

A YEAR OF FIRSTS...

RACHEL LEAH FRY

ABOUT A YEAR AGO I began to feel seriously the yearning of my *neshamah*, my Jewish soul. Raised by a Jewish mother as a Christian, it took many years of stepping in and out of efforts to don the mantle of a Jewish life, before I finally began to seriously devote myself to reading and learning and listening to what my soul was begging for—devotion to Hashem without fear or confusion.

One of my “firsts” was becoming acquainted with Chabad.org.

I began to seek out information there every day following a visit by Rabbi Yosef Goldwasser, the Lubavitcher emissary in Mobile, Alabama, who, together with his wife, Bina, introduced me to the website. There was so much information and comfort there. I could read about any topic and learn about this beautiful and sacred heritage I had not been grounded in. My only tether to a Jewish life was the time I spent as a child, visiting my Orthodox Jewish grandparents in Brooklyn, New York. I revered them, and still do, as it was there the seed of love for Judaism and the need to live a Jewish life was planted.

Even before I began to live a Jewish life, as an adult I lit Chanukah candles each year. The deep meaning of this act came much later, but I knew how much it meant to my grandparents. In fact, when I was about ten years old, living in the deep South, I saved the Green Stamps my mother collected whenever she went grocery-shopping, licking them and putting them in a special little booklet. When I finally had enough to turn them in for something, I found I could get a brass menorah with a little turquoise stone decorating it. Proudly, I ordered it and sent it to my grandparents as a gift. My grandmother used it over the years. I know because it was always displayed in her little kitchen when I visited, and that may have kindled

the tiny flame that over time became my brightly lit *neshamah*.

Hashem does things in His own time, and when He knew I was ready to make a commitment to live a Jewish life He gave me opportunities and tools to begin that process. For example, at about that same time, I felt quite strongly that I would like to share my journey with others. I am blessed beyond measure to be able to write for, and publish my stories on, Chabad.org. Continuing to share in my newly minted Jewish life after living so long in the miasma of wrenching confusion is freeing. But the best part goes beyond having a place to express my happiness in the experience of learning to be a Jew; it is the comments I receive from readers, many of whom are on a similar path, finding their way to a religion and heritage denied them earlier in life. There are also many expressions of encouragement that lift my heart and help keep me moving forward.

Another first for me came on Rosh Hashanah, when I went to Rabbi Goldwasser's home to fulfill the *mitzvah* of hearing the *shofar* blown. I had heard a *shofar* blown before, but never so perfectly. As I listened to the crying song of the ram's horn, tears came to my eyes. I closed my eyes to listen and what my heart heard was *teshuvah*, *teshuvah*, *teshuvah*. It was a personal and deeply moving command from Hashem, "Return to me and follow my ways." In those holy moments, when the clarion call of the *shofar* seared itself into my heart and soul, I knew that nothing could ever again separate me from my life as a Jew among Jews.

I am now studying Torah once a week with Rabbi Goldwasser. I want to learn about this great gift G-d gave the Jews to keep them living for Him and repairing this broken world until in His estimable time he sends Moshiach to His beloved people. Learning Torah is a difficult but endlessly interesting pursuit: overwhelming, intense, and gratifying.

Keeping Jewish practices each week is also a first in my life. Creating 6-braided *challos* and lighting candles each Friday



evening makes me exquisitely cognizant of the worldwide circle of Jewish women doing these same *mitzvos* each week. And making sure that giving *tzedakah* is a regular part of my practice not only benefits others, it redounds to me through the incredible satisfaction I feel at having accomplished that *mitzvah*.

My newest “first” was sharing Sukkot with the Goldwasser family in their *sukkah*. Doing yet another *mitzvah* by entering a *sukkah* for the very first time was transformative. Nothing existed but the surrounding hug of that space and its occupants. The food was delicious, the joy palpable. My first-ever recitation of the blessing as I shook the *lulav* and *etrog* felt holy and perfect. I was exactly where I was meant to be, befriended by Lubavitcher emissaries whose gift is making every Jew they encounter immediately feel like beloved family.

