

In at the Deep End: Immersion and Affirmation of Jewish Identity—A Personal Account

BY DAVID DUNN BAUER

As I begin my second year as a rabbinical student at RRC, I am so steeped in the community, the studies, and the process, that I sometimes forget that I have only claimed my Jewish identity for a very short time. As recently as 1995 I approached different rabbis with much uncertainty to ask if I had the right to call myself a Jew.

My journey from that period of doubt and ignorance is far from over. There are still times when my lack of a lifelong personal history of Jewish identification and practice hampers

me like the short suit in a hand of cards. But these last four years have been packed with Jewish ritual, study, and service to the Jewish community, while at the same time receiving its benefits. I now claim and proclaim my Jewish identity loudly and with pride. But I would be hard pressed to answer definitively and to my own satisfaction, “When did I become a Jew?”

There may be more responses, but two very different and potentially conflicting answers come most easily to mind: January 6, 1960, the date of

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my birth; and June 4, 1997, the date of my Ritual of Affirmation of Jewish Identity. Had the first date no validity, I would not have pursued spiritual enrichment and fulfillment through Judaism at all. Yet had I not undergone the ritual nearly 40 years later, I could never have owned my Judaism with the assurance I do now. I feel a dual pride in being Jewish—pride in my inheritance and pride in my own efforts to seek it out, come to terms with it, and call it mine.

Family of Origin

My parents were both born Jewish—my mother in Detroit, Michigan, and my father in Nürnberg, Germany. As their son, I have halakhically always been a Jew. Yet by the time I was born in 1960, both my parents had given up any Jewish practice, finding no spiritual enrichment from Reform Jewish life in Detroit at that time. Along with many other disappointed Jewish families in their community, they joined a Unitarian Universalist Church with a dynamic intellectual and spiritual life and a commitment to the liberal social causes of the time. That church was my first religious home and the only religious school I ever attended.

My parents never denied their own very different histories as Jews. I knew about my father's evacuation from Germany to England in 1939, and I once accompanied my mother and my maternal grandmother to synagogue on my grandfather's *yahrzeit* (anniversary of his death). Yet our Jewishness was present as our heritage, not as our

identity. We celebrated no Jewish holidays and made much of both Christmas and Easter. Yet these were for us family festivals and American ones, not religious ones. They were opportunities to sing together, eat together, play games, and give presents. I sang every verse of every Christmas carol imaginable, but never once thought or was told that the story was true or that Christ was indeed my savior. Santa and the Bunny were more real to me than Jesus.

At age 10, I moved with my family to Philadelphia and we tried with no success to find the home in the Unitarian Church there that we had enjoyed in Birmingham, Michigan. None of us lasted long there, and I remember being unpleasantly struck by how *Trinitarian* the building looked. I didn't think I was Jewish, but I knew I wasn't Christian. Nor did I ever feel Quaker, despite my attending Meeting for Worship throughout my seven years at Germantown Friends School. Perhaps not surprisingly, all the friends I collected during my high school years—many of whom, *barukh hashem*, remain my friends today—were Jewish. I would sometimes claim some form of Jewish identity in order to feel more closely connected to them. But since I ultimately considered Jewishness to be a matter of religious faith, my conscience would never fully allow me to say I was a Jew.

Seeking a Spiritual Home

During my adolescence, I began to feel my own spiritual need and I ini-

tiated a non-denominational prayer life of my own. Both the practice and the urge behind it continued through my college years and into my early twenties, when I briefly attended Episcopal services in Washington, DC, where I started my first career as a director for theatre and opera companies. I attended Sunday morning mass and went to various priests for consultation, especially looking for the assurance that my feelings and lifestyle as a gay man would not be an obstacle to my connection with God. My choice of the Episcopal church was based in aesthetics rather than in theology: I knew the strong Episcopal tradition of sacred music. The “tastefulness” of urban Episcopal churches somehow seemed to match that of my home and family. Besides, I had heard somewhere that there was a prominent gay presence in the Episcopal community.

What I couldn't do, though, was believe. The leaps of faith and the acceptance of the miraculous were extremely problematic for me, and finally the exclusivity of Christian faith drove me away. The one belief, one path, one savior, and one standard of virtue felt unfair and incongruous with the creator God of my imagining. Why would anyone create so much if only to embrace a part of it all?

