

A Trek from Catholicism

by MARIAN NASH

The baptismal records at a church in New Jersey have a certificate showing that on July 5, 1969, my Jewish father converted to Catholicism. My family has always kept this quiet, our mother teaching us to be sensitive to the feelings of those who would find this a betrayal. When my mother and father married in 1957, he was a non-practicing Jew, and she was a devout Catholic. Without question, my parents knew that their children would be raised in her faith. Twelve years into the marriage my father died, leaving my mother and six children behind. Twenty-five years later, the silence around my father's conversion would lead to the sounding call of my own voice as a Jewish woman.

While living in Utah in my early thirties and dealing with the loss of a dear friend, I turned toward Judaism for solace. A non-practicing Catholic, I could have turned to Catholicism, but when I had tried this in my twenties—joining others in prayer groups or reading the New Testament before bed—I felt disconnected.

The idea of practicing Judaism came to me after my older brother David, who lived in Utah as well, mentioned having attended a few synagogue services. I stood in his kitchen dumbfounded. I didn't know there were any Jews in Utah, the state known for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Mormons. There were 650.

The following Friday, I went to Congregation Kol Ami with a friend from work. Ghosts of my father and his brother, Al, seemed to stand before me on the *bimah*, the raised platform from which worship services are led. The President of the Board stood a full six inches shorter than Rabbi Wengar, who was leading the service. My Uncle Al had stood the same size alongside my father, who had been tall and had a full head of hair, like Rabbi Wengar. Uncle Al had been my height, tall for a woman, below average for a man, with thinning red hair. Before cancer had ravaged his body, he was round, as was the President of the Board. Rabbi Wengar had full lips like my father and the same easy smile. My eyes darted back and forth between the two of them; a cache of memories and mourning stuck in my throat.

I began going alone to the Saturday services. Before this, I had never heard the song of Hebrew: I was washed over by a river without bottom. Too shy to join the *oneg Shabbat*, the

informal gathering after Sabbath services, I would drive directly home and lie in bed with my thoughts humming. My favorite melody turned out to be that of the *Shma*, the revered prayer which declares God's Oneness: Listen, Israel, Adonai our God is One. It is the first prayer I learned in Hebrew: *Shma, Yisrael, Adonai Eloheinu, Adonai Ehad*. I was in wonder at these words, since they were the last of the rabbinic scholars in past centuries burned alive while wrapped in Torah scrolls, and upon the lips of those about to enter the gas chambers. On Shabbat, as the summer sun rested on the edge of my bed, I would repeat the *Shma* in my mind and be soothed.

Sitting in synagogue over the following weeks, I brimmed with a remembered awareness of myself. I loved the sounds and the prayers; thankful for life in spite of loss. I swam in an inarticulate homecoming, as I took unpaid days off from work to celebrate the High Holy Days, light-headed from fasting, but filled with a sense of having reached the brink of myself, then going beyond into a forgiveness that dissolved any sense of separation between me and another. I began reading books that opened me up to the world of Judaic rituals and five-thousand-year-old traditions. I discovered the instruction to probe, and this was where I swam most freely: questioning. I didn't worry that my feet didn't touch the bottom, that I was treading with no end in sight. I was buoyant within the waters of Judaism.

I found that my mother and I were able to celebrate my father's family without having to deconstruct her spiritual foundation. In our phone conversations, I would tell her how Judaism felt like a Return for me. I'd ask her what she would think if I converted, and she'd say, "I married a Jewish man, why would I mind having a Jewish daughter?"

Soon after, though, my viewpoint on conversion changed considerably. One day after services, I was sitting on my bed reading a book on Judaism. Fall was stepping into Utah. The leaves outside my window were turning color; a gentle breeze lifted the curtains. The author, a rabbi, suggested to the people who were searching for meaning within religion to go back to the one in which they were raised, reasoning that the fundamental practice of most religions was the same: Love thy neighbor as thyself. He didn't believe it was necessary to travel down a completely new road to find one's meaning or solace. I lowered the book, surprised by the sense of relief washing over me: I was being given permission to keep our family

secret in the closet. All I would have to do is turn back toward Catholicism and then The Apostate, my father, could remain there in the dark.