In the *sukkah*, Mendel, the eight-year-old, told the story of Abraham and Isaac. He explained carefully that though Isaac knew he was destined to be a sacrifice, his consummate trust in Hashem led him to cooperate without complaint. And it was ultimately the faith of both father and son that brought about the angelic provision of a ram to sacrifice. In the *sukkah* we are all like Abraham and Isaac—Jews together, sharing our belief in Hashem’s limitless goodness and rejoicing in being together and taking particular notice of the blessings of food, drink, and companionship.

And so, the Jewish seasons follow one another and as I continue to grow in knowledge and in practice, I keep in my heart the words of the prophet, “...to do justice, and to love goodness, and to walk modestly with your G-d” (Micah 6:8). The seeds of love for *Yiddishkeit*, planted so long ago by my grandparents, now are becoming full-grown fruit-bearing trees. As I carry out or share in more and more *mitzvos*, I am no longer a child of religious division and confusion, but a Jewish woman, sure of my place in what the Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem M. Schneerson of righteous memory, referred to as G-d’s garden.

...AND ALSO, THE LONGEST YEAR

It is almost the end of 2020 and I have not seen my grandchildren in a year. We have not, *baruch Hashem*, experienced any COVID-19 illness or death in our family, but we assiduously avoid any place or people that might change that.

My husband is in his late seventies, and I am immunocompromised. Our beloved grandchildren live in two different states where they attend public school and where there are high rates of the virus. There are also known cases of the virus among the students in their schools.

I have one grandson and two granddaughters and will soon have two more girls in the family when my son remarries. I miss all five of these kids desperately. My husband and I have missed a whole year in which they have all celebrated birthdays, gone on to the next grade in school, experienced growth spurts, and could not be here to share the longed-for hugs and kisses we can never get back.

As I am 68, I am reading Psalm 69 regularly. It perfectly mirrors my feelings of both despair and hope:

*Deliver me, O G-d,
for the waters have reached my neck;
I am sinking into the slimy deep
And find no foothold...
I am weary with calling;
my throat is dry;
my eyes fail
while I wait for G-d.*



I feel these words viscerally each time I read them. Sometimes I literally cry because I feel so sad for time I cannot get back with children whose lives hurtle into their future. And yet... and yet, I keep reading, and there, when I get past the obvious grief in the first words of that Psalm, I am literally lifted up and imbued with hope by the words that follow:

As for me, may my prayer come to You, O L-rd, at a favorable moment;

O G-d, in your abundant faithfulness, answer me with Your sure deliverance...

Answer me, O L-rd,

according to Your great steadfastness; in accordance with Your abundant mercy turn to me...

And as I read those words I begin to breathe out the fear and the pain of these times we live in and breathe in the hope of the future when surely Hashem will bring together not only my precious family, but the families of all who are suffering physically, mentally, and emotionally.

We are all exhausted by the events of this year—a year of a pandemic of monstrous proportions, a year of political division, a year of such tragic loss and sadness that we Jews hope more fervently than ever for the imminent arrival of Moshiach with every prayer we say. But in the event that all we have for now is our deep-seated belief that G-d is present in everything, we must then turn to hope.

King David surely knew sorrow if he felt the waters had reached his neck. But this incredible Psalmist also knew that Hashem's love and joy and redemption were within reach, and he passed this wonderful realization down through the centuries to we who read his words today.

So, I will hold on to the truth of Hashem's presence, light my Sabbath candles, read my Psalm and pray instead of crying. I will work to bring joy to others and to be the good in this world I am expected to be. And I will hold fiercely to the belief that soon my beautiful grandchildren will be here for me to hold in my arms, to laugh with, and to share the stories saved up in the time we were separated. ❧



Rachel Leah Fry is a freelance writer who has been chronicling her Jewish journey for the last year. Much of her story can be found on Chabad.org. Rachel Leah loves to learn and to write. Her other passion is animal rescue and her pets include three ex-racing Greyhounds, a hound dog and two cats.