After retreating from that venture, my spiritual life remained private to the point of secrecy for years until I began in my later twenties to find New Age gatherings and congregations in whose company I could pray

in what seemed the general direction of the Divine. Nothing felt fully like home, but I felt reinforcement for my own individual beliefs and rituals.

Discovering Jewishness in Germany

My personal identification with other Jews in my life and in history began with my move to Cologne, Germany in 1992. I moved there to add international credits to my opera directing résumé and for the sheer adventure of living abroad. I was fortunate enough to achieve both goals, but the most lasting benefit was the decisive confrontation with my Jewish heritage. For greater freedom to live and work in Europe, I claimed the German citizenship that was my legal right as the son of a refugee. In locating and filing copies of all the pertinent documents from the time of my father's departure (some of which were on swastika letterhead), the reality of my family's persecution and of their lives as German Jews became three-dimensional and palpable to me as never before. The irony of becoming more Jewish by becoming German was not lost on me.

When I worked at the Prague State Opera in 1994, other Jews both in the opera house and elsewhere approached me furtively to ask me if I were Jewish and to claim kinship. In the moment I felt non-plussed and bewildered, but I retain the memory of their need to connect. So early in my conscious life as a Jew, I did not know what I legitimately had to offer another Jew. Their

apparent fearfulness testified to what I imagined to be a personal history of oppression, and having ignored my own identity throughout my life, I could only begin to guess what being Jewish meant to them. But clearly, it carried weight.

I returned to the States at the end of 1994 newly confident in and excited by my Jewishness, wanting to give it substance, and eager to find out what the Jewish religion could offer me. In all of my searching till then, it had never occurred to me that I would find in Judaism any resonance for my feelings about God and all things spiritual. I associated faith with *shukeling*, unwelcome dietary restriction, and dull Saturdays when telephone calls were prohibited. No one in my immediate family or circle of friends had ever shared how Jewish faith or practice could be a source of strength or satisfaction to me.

Finding a Home

In attending services at Stephen Wise Free Synagogue in New York City, I had a sudden experience of homecoming, a feeling of familiarity with the text of the siddur. The English prayers as printed seemed to echo the private, personal prayers I recited on my own. I was captivated by watching families celebrate together and had my first inkling of what a Jewish life might mean. My family had shared many loving rituals, and I believe the aesthetic and social values of our home were fundamentally Jewish ones; but we had not experienced the reflections of community and his-

tory that characterize conscious Jewish living.

My investigation of Congregation Beth Simchat Torah brought me into contact with RRC graduate Rabbi Sharon Kleinbaum, who became both an inspiration and guide for me as I pursued my goal of fuller understanding, knowledge, and Jewish identity. I was relieved when she told me how Reconstructionism had abandoned the traditional, exclusive concept of chosenness.

I read, I attended *shul* (synagogue), I started studying Hebrew. Job opportunities with the New Israeli Opera brought me repeatedly to Tel Aviv, and my need to find a place to *daven* in a non-Orthodox and English-speaking congregation took me to the Hebrew Union College (HUC) campus in Jerusalem. The beauty of Shabbat in Jerusalem, the warmth of a whole neighborhood filled with *zemirot* (songs) from every dining room, enchanted me. As I became friends with the HUC students and a faculty member there, the idea of rabbinical education first entered my mind. I had long since realized I was ready to leave the theatre and opera world. The work, which had for years held a sacred quality for me, had become uninspiring, and I wasn't getting the opportunities to create and interact with people on a level that satisfied me emotionally, spiritually, or intellectually. In the studies and eventual careers my HUC friends anticipated, I saw the medium to enrich my own life and to reach others more surely than my theatre career permitted.

Approaching the Rabbinate

Even as I write this, three years later as a second-year rabbinical student, my fear of being thought a “flake” becomes strong again. I knew I had found the career that would offer me the engaged and dynamic life I wanted, and yet I was embarrassed at the swiftness with which I had traveled from being an inquisitive neophyte to aspiring towards being leader and teacher in the Jewish community. As I tentatively began to share my dream with Rabbi Kleinbaum and others, I expected with every moment to be told, “Sorry, this just doesn’t make sense.” No one—not Rabbi Kleinbaum nor anyone at either HUC nor RRC—ever tried to stop or discourage me. I can only believe that they trusted my sense of mission and felt that my assessment of the role of the rabbi was good and that I might bring something worthwhile to it.