For years, my father's act—renouncing Judaism—had pressed the air like wings in my mind. I was always warned by my mother not to release it to anyone Jewish for fear of it seeming a slap on the face, rather than breezy conversation. Her warning was justified. Once, at a poetry reading, I was talking with an elderly Jewish man and I mentioned that my paternal grandfather had changed our family name from Geltzeiler to Nash. The gentleman's face fell and I was unable to lift it to an understanding that my grandfather did this for the safety of his children. I was told that he had dragged his finger down page after page of the phone book to find a generic last name so my father and uncle could go to school: with a new last name, they would be safe from endangering connections to the Geltzeiler cousins who were bootlegging in Newark, New Jersey. Regardless, my grandfather became, in this man's eyes, a Jew to be ashamed of. I didn't understand; I did not grow up learning about my heritage this man was mourning over: After my father died, we lost all touch with his side of the family. It was after this encounter that the shame surrounding my family's name change slid a bolt across the closet harboring the secret about my father finding Jesus.

I put the book back on the shelf in the living room. I decided that with a past that could lead to judgment and controversy in the future within the Jewish community, I would take the

She'd say, "I married a Jewish man. Why would I mind having a Jewish daughter?"

option not only to step away from Judaism, but make my way back to Catholicism. I would seek to recall the cool water of my baptism slipping over my forehead; receive the communion wafer as the Son of God; confess my sins in Confession. This way, I could continue to hold the secret within me, deem myself powerless to speak for a man in his dying days: My father converted to Catholicism six months before he died, and was buried in a Catholic cemetery in New Jersey with my mother's name and birth date chiseled in the stone alongside his, waiting for the date when she joined him.

Ensnared in judgment and shame, I watched the door of reason slowly close in my mind. While I knew that I had sat in synagogue and whispered to my forebears, "I hear you when I speak," I told myself I'd be able to have Christmas and Nat King Cole, multi-colored lights on freshly fallen snow, children anticipating Santa Claus—if I simply placed my hands over my ears. I'd be able to stand alongside my family at Mass and welcome the sound of their song in my heart. I'd be able to rest on Sundays, along with the rest of the country. I would be able to remain in step, get along, and keep quiet.



Some weeks later, in the dark of a December morning, tree branches crackling under the burden of ice, I put the last few things into my packed car for my return to New Jersey. It was time to go home. Beneath a sky pierced with stars, I began my drive over the Rockies and across the Mississippi. Resettled, I began attending Mass and studying what I tried to believe was the dormant Catholicism within me. Before a year was out, I found myself without a religion.

I was in church one Sunday, and on the altar was a child in the arms of her family; she was being baptized. As I was reciting a prayer in perfect step with the congregation, enjoying the ease with which I was remembering the dance of kneeling and standing and sitting and responding throughout the service, the words suddenly stopped rolling out of my mouth and into the collective pool of belief: I did not believe in the sacrament of Baptism, "...unless we be born again of water and the Holy Ghost we can not enter into the Kingdom of Heaven, as Truth Himself told us."

The congregation created a soft sound of rolling thunder through the church as we all sat down again. I looked at the people around me; I did not believe a single child would be shut out from God if she wasn't baptized.

I walked back down the marble stairs as a member of the church for the last time.

For awhile, I was without a religious identity, until I realized that if I were to have children I wouldn't raise them anything but Jewish. With this quiet, simple knowingness, I fully recognized myself as a Jewish woman. Two years later, I converted with my mother's blessings. Five more years would pass before I'd have the fortitude to disclose my father's conversion to anyone but my closest intimates. For the rest of my life I will yearn for the intricacies of my father's journey toward July 5, 1969. ■

Marian Nash lives in New York City. This piece is excerpted from her manuscript-in-progress, The Morning of My Judaism: An Exploration of the Jewish Morning Prayers.

