

Fast Forward



Spiritual Dimension: After her conversion in 2000, Van Gelder took a trip to Israel. Here, she stands amid the ruins of Bet She'an National Park.

A Fraught Journey to Judaism

By Lindsay Van Gelder

I've spent most of my adult life on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, where the reigning deity is liberal politics, and in Miami Beach, where the locals worship sun-bronzed physical perfection. Not that there's anything wrong with either one. But there came a point — amid an array of midlife disjunctions, including an empty nest, an unraveling relationship and my mother's terminal illness — when I realized I was feeling a certain spiritual malaise. I had always thought of myself as an agnostic, not an atheist. Still, I'd been completely uninterested in organized religion of any kind. My suburban New Jersey family was what I can only describe as secular Protestant; we didn't go to church, but my mother had us baptized "just in case." I had been married for a decade in my 20s to a secular Jew, and my children were raised in that tradition: bageltarians, basically. I was on board with that. More of my friends were Jewish than not. Since my teens, I'd been besotted with everything culturally Jewish, from the *mot just-ness* of Yiddish to the novels of Philip Roth. When a girlhood friend discovered as an adult that her grandmother was a Jew, I was jealous (although it did give me

the chance to quip that some of my best friend was Jewish). During my marriage, my former mother-in-law put no pressure on me to play Ruth to her Naomi; I think it was good enough that I wasn't identifiably Christian. But I embraced her tutorials in the handover of the prince, learning to make chicken soup with the secret ingredient (feet) and becoming wise in the ways of *yahrzeit* candles and *mezuzot*. In all this ethno-cultural swooning, there was not a single thought on my part about religion, per se. Theologically speaking, our *mezuzah* might as well have been a four-leaf clover. I had no idea what Jews believed in. But neither did a lot of the Jews I knew. Years after my divorce, I interviewed the late philosopher, biologist and neuroscientist Francisco Varela for a science magazine. Varela believed that objective, static "reality" was a myth. You and I might look at a rainbow and collectively agree as sighted humans that it has certain properties, like seven colors. But a cat, whose rods and cones process only red and green, sees a different rainbow, and a bird may well see colors that aren't perceptible to the human eye. In fact, Varela thought the pigeons he worked with might be seeing other dimensions. For that matter, people who lived eons ago and had

different brains may have seen something else altogether. All we really know about a rainbow is where its characteristics intersect with our biological ability to perceive them. The cat and the bird are still experiencing completely different, equally valid physical realities. I loved this stuff. And while it didn't jumpstart me to contemplate organized religion, it definitely made me ponder the legitimacy of things that can't be verified. Much later still, I briefly attended a 12-step group for loved ones of substance abusers. Although it was supposedly not religious, the meetings included lots of praying and referencing of higher powers. I had a near-allergic reaction. And yet, another part of me recognized that the people I was feeling so snottily superior to had something I lacked. As I began to imagine what it might feel like to have a spiritual dimension in my own life, my old flirtation with all things Jewish kicked in. Without having much of a clue as to what a spiritual journey might involve, it struck me that I would probably be most comfortable making it among practicing Jews. I went to see a rabbi.

I had stumbled into a rich evolutionary moment. The Jewish Renewal movement was working to synthesize modern concerns, like feminism and ecological awareness, with ancient traditions, such as Hebrew chanting, kabbala study, meditation and the dancing-in-the-aisles joyfulness of the Hasidic sects. Soon I was devouring the works of Michael Lerner, Arthur Green, Roger Kamenetz, Mitchell Chefitz, Lawrence Kushner and Aryeh Kaplan. As I plowed through my reading list, I learned to my delight that what I valued about cultural Judaism — the poetry of the language, the passion for justice, the irony, the food — was rooted in "the religious part." I also experienced a surprisingly easy transition from having my nose pressed against the glass of belief to feeling the warmth inside. The rabbi I met with every week gave me a pivotal piece of advice: Instead of intellectualizing everything, just go through the motions of saying the prayers... and see what happens. To my amazement, the rituals took on a life of their own. (I am reminded here of the observation of that other Jew, Woody Allen, that 80% of success in life is just showing up.)

