, strongly tied to my Italian heritage, distrustful of organized religion and a general skeptic when it comes to God. The perfect New Shul congregant!

Niles has often reminded us that the days of awe are a mini pilgrimage of the mind and soul. The doors open on Rosh Hashanah and today on Yom Kippur in these final moments we pray before the doors close and our judgment is sealed. I have embarked on a long spiritual pilgrimage since I joined New Shul and on my journey the doors just continue to open wider as my mind and heart expand and I let God in.

We have just heard about Jonah's journey a few minutes ago but in order to talk about where I am in my journey today, I need to tell you a bit of where I came from. Although raised by a mother who never misses church on Sunday, I never felt connected to Catholicism. To me, it is full of pomp and circumstance, incense, stand up, sit down, kneel and a lot of "you shall not". I have always felt that it was a religion based on fear of retribution and an eternity in hell. Although I went to a Catholic school (and boy could I tell you stories about that one day!), I never felt close to God or that religion or church filled any particular void or need in my life.

I grew up in a Jewish community which allowed me to become very comfortable with Judaism. Through my Jewish friends, I spent a lot of time in synagogues attending services and numerous Bar and Bat Mitzvahs. I celebrated Hanukkah in friends' homes and was a welcomed guest at Passover Seders. All of a sudden, however everything changed. As a teen, when I thought I was "in love" for the first time, my "boyfriend" called to tell me that he was forbidden to date me any longer. I was crushed. I could not wrap my mind around the idea that a 16 year old could be deemed "unworthy" because I was a different religion – one that mattered so little to me! Fast forward to college. I met Steven, my soul mate and best friend and fell in love. Our different religions became a major obstacle. Again, I felt rejected. My feelings turned to anger. Why would God want this? Is this what organized religion brings? How could I love a God who would make me so miserable?

Ultimately after 11 years of dating and a lot of convincing on my part, we decided that somehow we could make this work. In the end, and looking back on it now, I know that it was with a bit of resentment in my heart, I agreed to raise my children Jewish and to look into converting myself. We took a class in Judaism. We looked at synagogues. We met with Steven's rabbi. He told us our marriage would never last unless I converted. Over and over again, I was told: Convert. I became frustrated that I would somehow be deemed acceptable and our marriage would surely succeed simply by me going through a conversion process. And most importantly, I felt that I needed to give up my identity and connection to my heritage and traditions. I rebelled. I had no interest in this God. I stood my ground. The children yes, me no.

As we just read, Jonah initially flees God's command to go to the Ninevites and tell them to repent. He runs and hides in the bottom of a ship. By the time we got to New Shul, I was tired of religion. I was tired of feeling rejected. I was joining New Shul purely to keep a promise I had made to my husband and his family. I was in the bottom of the ship with Jonah, hiding from my own spirituality and a relationship with God. My mind and heart were closed.

Then a strange thing happened. I was not greeted with a "you must convert" speech. I was instead welcomed and accepted into this community. I will never forget that we were asked to light the Shabbat candles at a Kabbalat Shabbat service shortly after joining. I timidly told Amy "but remember, I am not Jewish", waiting for the rejection, and she said "I know but we would still love for you to do it if you are comfortable". With this simple act of acceptance, my pilgrimage began. I gathered my

courage and decided to take a dip in waters that I had such a visceral reaction against. I had to let go of my anger, distrust and skepticism. I had to allow myself the gift of openness.

The combination of community and spirituality is powerful. As I opened my heart and mind spiritually, I began to feel a connection to God. I began to be the one suggesting that we attend Kabbalat Shabbat services. As we attend services more frequently, I find the melodies to the prayers beautiful and comforting. Steven teases me as he hears me singing my “li, li lis” in the shower. I tried lighting Shabbat candles and it feels great to worship God in a routine but joyous way. The simplicity and magnitude of the S’chma causes me to really stop and feel it inside. Singing the Avenu Malkeynu on Yom Kippur brings tears to eyes as my heart swells with the meaning of the words. Reciting the Al Cheyt – the great confession, today, the strength of the prayer for forgiveness overwhelms me.

The power of community is not to be underestimated. Niles, Amy and Melanie have given me so much more than a place to send my children to Hebrew School and to attend holiday services. They have given me a sanctuary to explore my spirituality and experiment with observance. I have found that the more I give of myself, the more I get back, whether it be through taking classes with Niles, hosting events in my home or helping to plan for New Shul’s future. A few years ago my mother was very ill and I was beside myself with fear and sadness as I traveled back and forth to Philadelphia. One day, I received a call from Niles telling me that he had just heard and he offered his comfort and advice. It finally hit me that I was a part of this community. Wow. The “they” somehow became “we”.

So here I am, taking the literal “leap of faith” and finding that the landing is just fine. I had always feared of losing myself or my identity, but the opposite is true. I observe my family traditions and celebrate my family’s holidays with my children. They do not confuse this with God or being Jewish. Finally, now neither do I. My children will always love my spaghetti and meatballs best, although I have learned, thanks to my mother in-law Lila, how to make a mean brisket also- and I plan to take you all on at the next Battle of the Briskets. I now know that who I am ethnically has absolutely nothing to do with who I am spiritually. Over lunch on Rosh Hashanah last week, my 7 year old son Jacob asked me what my Hebrew name was. I replied that I did not have one. He asked why – everyone else in our family does. Then he remembered. Oh, you are not Jewish – Why aren’t you Jewish mom, he continued to ask. In that moment, I wanted to explain a 5 year journey in one sentence. I wanted him to know what I have felt in my heart for some time now. Yes, I am a Jew, I wanted to say. Instead, I asked him what my Hebrew name should be. He thought and since just previously, my mother in law had been teaching him to be sure to pronounce the “CH” sound in “Challah” and “Chanukah”, he suggested my Hebrew name be “CHNatalie”. I think I’ll work on that one.

As I continue on my spiritual pilgrimage long after the arc closes tonight, I don’t know where I will end up. My daughter Nia will be a Bat Mitzvah soon. Will I go through a conversion ceremony and pick a Hebrew name as she prepares for her Bat Mitzvah? I do not know the answer yet but I do know with an open heart and mind and this amazing community, I will continue to grow in ways I could never have imagined. I can have a relationship with God and worship in a loving and secure place. I encourage any of you to whom this story may sound familiar, not to hide in the bottom of ship as Jonah and I did, but to look in the face of your fears, doubts and cynicism and take the pilgrimage along with me. You will lose nothing and maybe gain a relationship with God and a stronger connection to this community. You may even decide that you believe in God. If a lapsed Catholic, Italian girl skeptic like me can do it, so can you.