



**THE JEWISH
FAMILY JOURNAL**

Fall 5765/2004, Number 42

HORIZONS

**Melodic mysteries:
Music of the Mikdash**

**American "marranos"
The Road Back**

**A siddur, an eating disorder,
and new-found hope
Praying, Again**



HORIZONS

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What made these neighbors so special?

On the Outside

Looking In

Judy Gruenfeld

As Naomi gazed at the house across the street, she couldn't help but glance in the window. She and her husband had just moved into the neighborhood, and she was surrounded by boxes daring her to unpack them. Of course, she wouldn't stare. It's not polite. It's also an invasion of privacy to peer into someone else's living room window. But what she saw captured her attention, and she couldn't pull herself away. She sat rooted to the spot, her eyes looking on in wonder as she observed the scene unfolding before her.

There were eight menorahs in the window. One by one, each

person came and lit his — father, mother, oldest son, and so on down the line until only one menorah was left unlit. Then, very gently, the father lifted a small frame from a tiny wheelchair that stood in their midst. Naomi hadn't noticed the wheelchair until she saw the child being lifted from it.

The candles illuminated the little girl's face as she anxiously awaited her turn to light. The father struck a match and lit the *shamash*. He then put the candle in the child's hand and

FICTION



securely placed his hand over hers. One by one, as the candles were lit, they reflected the sparkle in the little girl's eyes.

Oh, how Naomi longed to be part of that scene. She'd grown up in a house with no siblings, no menorahs, and no *Yiddishkeit*. She'd been very lonely, had few friends as a child, and occupied most of her time reading books. With each one, she was transformed into someone else and transported somewhere else. One week Naomi was a princess in England and the next, a safari guide in Africa. The characters in the books seemed more real to her than she herself did. Her life consisted mainly of school, homework, chores, and, of course, her precious books.

As she grew up, Naomi began searching for something meaningful in her life. She looked into Eastern religions, prominent religions in the West, meditation, and anything else that promised to fill the hole in her soul. But as each approach failed to fill the void, she became more and more isolated and dejected.

Then one day, while in the bookstore, she asked the clerk, a nice young man about her age, why he always wore a yarmulke. After

all, he wasn't in synagogue.

"I'm an Orthodox Jew," he told her. "We must always cover our heads."

"Oh," Naomi replied. "I'm Jewish, too, but no one in my family wears a yarmulke all the time."

"As I said," responded the young man, "I'm Orthodox. Since you're Jewish, would you like to read about what observant Jews do and why they do it?"

"Sure," Naomi told him.

"Wait here," said the boy. "I'll get you a few books."

When she got home, Naomi began reading the books like a drowning person reaching for a life preserver, which was really the case.

Naomi was now a *ba'alas teshuvah*, married to that nice young man from the bookstore and living a meaningful Torah life.

Her husband walked in the door, bringing her out of her reverie. She pointed to the house across the street and asked, "Do you think we could go over there and wish them a happy Chanukah instead of waiting for them to come over and welcome us to the neighborhood?"

"I don't see why not," answered her husband. "Why don't we light

our menorah and then go over and introduce ourselves.”

She smiled. “That sounds like a plan.”

Half an hour later, they were ringing their neighbor’s doorbell.

“Hi,” the couple said when the door was opened. “We’re your new neighbors.”


“Welcome, welcome,” responded the lady of the house.

“Please come in. We are about to sit down to our meal. We would be honored if you would join us.”

By the time they left, their stomachs and their hearts were full.

“Please come again,” their new friends offered.

“Oh, we will,” Naomi said, feeling very much at home. “This is the first house I have ever visited that has a ramp for my wheelchair.”



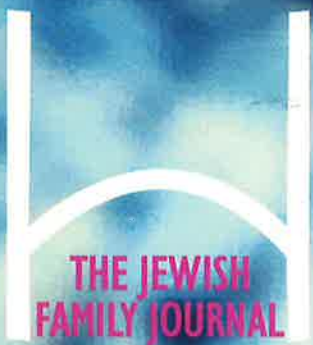
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Stories and love

Growing Up in Shtetlheim, USA

Judy Gruenfeld

My grandmother never lectured me or told me what to do or what not to do. She always used a story to get her point across. And the point always hit its mark. We never rebelled. There was nothing to rebel against. How do you turn your back on a story that is accompanied by a warm hug and a huge dose of love?