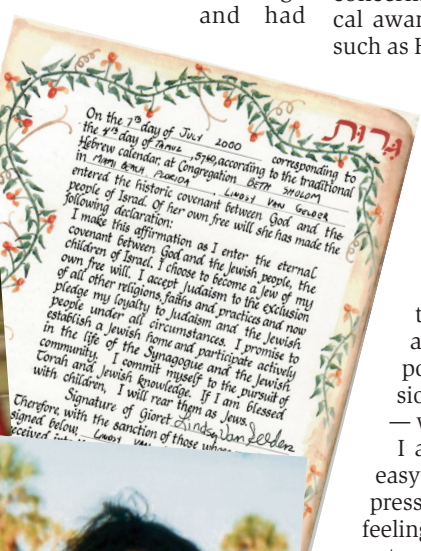
There is a tradition, not really followed these days, that converts to Judaism should be turned away three times, to test their commitment to an often despised minority. I had my own trials, including a required course that spent very little time on the parts of Judaism I was interested in and a lot on teaching women half my age how to cover the challah bread

properly after they made Shabbat dinner for their future husbands. But the biggest challenges during the year of my conversion came from living largely in a milieu in which religion is pretty much regarded as the opiate of the masses.

Several friends whose lives seemed to be no less screwed up than mine expressed alarm when they heard my plans, their premise being that no intelligent person would turn to religion except to salve a deep existential wound; hence, things with me must be far more horrendous than they had realized. One dear friend said that although he would never need the "crutch" of religion, it was probably a good thing that other people (apparently, such as weak-willed *moi*) could find solace in it. I heard numerous lectures on why religion is responsible for most of the world's ills. My then-, now ex-, partner asked (sotto voce, in synagogue): "Do you really believe this crap?"

But the most common reaction was embarrassment. Friends with whom I had shared confidences about sex and finances apparently found the subject of God way too personal. Years earlier I had surprised my circle by taking up with another woman; now I had a new understanding of which love truly dare not speak its name. Few people asked me any substantive questions. Indeed, they were clearly dying for me not to jawbone about whatever it was that I found so compelling about religion.

This holding up of a secular cross against the vampire of religion was true of recovering Christians and lifelong atheists, but among the most adamant were the past-tram Jews who hadn't been in a synagogue for decades. They made it clear they already knew all they needed to know about Judaism. Even when I noted that many things had changed since their bar



PHOTOS COURTESY OF LINDSY VAN GELDER

Religious Reality: Clockwise from top left: Van Gelder (left) with her best friend, Jane; the conversion document; Van Gelder (right) with mikveh lady Rabbi Ruth Adar after Van Gelder's immersion ceremony in the Atlantic Ocean; a young, Protestant Lindsay saying bedtime prayers.



BOB ROTTENBERG

The Quasi-Jewish Grandkids: Van Gelder's grandchildren, Julia Rottenberg (left), and her sister, Rebecca, celebrate Hanukkah.

Forward Looking Back

100 YEARS AGO

IN THE FORWARD
* New York City seltzer factory worker Philip Cohen, 23, heard that his boss, Morris Rubin, was anti-union and rumored to have poisoned the horses of some union delivery men. When Cohen was on his way home from work, he happened to see Rubin on East Broadway. Curious as to where Rubin might be going, Cohen followed him. As he got clos-

er, the seltzer boss turned around and lunged at Cohen with a huge knife, stabbing him in the stomach. As Rubin ran off, Cohen was brought to the local station house, where he described to the police what had happened. He was then brought to the hospital in critical condition. The police later picked up Rubin and brought him to the hospital, where he was identified by Cohen as his assailant. Rubin was sent to prison, and Cohen died a few days later.

75 YEARS AGO

IN THE FORWARD
* A massive bomb destroyed the editorial offices of the *Vilner Tog*, the largest daily newspaper in Vilna, Poland. The explosion was so powerful that not only were the offices destroyed, but hundreds of windows in surrounding buildings were shattered, as well. Another bomb was set to go off in front of another Jewish business in Vilna, but it was discovered and defused. Bombs were also thrown at Jewish stores in Warsaw — from the

windows of moving cars — and did much damage, including destroying a large number of goods and injuring a number of Christian passersby. Although no group has yet taken credit for the attacks, it is obvious to all that they are the work of anti-Semites.

50 YEARS AGO

IN THE FORWARD
* Yiddish culture and literature will never return to the Soviet Union unless Soviet Jews demand it from the government, said

Mikhail Suslov, a Communist Party secretary, to a British communist delegation that was visiting Moscow. One of those attending, Hyman Levy, a well-known British academic and member of Britain's Communist Party, reported on the event and noted that the years 1948 to 1952 are considered the "black years" for Soviet Jews. During these years, Soviet Jews were fired from their jobs simply for being Jewish. The Yiddish language was banned outright, and writers and poets were arrested and eventually liquidated.