While no one tried to stop me, everyone was careful not to make it easy for me either. The next year and a half were exciting, but they were extraordinarily lonely. The message I received from everyone was pure Hillel, “Go and study.” I longed for someone to reach out a hand and pull me onboard, but, appropriately, the guidance I received left the responsibility for the success or failure of the endeavor entirely with me. Either I would learn what I needed to learn or I wouldn’t. Either my enthusiasm would grow with my labor, or it would fade.

I studied in New York and Jerusalem. I eventually informed the Israeli

Opera that I was withdrawing from the profession and would not be available for future productions. I took the GREs and completed my RRC application. The admissions interview was a very moving hour for me. It had been exactly eighteen months since I first considered pursuing the rabbinate, and a lot of emotional weight was centered on that moment. I had, at that time, no “Plan B” and had staked a great deal on that one dream.

Confronting Commitment

Some hours later, in the daze that followed both the interview and RRC’s Hebrew skills test, I was called upstairs to Jacob Staub’s office. He assured me that the interview had gone well, but that the committee was concerned at the lack of ritual affirmation of my Jewish identity. “You were a practicing member of another faith,” he said in a voice that made clear this was of no small importance. My response, colored by my punchiness at the end of a draining day, was bewilderment and confusion. All along I had been waiting for someone to tell me I needed a bar mitzvah—the only Jewish ceremony I knew of—in order to proceed, but no one had. Why was I only hearing about this now? How had my advisors and teachers let me get as far as my rabbinical school interview without telling me that I needed ritually to establish myself as a Jew?

I understand his answer now better than I did then, when I felt simultaneously a little foolish and a little resentful. As he explained, synagogues

are open and welcoming to any Jews who want to attend, *daven*, learn, and participate. However, for a rabbinical school, the absolute status of the applicant assumes much greater importance.

Shortly I went from stunned to enthusiastic. Jacob provided me with what background materials he could locate that addressed my situation. Halakhically I was Jewish, and I had been living and practicing as a Jew for over a year; I was not, in the committee's mind nor in my own, a candidate for conversion. But he sent me conversion rituals from both the Reform and Conservative rabbinic manuals as resource texts. I found medieval responsa on the returning apostate in turn hilarious (rituals of shaving and whipping), moving (acknowledging the pleasures of a Gentile life that were being lost), and troubling (the need for repentance). I certainly rejected the title "apostate"—nor did RRC mean to apply it to me. I knew my spiritual search have been sincere, even though it had taken me 25 years to open the right door. I felt no obligation to repent any part of it.

A Ritual of Affirmation

RRC set simple parameters for the ritual: that I go to *mikveh* with a *bet din* and that I compose a statement of affirmation of Jewish identity and recite it there. Beyond that, I was free to add whatever would be meaningful for me.

The first challenge was to square off with the symbol of the *mikveh*. Even though it had been my exposure

to another faith that necessitated a ritual bath, I was adamant that this particular trip to *mikveh* not be to wash anything away. I could, however, accept it as symbolic of immersing my whole self—with all the scars and strengths from my journey—in the Jewish world. I might well change through the process, but I was not consciously shedding the effects of any previous decision, as if I could.

I wanted to be a participant and co-creator in the event, not just its object. At the same time, Jacob encouraged me to let Rabbi Kleinbaum take much of the control over the ceremony, and to let myself experience it rather than manage it. Looking back, the significance of that directive is deeper than I understood. This was to be my first exposure to the catalogue of Jewish rituals, whose power and history make them larger than any individual participant. The joy and excitement of ritual for me is in accepting and trusting the wisdom at its core and the mechanical process it imposes, like being strapped into a spiritual roller coaster. I needed to let the ritual do its job. Rabbi Kleinbaum indulged my requests and let me tap the other two members of the *bet din*. The ritual would be foreign enough; I wanted the witnessing Jewish community to be represented by familiar faces.

Composing my Statement of Affirmation involved addressing the significant issues raised in both the Reform and Conservative conversion rituals. Some were easy to absorb unchanged, for example that my choice was free and independent and that I

anticipated not only individual status as a Jew, but the rights and responsibilities of a member of the Jewish community. But as a newly-hatched Reconstructionist, I needed to express my commitment to Judaism through some way other than strict observance of *mitzvot*. Where the Reform text asked for severance “from all other religious affiliations” and “loyalty to Judaism and the Jewish people amid all circumstances and conditions,” I needed to expand the concepts to allow for inspiration from any true spiritual source I might encounter and to ensure that “loyalty” did not mean disengaging my critical faculties.