We were allowed to be children, but there were expectations of us. And we children would never entertain the idea of not living up to those expectations. The worst punishment that could be meted out was for a parent or grandparent to be disappointed in us. Grandma never heard of psychology, Freud, or Gestalt theory. We were raised with the Gevalt theory. If you did something wrong, she would clutch

her chest and say, "Oy, *gevalt!*" Whatever it was you did, you never did it again! A little guilt, well placed, went a long way.

Grandma and Grandpa lived across the street. Aunts, uncles, and cousins lived down the block. If you didn't like what Mom was making for dinner, you could always manage to get an invitation elsewhere.

I can recall one afternoon when my cousin was playing at my house. It was getting close to dinnertime, and she asked if she could stay. My mother, of course, told her she was more than welcome, but we were having veal cutlets for dinner and my cousin didn't like veal cutlets.

"I'll eat it," she said. And she did. My mom gave my aunt the recipe,



Grandma and Grandpa in younger days

and veal cutlets were never a problem again.

We had more than one home, but we weren't split in half. On the contrary, the whole neighborhood was our home. And neighborhoods were safe.

On Shabbos I would get dressed and go shul hopping with my cousins and friends and then to my grandmother's for the afternoon meal. One particular Shabbos, a neighbor joined us. After the meal, my cousins and I went about the business of being children and making noise, as children do. When the

neighbor questioned my grandmother as to why she allowed us to make so much noise, my grandmother replied, "My grandchildren don't make noise. My grandchildren make music."

If my parents went out *motza'ei Shabbos*, I got to sleep at my grandparents' house. As a matter of fact, I usually slept over anyway. My grandmother would sneak me a piece of candy before my grandfather said, "*Gei shluffen. Es is shpeite und du bist meed* — Go to sleep. It's late and you are tired." Yawning, I would deny the accusation and

W

sneak the candy into my mouth while covering up the yawn.

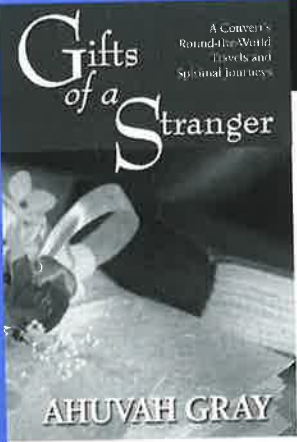
Those were delicious days. I would lay my head down on the pillow, enveloped in love and warmth. As I started drifting off to sleep, the stories would start swimming around in my head.

As the years went by, my head was filled with many more stories, some of which happened to me and some of which were told to me by my grandmother. Are they true? Whether or not they really hap-

pened is not what is important. What is important is that they took on a life of their own and in doing so created their own reality.

And that reality exists today every time I tell my children a story to make a point. Do they listen? I really couldn't say. They're all grown up now and living their own lives — lives that are much richer, I think, because of these stories.

The author is a social worker in Lakewood, N.J., and a published author and poet.



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My First Real Shabbos

Judy Gruenfeld

I will never forget my first real Shabbos experience. I had been learning every week with Mrs. Cohen for several months when she blurted out, "I think it's time you came for Shabbos."

"Oh," I said, having eagerly anticipated this moment and yet feeling somewhat unsure at the same time. "I'd love to come," I said a bit haltingly.

Two days later I was standing in front of Mrs. Cohen's house, flowers in hand. After ringing the doorbell, I heard several different voices chatting back and forth before the door opened. Six children standing in a row, oldest down to the youngest, who had obviously just learned how to walk, greeted me.

"Please come in," said Mrs. Cohen's eldest daughter. "My mother will be down in a minute."

"Thank you," I said as I entered a

new and exciting world for the first time, not knowing what to expect.