Lonely at the Table

Some converts come to Judaism missing one thing: a Jewish family.

by DARCY R. FRYER

WHEN THE JEWISH MONTH OF ADAR BEGINS, JOY COMES IN... or so the saying goes. Not for me. When Adar begins, anxiety sets in, and it has nothing to do with pre-Passover cleaning. It's the annual problem of finding a place—two places, actually, one per night—so that I'm not alone for the Passover seders.

A decade ago, I converted to Judaism. For eleven months of the year, this is a non-issue in my Upper West Side (Manhattan) Jewish community. Converts are as common as blackberries in liberal synagogues these days, and my plight isn't that different from that of friends who grew up as non-observant Jews and then adopted, as adults, a more religious lifestyle. Most of the time, being a convert simply means being a Jew; it's easy and lovingly blending in.

As a single convert, I have no Jewish family. This isn't a great hardship on most holidays. On the High Holidays, I *daven* where I please, mindful of my good fortune. (Several friends have told me about miserable years they spent praying at shuls their families loved but they couldn't tolerate.) On Shavuot and Sukkot, I happily join old friends for days of festive reunion. Shavuot is the holiday most commonly associated with conversion; Jews read the Book of Ruth, the story of Judaism's most famous convert. Shavuot is, in many ways, the perfect holiday for converts: maximum time in shul, maximum emphasis on community; minimal time at home, and minimal need for family. The High Holidays are wonderful for similar reasons. During much of the year, a patched-together "family" of friends functions just as well as a family of blood relations.

Passover, though, is different. Of all the Jewish holidays, it's the most home-centered, and even non-observant Jewish families tend to celebrate it. It's the holiday when relatives who see little of each other during the rest of the year gather in large groups. The seders take center-stage, and synagogue services, by contrast, are poorly attended. Of course, it's possible to sign up for synagogue-based seders—I've been to quite a number—but even the best ones sit wrong at heart.

Every year as I watch my Jewish-by-birth friends flit off to seders with parents, grandparents, or distant relatives with whom they would scarcely dream of spending Shavuot or Yom Kippur, I am painfully reminded of the one thing that is missing from my Jewish life: a Jewish family.

Family seders are not intrinsically better than institutional seders; in fact, in ten years I've attended some thoroughly unsatisfying ones. I've been to seders fraught with tension because not all in attendance want to read the Hagaddah; I've been to

ones where the story of great-aunt Gertrude's hip replacement replaces the story of the Jews leaving Egypt. I've been to seders so big that I was never introduced to half the people present, and to family-oriented ones that were so family-oriented there was little room for anything else.

WHAT MAKES A FAMILY SEDER SPECIAL, REALLY? In the end, it has little to do with the rituals, food, or the quality of the discussion. *It's special because one automatically belongs, one doesn't have to ask for an invitation.* As someone who doesn't have a biological Jewish family, I am keenly aware of how the biblical tale itself revolves deeply around themes of household, hearth and family: The babies slain or not slain; the bread not rising on the family hearths; the four children of the Hagaddah.

And, of course, there are rituals of Pesach hospitality. *Ma'ot chittim*—the charity specifically earmarked for Jews who can't afford Passover food—and the injunction in the Hagaddah to "let all who are hungry, come and eat" both focus on quenching physical hunger, not loneliness. Family seders may be jolly, learned, rambunctious, disputatious, warm, or bleak, but *they are always inclusive.* I imagine parents and grandparents checking that everyone is coming, corralling not just children but the middle-aged. No one has to ask if she may come.

For converts without Jewish family, the annual Passover anxiety arrives in Adar, the Jewish month that begins our perennial uncertainty. Where and with whom will we spend the seders? How long to wait for an invitation? Whom to ask. How to ask. When to ask. Whether to "settle" for a synagogue seder, or to drive on a holiday when car travel is proscribed. I have never been homeless on the first or second night of Pesach. The Jewish community has always come through for me, often splendidly. But much of the hospitality is extended at the last minute, and there's no continuity from one year to the next.

