



Shabbat Shalom

When our daughter, Lily, turned three, my husband and I decided to take her to her first Shabbat for toddlers at a nearby temple. I was moved to do this because she had begun singing about everything, “I got up this morning and I love my bear and my toes and I love my Mommy and my Daddy...” Her songs, so full of light and love, reminded me of the way, when I was a little girl, I sang songs to God and felt him everywhere. Somewhere in my late teens, I’d lost the link to my Jewish roots, but hearing Lily’s songs inspired me to seek rituals that would keep alive her connection to spirit. Judaism was Lily’s birthright and part of her heritage. My husband, Brian, a non-practicing Catholic, insisted we raise our daughter Jewish, because he wanted no reminders of the cruel nuns and creepy priests of his childhood.

The sanctuary in the well-known Hollywood temple was packed. Parents held young children of every size, while older kids sat squirming next to them. We found seats as the Cantor, strumming a guitar, sang loudly above babbles and wails.

“Bim bam, bim bim bim bam, bim bim bim bim bam. . .

“I actually know this song,” I whispered to Brian. Turning to Lily I sang, “Shabbat Shalom (clap), Shabbat Shalom (clap), Shabbat, Shabbat, Shabbat, Shabbat Shalom...”

As the singing died down, the Rabbi approached the pulpit, inviting all the children who wished to light the candles to join him at the Bema. I walked Lily onto the stage, and there she was delighted to discover her neighborhood friends. As the children recited the blessings I looked out at the congregation and longed to feel a bond, a shared history, a heritage; instead I felt like an outsider. Over twenty years had passed since I’d participated in a service like this, yet as the blessings continued, a sense of familiarity washed over me and tears burned my eyes.

Once the candles were lit, we returned to our seats and the Rabbi began to tell a story; “Once upon a time there were three Rabbis...”

But my mind wandered, back to Camp Sabra, a Jewish campground on The Lake of the Ozarks. When I was ten, our family attended a weekend retreat designed to bring us closer to God, and to each other. On Saturday at sunset all the families gathered on a hill overlooking the lake for the Havdalah service. The sky turned pink as the sun disappeared beyond the horizon, casting its last glow upon the water. A breeze rustled the leaves as we sang “La la la la la, la la la la...” We ended our song as the

Rabbi lit the braided Havdalah candle and recited a blessing. In silence he passed around the candle, and when it came back to him, he dipped the flame into a glass of wine signifying the close of Shabbat. I sat in my father's lap and my sister's head rested on my mother's shoulder as we all sang, "He Nay Ma Tov Vu Ma Nayim, Shevat Yachim

Gum Ya Had..." We sang round after round, swaying like the leaves in the trees. I could have stayed there forever.

Back home in St. Louis, in the Jewish suburb where we lived, our family practiced a few rituals: On Friday nights we ate Shabbat dinner at my Noney and Zadie's house. Each week, the same chicken boiled off the bone into soup rich with farfel and overcooked carrots; and each week, the same bickering between my grandparents about something as mundane as how he slurped the broth.

Like most good Jews, we observed the High Holidays. My sister and I somehow survived the boring children's services, and afterwards dined at my Aunt Sophie's and feasted on her chopped liver, noodle kugel, and dried out brisket. In the fruit-filled basement of my Zadie's Orthodox Synagogue, we celebrated Simchah Torah, my favorite holiday. I don't remember kissing the Torah, but I do remember stuffing my face with Hershey bars and candied apples. When I was almost five, I learned the four questions for Passover; my mother sat me down in front of the Victrola, pulled a record from its jacket and played the prayers until I had them memorized -- in Hebrew. Did I understand what I was saying? No, but I performed beautifully at the Seder.

Every week I attended Sunday school, where, year after year, chapter by chapter, the teachers read us the history of our people as the boys threw spitballs and the girls wrote notes to each other. Hanukkah was fun; my dad walked into the house dressed like Judas Maccabee, a blue toga of bed sheets wrapped around him and a yellow pillowcase stuffed with gifts slung over his shoulder. "Ho, ho ho, happy Hanukkah!" he would cry, and my sister and I, along with our cousins, couldn't wait for him to pass out presents.

One Saturday morning not long after that first Tot Shabbat, as I was rushing out of the house, late for an appointment, Lily grabbed my sleeve.

"Mommy, we forgot to light them. Again!" She pointed at the Shabbat candlesticks sitting on shelf in the living room. I'd stuck post-its on the refrigerator and still I'd forgotten.