"Can I get you a drink?" the girl asked.

"No thank you," I replied. "I'm fine."

Then my friend appeared. "Good Shabbos, good Shabbos," I heard as Mrs. Cohen came gliding down the stairs.

"Good Shabbos," I said in return, handing her the bouquet of flowers I'd brought.

"They're beautiful," came the appropriate response. "Thank you."

"You're very welcome," I duly replied.

"Okay," said Mrs. Cohen, "now that the social amenities are out of the way, what can I get you to eat? How about a piece of potato kugel?"

"Now you sound like my grandmother," I laughed.



"I'm sure I do. By the time you leave, you'll understand why," came Mrs. Cohen's knowing response.

Unfortunately, I was not raised with much *Yiddishkeit*. But I do know a good potato kugel when I taste one. I took one bite of the proffered golden square and cried, "Grandma!"

"Aha!" said Mrs. Cohen. "We're off to a good start. Keep your heart and your mind open, as well as your mouth, and by this time tomorrow you won't be the same. There will be no turning back."

"You're on," I replied. We both laughed as we walked toward the candles.

"I've been lighting Shabbos candles for several years now," I told her.

"I know you know the *berachah*," my hostess proclaimed proudly.

"Indeed, I do," I proclaimed, just as proudly.

Mrs. Cohen lit a match and then handed me the box. I watched as she lit each candle, two as commanded in the Torah and then one more for each child, totalling eight. She then recited the *berachah* and added her own supplications. I lit two candles

and said the same *berachah*, followed by my own heartfelt prayer to learn more Torah and do more mitzvos.

When Mr. Cohen and his sons returned home from shul, he made Kiddush and then we all went to wash. My first bite into the challah elicited another "Grandma!" response from me. I do not remember Kiddush as a child, nor do I remember anyone washing and reciting *al netilas yadayim*, but I do remember the challah, food that comforted not only the stomach but the soul as well.

Up until now, the only pathway to my soul was through my stomach. But I was about to be infused with Torah that needed no detour to reach its mark. The meal was exquisite, but the food for the soul was incomparable. It nourished the part of me that had been so lacking, so hungry, yearning to be fulfilled. By the time we were done with our meal, everyone was charged up and exhausted at the same time.

Mrs. Cohen and I cleaned up the kitchen and went to bed. As I lay there feeling safe and secure, many new and interesting ideas began swimming around in my head.



Eventually I started to drift off to sleep. But something was very different. I did not hear the television blaring in the background. What I heard, instead, was Mr. Cohen, learning and chanting and singing praises to Hashem.

I'm sure my mother sang lullabies to me as a child. Although it's

been a long time since those peaceful days, listening to Mr. Cohen made me feel like a child once again. Hashem's child.

A very wise lady, my friend Mrs. Cohen. She told me that if I kept my mind and heart open, I would never be the same after my first Shabbos. And she was right!

Perfection

She lights the candles, one by one
 The little girl asks
 Why is there blue inside the fire?
 And she looks deep into the flames
 Seeing the blue of the sky
 And the blue of the waters
 She looks down into the gray blue eyes of the little girl
 And she thinks how all the chaos became order
 All that is broken is fixed
 Everything that she needs to do is finished
 And now it is time for being
 For holding the moment
 And so they stand by the Sabbath lights
 In awe-filled silence
 A little girl and her mother
 Staring at the flames
 And knowing suddenly
 That everything that is, was, and will be
 Is as perfect as the blue and orange fire
 Dancing before them

Sara Debbie Gutfreund

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In tribute to a mother-in-law

Love Gone Right

JUDY GRUENFELD

We visited my mother-in-law a few years ago, after she suffered a stroke and had to move into a nursing home. She had just turned ninety-five. As we each took turns wishing her a happy birthday, her words of long ago echoed in my ears.

"G-d forbid," she had always said. "I should never have to be in a nursing home."

Now, still somewhat disoriented, she asked, "Do you like my new apartment?"

"It's very nice," I said.