I am waiting for the Adar when I hear the rabbi preach about finding spiritual meaning in the insecurity of not knowing where one will be for the first seder. I am waiting for the Adar when I hear congregants consulting one another about the intricacies of inviting oneself to someone else's seder, and whether it's wiser to ask a close friend, who will feel obliged, or a more distant acquaintance, who won't.

After all, finding a place at the seder table is supposed to be the easy part. ■

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A Mormon-Jewish Burial

Why Not?

by AMY WALL

MY FATHER DIED OF A HEART ATTACK AT 81. I was relieved. Our relationship had been difficult; knowing that it was over at last was good news.

When I was young, my father spent a lot of time teaching me—reading, mathematics, fixing cars. He approved of me; maybe he even loved me. But when I entered puberty, everything changed. Embarrassed by my blossoming body, he made sure I was embarrassed, too. He found a variety of clever ways to do this. He read my diary, with its junior-high-school crushes, out loud at the family dinner table. (“Oh Rodney, such blue eyes you have!”) When I went out with friends he hollered out the front door, “Amy! Did you remember to wear a bra?” He called me “Crisco” (“Fat-in-the-can, get it?”). I loved and admired my father, and having him treat me this way was astonishingly painful.

I worked hard to get back into his good graces, becoming a straight-A student, joining Honor Society, even studying science to please him. Nothing worked. But by the time I finished high school, he had tired of the shame game. I was no longer an object of ridicule; I was just invisible.

In turning away from me, my father turned toward my brother, Eddie, and all the family dynamics changed. My mother had long ago selected my brother, Eddie, as her child-of-choice; now he was both parents’ favorite child. The three of them were a family; I was a guest.

WHEN I WAS 25, EDDIE FELL IN LOVE WITH A GIRL WHO AGREED TO MARRY HIM IF, AND ONLY IF, HE CONVERTED TO MORMONISM. I guess if we’d been “real” Jews, this would have been out of the question. We were all born in New York, but the family moved to Arizona when I was five and Eddie was three. There was a thriving Jewish community here, but my parents made no effort to connect with it. We thought of ourselves as Jews, and our blue-and-white holiday gifts sat under a Hanukkah bush.

But blue-and-white wrapping paper was no match for true love. Eddie converted without a heartbeat of hesitation. Soon after, my mother’s many Mormon friends persuaded her to dip into the baptismal pool herself. At her insistence, my father grudgingly agreed to convert with her.

My mother was happy, surrounded by new friends and busy with church activities. My father, however, raised in a Jewish orphanage in New York, thought of himself as a Jew, and the baptism worried him. Then a rabbi told him that as far as

Judaism was concerned, the conversion had been meaningless. “You can’t give away your Judaism,” the rabbi said. Reassured, my father allowed himself to be lured to Mormon functions by homemade brownies and ice cream.

I was deeply confused by what felt like religious musical chairs. Did people change religions as easily as that? I had never heard of such a thing. And I was angry with my parents for what felt like another abandonment, not to mention blindly following Eddie. When we met for occasional family dinners, we were tense and barely polite.

ABOUT A YEAR AFTER HER CONVERSION, MY MOTHER’S BISHOP SENT HER A LETTER SAYING THAT GETTING HER DAUGHTER TO CONVERT WAS NOW HER LIFE’S WORK. Yes, really—I saw this letter myself. Immediately, my mother bent her considerable energies upon me. She gave me a Book of Mormon, which I was supposed to read. She’d check on it

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when she came to my house, so I thumbed the pages to make it look handled. At her insistence, we attended church functions together. I learned a lot of useful stuff: canning and drying food, baking bread, making jams and jellies.

The cooking classes were fun, and I was enjoying my mother’s company. Honestly, I did think about converting. I mean, why not? My mother would love me forever. My brother and his wife would be delighted. My father would continue to ignore me. What was the downside?

The downside was that I just could not do it. I was a Jew.