“Oh Lily, we’ll light them when I get home. I’ve got to go.”

Tears welled in her eyes, “I want to light them now, Mommy, please! Please!”

I called my client to tell her I’d be late. “Okay Lily, let’s light them.” I sighed.

She clapped her hands as she rushed to get the candlesticks that Galia, my stepmother, had bought for me in Israel while she was visiting her parents. They were a nudge gift, like the menorah she’d bought me the year before.

I searched for white candles, cloth napkins and matches. I moved slowly, with ambivalence, reminding myself with every step that I was doing this for Lily, because what I had started as a whim had taken root. I pulled a loaf of sandwich bread out of the freezer, firmly placed the candles into the holders, and poured spiced apple cider into a wine glass for the Kid-dush. Lily climbed on a chair at the dining room table, eyes shining. “I want to help you light the candles, Mommy.”

“All right. First, put this napkin on your head.” I put mine on to show her. With my daughter’s small hand in mine, we lit one candle and then the other. We circled our hands in front of our faces, and after the third circle we held them in front of our eyes. Once again tears welled as I remembered my Baba, my great-grandmother, so small, so old. I was three years old, helping her light the candles. Her red eyes were closed as she began the prayers, “... Baruch atah adinoh, elu hanu melech holem...”

And as suddenly as Baba had appeared, she vanished, and I was twelve years old, lying awake, and listening to my parents muffled argument behind closed doors. My mother’s voice rose above the din of the TV. “Well, charity begins at home Milton, and by the way, you’re never here anymore . . . your pals at the Jewish Federation can’t spare you from their meetings once in a while?” I strained to hear more of their muffled exchange above my mother’s sobs, but Lily interrupted my reverie.

“Shabbat Shalom, Mommy,” she beamed. Then she wrapped herself around me. “Let’s dance,” She said, clapping then singing, “Shabbat Shalom, Shabbat Shalom...”

I took her hands and we began to dance in a circle, but I could not abandon myself to the dance. I was trapped back in that childhood bed, rubbing my ears, pretending I hadn’t heard my parents’ angry words praying silently, “Please, God, make everything okay, please, God, I promise I won’t fight with my sister anymore, if you just make Mommy and Daddy

happy again.”

“Twirl, Mommy,” Lily sang, but I didn’t want to twirl. I wanted to yell at the top of my lungs, “So where were you God when my parents decided to split? Where were you when my father packed his red Camaro with all his belongings? And where were you when he drove off promising my sister and me that he was only ten minutes away and that Tuesday would be our special night? I want to know God, where were you, then?”

I clamped my mouth shut, feeling dizzy, nearly sick, and I slowed my dance and focused on my daughter, willing myself back to the present.

A few weeks later, Lily and I traveled to St. Louis for our annual trip to visit my dad and his second family, and when my father came home that evening, he entered the kitchen carrying three bouquets of roses. “Shabbat Shalom,” he exclaimed. “May the Sabbath be as beautiful and smell as sweet as these roses,” he said as he presented red roses to Galia, my stepmother, yellow roses to me, and pink to Lily and kissed each one of us. “Oh thank you Saba, these are so, so pretty,” Lily said, fingering the petals.

It was almost sundown, and other family was just arriving. Every Friday the Shabbat dinner rotated between Galia’s home and her sister’s. We gathered around the table, and my father put an arm around my shoulder and whispered, “I’m so glad you’re here. This,” he said, motioning with his free arm, “is what it’s all about.”

Afraid I might slip into unhappiness again, I breathed in deeply and looked around. Lily stood with Galia in front of the silver candelabra with its white candles. The nearby covered challah represented plenty, and the wine in the Kiddush cup was there to welcome any weary traveler to join this celebration. The light was warm, and through the window I caught sight of the fading sunset as the North Star began to shine.

Galia and Lily lit the candles, then Galia circled her arms and covered her eyes, calling forth the light of creation. As she recited the prayers welcoming the Sabbath into her home, I felt the Shekhinah, the spirit of the Sabbath, enter. When my father began to chant the blessings over the wine, I felt his peace, and for that moment at least, I felt my own.

Cheryl Montelle is a Los Angeles based writer whose stories have been currently published in the anthologies, Raging Gracefully, and Cup Of Comfort For Mothers To Be. She has also been published in Fresh Yarn , Seven Seas, On The Bus, Rattle, and Spillway.