"Yah, it's okay," she said, her Austrian accent still as thick as when I had first met her, many years ago. "In this apartment I get all my meals. Not just supper. The food is not as good as in the other place and I have my main meal for lunch. Supper is terrible. I think they're trying to starve me. Everyone else gets a big plate of food and I only get a small one. I keep losing weight."

Mom went from semi-independent

living to nursing care in the same complex. The food is the same. The private-duty nurse we hired for her said she eats everything.

"She complains," the nurse said, "But she always eats it."

"Come closer," Mom said to each of us. "I want to see you better. You look wonderful," she said as she raised the only arm she could move to give us each a hug. Her recent stroke and subsequent mini-strokes left her right side virtually useless. She was unable to walk independently and required assistance to go from bed to wheelchair, to get to the bathroom or dining room. When she did move, it was at a snail's pace. She also had an alarm on her wheelchair, as the staff were afraid she would fall. If she attempted to get up by herself, the alarm would go off and someone would come to her aid.



When I first met my mother-in-law, she was in her fifties, which

is younger than I am now. I was twenty. She ran circles around me then. To see her so debilitated was incomprehensible.

My in-laws were European and, thank G-d, they made it to the United States before the gates surrounding Europe were sealed.

Over the years we became closer and grew to genuinely love each other, but it wasn't always that way. As a bride of twenty-one, I got a somewhat less than warm welcome into the family and our relationship was strained for many years as a result. I come from a warm, loving family and did not know what I had done to deserve such cool treatment, nor did I know what to do about it.

The relationship remained strained

until one morning, when my husband and I had been married for about twenty-five years. My mother-in-law, who was then a widow, was visiting for Shabbos, when she suddenly leaned across the breakfast table and proclaimed, "I love you. You have no idea how much I love you. I'm always talking to my friends about you and telling them how much I love you. I'm only sorry I never told you sooner. I don't know why I didn't. Maybe I was afraid if I opened myself up to you, you would have made fun of my English. It was very foolish of me. Please forgive me."

I got up from my chair and went over to her. We both started crying and hugging, and melted into each other's arms. From then on we openly felt and showed affection for each other.



Seeing Mom in a nursing home, often disoriented, belied the strength and courage she had shown in leaving her home and starting life anew halfway across the world. But time marches on, as they say, and Mom was no longer the vital young woman she once was.

Shortly after our visit, I received a



*Seeing Mom in a nursing home belied
the strength and courage she had shown
in leaving home and starting life anew
halfway across the world.*

phone call from my sister-in-law, who had received a phone call from the nursing home. My mother-in-law had attempted to get out of bed during the night. She had fallen to the floor. Thank G-d, she was fine. Nothing was bruised or broken.

"I needed to use the bathroom," she told the night nurse as she was assisted back into bed.

With Mom safe and sound in bed, the nurse went back to her station.

When my sister-in-law went to visit her later that day, my mother-in-law said, "Come closer. I have to tell you a secret."

"What's the matter, Mom? Are you okay?"

"Yes, I'm fine," Mom said. "Don't tell anyone, but I fell out of bed on purpose last night!"

"What? Why would you do such a thing?"

"Because," Mom replied, "they come faster if they think you fall out of bed.

You have to learn how to get what you want around here."

When repeating the incident to me, my sister-in-law asked, "Is she funny, or what?"

"Yeah, she's funny," I admitted. But somehow I didn't feel like laughing.

A few weeks later, my mother-in-law had another stroke, which left her totally dependent, disoriented, and unable to communicate. She could not get out of bed and had to be fed either by someone else if she could swallow, or intravenously if she couldn't.

Last year Mom returned her pure soul to her Creator, dignity and *kavod* fully restored.

The author lives in New Jersey with her husband and thirty-nine-year-old autistic son. She has had numerous articles, stories, and poems published in several Jewish newspapers and magazines and will shortly be publishing two separate anthologies. She works as a social worker in Lakewood, N.J., with people who have mental, physical, or emotional challenges.

Success is a journey, not a destination.

— Ben Sweetland