Finally, I wanted to incorporate into the ritual some of the prayers I had been studying and using daily. *Birkhot Hashahar* (Morning Blessings) best fit the event as I imagined it. Ours would be a morning visit to the *mikveh*, but more importantly it was the inauguration of a new life for me as a Jew and a rabbinical student. The *Mah Tov* prayer addresses the designation of sacred space through worship, and I wanted to use it as a way of claiming the *mikveh* as ours that day.

Ceremony at the Mikveh

Never having been to *mikveh* on the Upper West Side of New York City (or anywhere), I didn't know how much I would need to work to create an atmosphere of the sacred. My mind recorded the whole experience that day on two tracks, one of profound spiritual content and one of contrasting atmospheric absurdity. It is important to report both lest the

story read more sentimentally than it transpired. I discovered that the *mikveh* stands directly adjacent to a stand-up comedy club which I thought would make a fine alternative venue should the *mikveh* be unavailable . . . perhaps better. The building itself had nothing of the mystical about it: random furniture in the waiting room, the sound and smell of laundered towels in the dryer, a make-up room lined with vanity mirrors and outfitted with blow-dryers. As soon as I emerged still damp from my dressing room after the immersion, before I could rejoin the *bet din* and say the *Shema*, I was apprehended by the bustling “*mikveh* lady” who asked me for my \$125.00. The penetrating mundanity of the facility forced the four of us to move deeper into our own intensely spiritual agenda.

Given the heat of emotion I felt that morning, I suppose the immersion itself could only have been cooling and anti-climactic. I half expected some shock or change in my physical being to match the change in the rest of my life. No, the *mikveh* was just a white-tiled pool of water, with a slight algae-green tint. While through the door I heard Rabbi Kleinbaum's own strength in the emphatic “Amen” she offered to each of the *berakhot* I recited, no, I didn't hear the echo of Jewish voices throughout history. In plainspeak, the earth did not move.

And then it did. As I read aloud my Statement of Affirmation, my voice began to shake, as did my hand. That statement brought forth the best in me; writing it had challenged me to examine microscopically both my in-

tentions and my expectations and to be simultaneously realistic and ambitious. I don't know how often in life, if ever, I will again get the opportunity in one moment to embrace my past and to shape my future.

We followed the ritual with a pilgrimage to a local coffee house. After that I walked with Roderick Young—an HUC student, friend, and member of the *bet din*—to West Side Judaica, and the walk felt different. Entering

the store felt different. The feeling of uncertainty about my Jewishness that I had experienced since childhood was gone. Whether or not I had always had a right to move as a *landsman* in the Jewish world, that morning I felt I did. As I now immerse myself in the studies and work of a student rabbi, the feeling intensifies and my sense of belonging buoys me up.

Below is the statement I composed for my ritual of affirmation.

Statement of Affirmation

With joy I embrace my identity as a Jew and the worldwide community of Jews as my own. Wherever I live and travel in this world, I will never renounce this identity, this membership. I turn confidently to you, my community, for support and company throughout my life and I am eager that you should look to me for the same.

I see our heritage as mine to honor, mine to confront, mine to study, mine to teach. I cherish the sacred texts composed by Jews in the past as my birthright to read and ponder. I value them as a source of inspiration and of challenge. They serve to transport and console me and sometimes to trouble me, but they always retain their claim on my attention. The variety of my response to them in no way mitigates my right to call them mine.

While I do not forget or close my eyes to the wisdom and insights of other traditions, I call the Jewish religion the core of my spiritual life and practice. Any true light from another corner of the world will only illuminate it the better.

I believe that the received traditions of Jewish life and worship require of me both study and respect. I will live conscious of them and with sincerity assess their value and usefulness in my life. I look forward to building a Jewish home for myself and to a life marked according to the Jewish clock and Jewish calendar.

As I am grateful to the Jews of all generations who continue to transmit our traditions and wisdom to me, so am I committed to teaching what I learn and discover to other Jews, my contemporaries and those of generations to come.