My mother couldn’t accept that. The pressure intensified. Other people from her church, including my new sister-in-law, joined my mother in explaining that Jesus was indeed Our Lord and Savior. An entire throng, singing a hallelujah chorus, cornered me whenever I accompanied my mother to her church.



Photo by Marni Horwitz

I GUESS IT WAS THIS PRESSURE THAT GOT ME UP EARLY ONE SATURDAY MORNING TO GO TO SERVICES AT A SYNAGOGUE. I didn't understand a word, but I liked it. I went again. I took classes and learned to read Hebrew. Eventually, I married a nice Jewish dentist and kept kosher. I joined the women's *chevra kadisha*, the "holy society" that helped prepare dead Jewish women for burial.

Again, the family dynamics shifted. My father, it turned out, liked having Judaism in the family. He came to my home for celebrations, wearing a blue kippah that I'd gotten for him. I hoped our Judaism would mend the rift. It didn't, though he clearly enjoyed being part of a religious Jewish family. My mother, furious, told me her church sisters were her real family, and buried herself in her church.

WHEN MY MOTHER WAS 66 YEARS OLD, SHE WAS DIAGNOSED WITH CANCER, AND GIVEN SIX MONTHS TO LIVE. Hatchets suddenly vanished. I was 42, raising two kids and managing my husband's dental practice, but I cooked and cleaned for my mother, took her to doctor's appointments, visited her twice a day in hospice, and sat with her through the night she died. We never discussed what had happened between us, never talked about what had driven her to Mormonism and me to Judaism, never expressed regret at the way our paths had separated us.

My mother was buried as a Mormon. Sisters sang hymns,

Brothers carried the casket, and there was ham and sweet potatoes at the church afterwards. She lies in the Mormon cemetery, in an unspoiled patch of desert on the outskirts of town, under a large mesquite tree. I hated every bit of it—the hymns, the ham, the service.

AFTER MY MOTHER'S DEATH, I WAS CERTAIN MY FATHER WOULD FINALLY NEED ME IN HIS LIFE. I hurried to be helpful: I stocked his freezer with matzoh ball soup, helped him with his bills, cleaned his house. None of it mattered. Our few conversations were about his medical conditions. I was sad, then angry, and finally resigned. He lived for another eight years, eight years of tense silence between us.

After he died, I realized Eddie and I had never discussed Dad's funeral. I didn't know if Eddie thought of Dad as a Mormon, which was technically correct from the Mormon standpoint, or as a Jew, which was technically correct from the Jewish standpoint. My father had left no instructions. When asked, he'd shrugged and said, "Like I care?"

We called the funeral home that had buried our mother eight years earlier, and made an appointment. When Eddie and I arrived at the funeral home, Bob, who helped us with Mom's funeral, was there. He remembered us, he said, and was sorry for this new loss. He spread out some papers, folded his hands on the table and looked up.

It's a small town. Bob knew my family and knew the score.

Eddie and my parents had converted from Judaism, I had not; my mother was an avid Mormon, my father was not. It was a complicated mess, and the three of us looked at each other, not sure where to begin.

I broke the silence. “Look, Dad wasn’t much of a Jew, but he wasn’t much of a Mormon, either.”

“No, Dad was definitely not a Mormon,” Eddie agreed, leaning back in his chair. “But we are burying him next to Mom, right? We’re not putting him in a different cemetery?”

“Right,” I said. My father had a pre-paid plot in the Mormon cemetery, right next to my mother.

Eddie paused. “You’d like Dad to have a Jewish service, wouldn’t you?” Now it was out in the open; good.

I answered matter-of-factly. “Yes, but no rabbi will conduct a Jewish service followed by a Mormon burial. No, we’ll have to do something secular, but we can say *kaddish* at the graveside.”

“Say what?”

“Uh—a prayer for the dead.” I’ve always been astounded by my brother’s total ignorance of all things Jewish.

“Will it be in Hebrew?”

“No. It’s in Aramaic.”

“Can it be in English?”

