

We bind ourselves to the One who, in the binding, sets us free

Melissa Musick Nussbaum | Feb. 14, 2014 My Table Is Spread

At sundown last Sept. 4, Jews celebrated the beginning of the New Year, what they call "the birthday of the world." For my sister's daughter, Becky, it marked the beginning of a new life, the birthday of a new world. The Thursday before Rosh Hashanah, she sat before a *beit din* (a rabbinical court) in Los Angeles and answered their questions about her preparation to live a Jewish life.

I sat with my sister, Becky's fiancé and friends from their community. As we waited for Becky to receive her new name, Batya ("daughter of God"), and step down into the mikvah (ritual bath), we chatted, as people do in waiting rooms. Bernice, a member of the synagogue, is retired from teaching special education in the public schools. She is learning to play the ukulele and hopes to visit Denver, a city she has never seen.

A rabbi grabbed a quick salad standing at the reception counter of the mikvah. The receptionists answered calls from Jews eager to go in the mikvah before the holidays.

A young man from Guadalajara, Mexico, was in and out with his rebbe, a native Spanish speaker from Argentina. The rebbe was sad because his oldest child was headed across the country to Boston University. But he stopped himself mid-complaint and recalled that he left his home at the same age and went to Israel, a much farther journey.

The young Mexican man could not stop smiling. Or talking about the congested Los Angeles traffic. He was converting. At last. He had made it, after a long and difficult journey down many actual and metaphorical versions of the notorious 405 Freeway.

Coming out of the mikvah, his hair still wet, he clutched an embroidered blue velvet pouch under his arm. Inside was his new tallit (prayer shawl). He would put it on for morning prayers on Friday. He would wear it for his first Yom Kippur as a Jew.

A cantor came in carrying her guitar case. She had written a song for Becky. She planned to sing it when Becky recited the *Shehecheyanu*, a blessing thanking God for allowing us to live to experience this moment of joy. In English, the *Shehecheyanu* goes like this:

Praised are you, the eternal one our God, ruler of the cosmos, who has kept us alive, sustained us, and enabled us to reach this moment.

My niece would recite it in Hebrew.

The room grew crowded. It felt like the family waiting room in a birth center, all of us anxious, but happily so. "How much longer?" the question on our lips. The expectant glance toward the door each time it opened. When will there be good news?

It had been a long journey; perhaps it is always long. My sister and I say Becky converted to Judaism, but

Becky corrects us. "I didn't convert," she says, "because I had nothing to convert from. I was nothing. Now I'm Jewish." By which she means Something. By which she means joy.

By nothing, she means, sadly and truthfully, the mall gods we have trained our children and ourselves to worship. She means the economic exchange we call Christmas. She means the pilgrimages to spas and gyms in a quest for eternal youth, if not eternal life. She means truth sought on a blue-lit screen and celebrities revered as priests. She means sex with a computer and friendship in a bottle. She means a life stripped of times and seasons, feasts and fasts, by which she means one damn thing after another.

The *beit din* has ruled. We are invited in. The rabbi asks my niece if she has come of her own will, if she joins this tribe fully and free. I begin to weep. This is what those who turn away from religious life don't understand. Everyone is bound, to some thing or some one. But we are the fortunate prisoners. We bind ourselves to One who, in the binding, sets us free and free and freer still, until we become ourselves, the fully human men and women we were created.

The rabbi asks if my niece will make a Jewish home. If she is granted children, will she raise them in a Jewish home? If she is granted sons, will she bring them through circumcision into the covenant of Abraham? Most of the questions are about the home and not the temple, for that is where the life is planted and tended and lived.

The rabbi asks her to explain the Hebrew name she has chosen. She tells the story of Batya, Pharaoh's daughter, who, according to the Talmud, rose in the night and went to the river to immerse herself in living water and become a Jew. At the river, she heard a baby cry and went to him, pulling the infant Moses from the water. She took him back to the palace and raised him. Batya is an adult convert whose first act is deliverance.

I recall our conversation earlier that morning. My niece's fiancé, a rabbinical student, works with addicts in recovery both in and out of the California state prisons. There are a number of women inmates who have converted to Judaism under his supervision and with his support. They are Jews, but there are no mikvahs in the prisons. They cannot go into the water. Becky tells me she has a list of the names of these women. She tells me she is taking them with her when she goes into the mikvah. She will say their names in the waters.

Batya pulled Moses up out of the killing waters. This Batya is pulling them down into the life-giving waters.

Becky goes to prepare herself for the immersion. The day before she had removed her nail polish and clipped her nails. She showers and takes off all her jewelry. We wait, until the attendant tells us we can go inside a small tiled room. A floor-to-ceiling curtain separates us from the pool. I hear Becky go under the water and come up. I hear her voice, strong and clear, as she recites the first blessing in Hebrew, the blessing for immersion.

Blessed are you, O Lord, our God, king of the universe, who has sanctified us with his commandments and commanded us regarding the immersion.

I hear the attendant say, "Kosher."

I hear the sounds of the second immersion, as the water again covers every strand of her hair. I hear Becky come up and say the *Shehecheyanu*. Her friend Rebecca sings, in English and Hebrew, a song of blessing. I hear the attendant say, "Kosher."

I hear the sounds of the third immersion. I hear Becky rise from the water and pray the *Sh'ma Yisrael*. I know this one, Deuteronomy 6:4, "Hear O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone." I repeat the words silently in English, as I learned them in childhood. They are a strong cord, linking my niece and me, drawing us in.

Then I hear the attendant say, "Kosher," for the last time. "Kosher," by which she means, "Welcome home."

[*NCR* columnist Melissa Musick Nussbaum can be found online at thecatholiccatalogue.com.]

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