“It can be in English after it is in Aramaic.”

“OK.” He paused. “You read it in Aramaic and I’ll read it in English.”

With that, a truce seemed to have been declared. I wasn’t asking for anything too Jewish, Eddie wasn’t asking for anything too Mormon, so we were both comfortable. We reached rapid agreement—Dad would not be embalmed, there would be no motorcycle escort. The plain pine box turned out to be surprisingly pricey, so we went for the cheaper box, made out of recycled pantyhose or something.

Bob was taking notes. He looked up and said, “Your Dad wasn’t wearing any clothes when he was brought in. Can you bring something?”

The right answer would have been, “Sure, pants and a nice shirt, first thing in the morning.” Instead, I said, “No, he’ll be buried in a shroud, and he’ll have a *tabara*, a ritual washing. Which I will do.” I will?

Eddie had been leaning back in his chair and it thumped on the carpet.

“YOU are going to do it?”

“I am.” I am?

“Why?”

“Because I, well, I need to.” I had been a member of the *chevra kadisha* for years, and had certainly buried people I knew. But I had never buried a man. I had never buried my father.

“Amy, wouldn’t it be very hard for you?”

“Lori can help me.” Eddie was now married to Lori—Janice (the Mormon girl who started it all) having divorced my brother years ago for a foot-stomping Baptist. Lori, a fundamentalist Christian raised to believe that the earth is flat, was fascinated by anything relating to sickness and death. If she weren’t such a nice, wholesome person, you’d wonder what was wrong with her.

Eddie put his elbows on the table, leaned his forehead against his hands and sighed. “Okay. If you want to do this, fine. I’m sure Lori will be thrilled.”

I turned to Bob, the funeral director. “Can you get us a shroud?”

He scribbled industriously on his forms. The meeting was over. Eddie and I walked, together, down the carpeted hallway. I said, “Thanks for not forcing another Mormon service down my throat.”

We walked through the wide glass door into the sunlight. It was August. The heat settled over our faces, an airless blanket, and we were silent for several seconds—there’s always a brief adjustment in Tucson when you go from 72 degrees to 110.

“I don’t think Dad would have liked it,” Eddie said.

I SPENT THE EVENING SEARCHING THE INTERNET, LOOKING FOR RELIGIOUS PRECEDENT: CAN A DAUGHTER PERFORM A *tabara* FOR HER FATHER? The pages I got were unequivocal and uncompromising: No. It’s immodest.

At 3:00 a.m., I’m sleepless and scared. Can this possibly be the right thing to do? Why am I putting myself through this? It’s not like we had any sort of real relationship. By dawn, all I could answer was this: I think I need this last contact with my father. I need to bind us together as Jews. My father was a Jew and should be buried as one.

I PULLED UP TO THE MORTUARY IN MY LITTLE RED RAV. Lori was waiting. She helped me unload one small yellow bucket and two blue mop buckets from my car, and we walked in together. Bob escorted us through a back door into the working area of the mortuary. The solemn, carpeted world vanished

I’d been emotionally iced up for almost three-quarters of an hour. That was the good news. The bad news was that I was starting to melt.

behind the door, replaced by linoleum tile, industrial-size sinks, stainless steel counters and giant refrigerators. The stench of antiseptic was everywhere.

Bob led us to a large room with two stainless steel sinks on one side and a long stainless steel counter on the other. In the center of the room there was a large white table. Somebody was lying on it, covered with a white sheet. I stopped abruptly and Lori bumped into me.

I walked forward slowly and lifted the sheet. My father’s face was frozen, tufts of gray hair in mad disarray, mouth wide, eyes open, staring straight up at me. My arm dropped, the sheet slid down his chest. Whatever made me think I could do this? What insane audacity, what perversity of character possessed me to

volunteer for this? I actually felt faint.

I took a deep breath and pulled the sheet back over my father's face. "Bob," I said. "I need surgical scrubs, towels, sheets and the shroud."

Bob was efficient. He handed me two sets of scrubs and a rectangular brown paper package, then opened a cabinet under the counter, revealing neat stacks of white linens. I took out sheets, towels and washcloths. Bob hoisted himself onto one of the Formica counters.

"Bob, you can go, we're fine."

"No, I'm required by law to stay here."

**"I've done a hundred *taharas*, and no one from the funeral home has ever watched."
"Well, I want to see this," he admitted.**

I scowled. "I've done a hundred *taharas*, and no one from the funeral home has ever watched."

"Well, I want to see this," he admitted.

Great. Could this get any harder? I showed Lori how to wear surgical scrubs, tucking hair up, putting scratchy paper masks over mouths and noses. I peered at the box of gloves, size medium.

"Don't you have smaller ones?" I complained to Bob.

"No, that's it."

I yanked the too-big latex gloves over my hands and reached for another pair. "Double glove," I told Lori, "in case one rips, you're still protected." We filled my small yellow bucket with warm water from the sink. My hands were shaking.

"Okay, I'm going to take the sheet all the way off; then we need to get a clean sheet under him, and then look for sores or bleeding."

"Right," Lori said, her voice high and strained. This was Lori's first dead body. It was also her father-in-law.

I pulled away the sheet, dropped it onto the cement floor, and kicked it under the table. Dirty linens were Bob's problem.

Made self-conscious by last night's Internet search, I averted my face and quickly put a towel over my father's genitals. I grabbed a sheet from my stack of linens, and handed it to Lori. "Open the sheet and stuff it under him when I tell you," I said.

I crossed his legs at the ankles so he'd roll more easily, put my arms around his shoulders, cradled his head to my chest, and rolled him to one side. He was ice-cold, stiff, just out of the fridge.

"Okay, bring the sheet."

I stood up, looked at my father's body and was shocked. He looked like a skeleton covered in yellow leather. My God. How could I not have known?

I DID NOT KNOW THE PRAYERS FOR THE MEN'S *tahara*, SO I WAS MAKING UP MY OWN, PRAYING IN MY MIND, STEADILY, WITHOUT PUNCTUATION. "Lord God have mercy

on my father he wasn't much of a Jew but then again he didn't have much chance what with my mother and her goyish friends but he did the best he could"—and so on and so on.

Lori and I dipped washcloths into the yellow bucket and gently patted my father's body. His skin was delicate; the washing was more symbolic than cleansing.

"First the face, then the right hand, right arm, then the left hand and arm, then chest and downward." We worked as I talked. I rolled my father toward me again so Lori could wash part of his back, then she rolled him the other way, cradling his head and shoulders, and I washed the rest of his back. We dropped our washcloths onto the floor and kicked them under the table.

I filled my two mop buckets with water from the giant sink. "This is the important part," I told Lori. "This is the *tahara* itself. I'll stand on his right side, you on his left. I will start pouring the water at shoulder level, and when I tell you to start, you do the same. Pour the water continuously as you walk toward his feet. Don't stop. Whatever water is left gets poured over the feet."

I lifted my bucket, straining, and carried it to his right shoulder. Tilting the bucket, I poured carefully, wrapping my father in a translucent sheet of water. I walked slowly; when I got to his waist, I said, "Okay, start." I watched Lori out of the corner of my eye, gauging her progress. She was pouring sparingly with enormous concentration and ended up with lots of water, which she poured, as directed, over his feet.

I looked at Bob and almost laughed aloud at his dismay over the condition of his workroom.

"OK, now we dry him. Pat, don't rub." This involved many more towels and sheets, checks for blood—which is sacred and not to be lost during *tahara*—and rolling. We slid wet sheets out and kicked them under the table. Now Dad was clean and dry, lying on a dry sheet on his back.

I TOOK A DEEP BREATH. I realized I'd been emotionally iced up for almost three-quarters of an hour. That was the good news. The bad news was that I was starting to melt. The fact of my father's death, that I was here with him now for the last time, was starting to sink in.

I needed to finish quickly. I ripped open the brown paper wrapping of the shroud. The burial garments, called *tachrichim*, were made of coarse white linen, plain and unhemmed. I'd never seen a man's shroud before, and was concerned there might be something unfamiliar here. I found leggings, under-tunic and over-tunic, ankle and waist straps, *kippah*, sheet, and packet of earth from Israel. There was no equivalent to the woman's "apron," a small square of linen tied around the waistband. Gee, surprise.

We pulled on the leggings and maneuvered him into a sitting position so we could slip the two tunics over his head. I showed Lori the ceremonial knots used to tie the ankle straps and waist strap. Rolling him first to one side and then the other, we tucked the linen sheet under him, put the *kippah* on his head, and sprinkled the earth over his eyes, heart and genitals. Finally,

we wrapped the linen sheet around him. Normally, in a *tabara*, we'd then put him in his coffin, but the funeral wasn't until the next day, so he'd go back into the refrigerator until then.

IT WAS DONE. My father was ready for burial, as a Jew. He was going to a Mormon cemetery, but he was going as a Jew.

The final act of a *tabara* is to ask the dead person's forgiveness for poor handling, misspoken prayers, whatever. "Dad, we're sorry for anything that wasn't quite right," I began in a whisper. Lori turned her head and started to sob, quietly.

"We did our best for you, Lori and I, and we hope you'll forgive us for anything we did wrong. Rest in peace." I choked on the last sentence. There was a moment of silence. No one spoke. Then I lifted my head and said, "We're done. Let's go."

BOB ESCORTED US TO THE FRONT DOOR, TALKING ABOUT HOW INTERESTING THIS HAD BEEN. We walked out into the August inferno. Lori helped me put the buckets into my Rav, hugged me and climbed into her minivan. As I backed out, I saw her hunched over her steering wheel, crying.

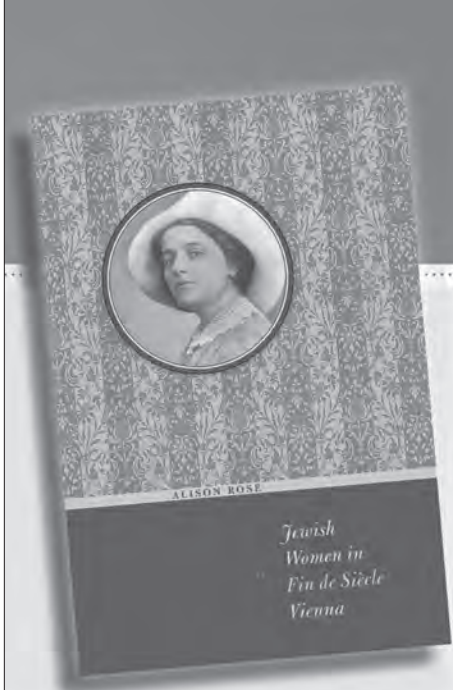
My Rav slid into four o'clock traffic, and I started home. Without warning, the last of the ice melted, and I began to sob,

painfully. I pulled into a strip mall parking lot, and wrapped my arms around myself. Tears poured down my cheeks.

Why did my mother and I let our religious differences keep us away from each other? Why did I let my father's coldness go unchallenged and unexplained? Was it cowardice? Pride? Stubbornness? Mine? Theirs? Had the difference in our gods really been so important? It wasn't what church you went to, not which cemetery in the desert you were buried in, not whether ham or corned beef was served on tables afterward. None of that mattered. None of it ever should have mattered.

I gathered myself together in the driver's seat, blew my nose, and wiped my glasses with my shirt. I took a deep breath and steered the Rav towards the street. My mother and my father were dead. All the things that kept us apart, all the things that prevented us from loving each other, seemed insignificant and petty. The light turned green, and the street opened up before me. ■

Amy Wall lives in Tucson, AZ. She's been a chemist for a manufacturing facility, a design engineer at a circuit breaker factory, a project manager at a defense plant and a remodeler of old homes. She is back in school working towards a degree in Transpersonal Psychology.



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