

CHAPTER ONE



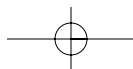
Hanging with the Jews

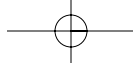
Each Wednesday night, I stand on the front porch of a Hasidic rabbi's home, waiting for him to open the door for me. Usually I'm the first to arrive—his most eager student. "Hello, Mary. Welcome!" he says, inviting me inside and ushering me to the dining-room table where we study.

If Rabbi G. hasn't yet recited his evening prayers, he slips off his jacket and dons a long black coat, placing a black fedora on his head. Then he begins pacing throughout his house, quietly reciting his prayers.

While the rabbi prays, I browse through his massive collection of books, almost all of which are in Hebrew; the rabbi is fluent in Hebrew, Russian, and English. I try, out of courtesy, not to watch him, but it isn't easy. Rabbi G. is about six feet, four inches tall, with huge brown eyes that seem to penetrate right to your soul. The fervor with which he prays, typical of the Hasidic branch of Judaism, fascinates me. Dressed to greet God, the rabbi invites admiring stares.

Soon others begin arriving, and we sit around the table, talking. When Rabbi G. joins us, we begin our study, first delving into





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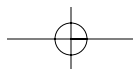
the intricate, detailed observance of the Orthodox and *Hasidim* (plural of *Hasid*). Then about 9 P.M., moving into something else, perhaps a mystical interpretation of the current *parsha* (Torah portion) of the week, maybe a study of the writings of the last, deceased, Lubavitcher Rebbe, whom Rabbi G. follows, or possibly something from the Tanya—one of the mystical kabbalistic texts favored by the Lubavitchers.

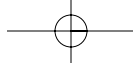
Most evenings, the group consists of Orthodox and Hasidic males—and me, a female Baptist. Yet they joke and talk with me as if I were one of them. They're respectful and complimentary of my input and questions. My guess concerning their acceptance of me is that they know I'm sincere. I'm not here to try and convert them to Christianity. I'm here to learn. I'm here because I've grown to deeply love Judaism and the Jews. It hasn't always been that way with me, but it is now. The rabbi opens his Hebrew text. I scoot to the edge of my seat.



My love of Judaism began about five years ago. I had returned to school to study philosophy and anthropology and ran across a newspaper article about a Jewish group that studied Jewish philosophy on a monthly basis. I thought it would be a great enhancement to my academic studies. I had never been around observant Jews, didn't know any personally, and so I called the group's leader, Reid Heller, and asked whether it was OK if a non-Jew attended the studies. He responded warmly and enthusiastically.

As it turned out, the group studied more than Jewish philosophy. They studied different classical Jewish texts and, occasionally, a book of the Bible. The group of about fifteen men and women were from all branches of Judaism. Some wore yarmulkes





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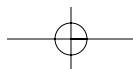
(*kipot*, in Hebrew); some didn't. (At the time, I referred to them as "little hats" because I had no idea what they were called.) Some were highly observant, meticulously following Jewish law; others observed Jewish law less stringently. A woman who acknowledged God's presence in every aspect of life sat next to another woman who was an avowed atheist. It was an eclectic group.

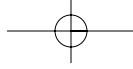
As for me, I felt like I was being transported back in time to the world of the Bible. I had read all my life of ancient Jewish rituals and lifestyles, but now I began to realize how uninformed most Christians are of Jewish ritual and tradition. I had always held vague images in my mind of Jews praying and teaching in synagogues, but it suddenly occurred to me that I had no real idea what went (or goes) on there, either in ancient or in modern times.

Each month, I sat surrounded by men and women bent over Tanakhs (the Hebrew Bible), various commentaries, and other ancient texts. No longer was I experiencing the world of scripture secondhand. I was involved with the people who encompassed that world, whose traditions and rituals pulsate through each of its pages. Rituals that had been practiced for thousands of years were, in some form, still being practiced today by a group of people I had never even bothered to get to know.

My favorite evenings with Reid's group were the ones in which we studied the Bible. Once we spent an entire hour discussing Bathsheba's seductive bath. One of the women in our group suggested that Bathsheba may have actually been engaged in a Jewish ritual, immersing herself in a *mikvah*, when King David spotted her. This launched numerous opinions from the group, each of which Reid led us to carefully consider. When one was exceptionally thought provoking, he'd stop and say, "Let's go with that."

We tackled the passage, as we always did, from every conceivable angle but never in a merely intellectual manner. We'd look





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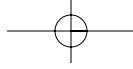
at its history, its philosophical significance, and its cultural relevance—for starters. Numerous interpretations might be offered, and all were respected, chewed on, dissected, and tossed about. Dozens of ancient and modern rabbis' writings would be recalled. Someone would bring up a mystical approach; others would point out the play on a Hebrew word or the modern implications of the text.

Rabbi Lawrence Kushner perhaps says it best: In the Jewish community, he explained, “the Torah or Scripture is expounded, interpreted, plumbed, allegorized, manipulated, massaged, psychoanalyzed, inverted, sliced, and diced. There is no one correct interpretation. Judaism may begin with a book, but it ends in the clouds.”¹

Because Reid let us know ahead of time what we'd be studying the following week, several group members came prepared with piles of texts that shone light on any troublesome spots. I loved watching them lean over a text, fingers humming along the Hebrew lines as they read one of the three or four languages some of them were fluent in.

In Jewish hands, scripture vibrated and pulsed into life. I felt the passion of the Hebrew God in a fresh way, heard the cry of the prophets' voices with a new force. The world of the Greek Testament²—Jesus himself—began to wiggle out of the Christianized world the Western church has created and emerged in Judaic splendor.

Although I knew that these Jews were modern and that they acquired their information the same way I did—by reading about the ancient world—they, unlike me, still *lived* aspects of the religious life described in scripture. They still practiced rituals that my own religion had discarded in its belief that such “graceless” activities were no longer necessary.



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This group—then my only representation of Judaism—was connected to the Bible, which was written to and by and for the Jews, in a way I would never be. Regardless of how much we’ve Westernized scripture, I was smacked with the reality that my Bible was Jewish from start to finish.

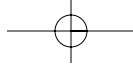


Today, with a number of years and hundreds of experiences later, I’m amazed at the way the Jews have transformed me. At the time I began studying with Reid’s group, I was in my mid-thirties and had only been out of a strict evangelical church for two years. My husband, Mike, and I had been devoted Christians since we’d married a few months out of my teens; we were attracted to the more conservative edge of evangelical Christianity because of our past drug and alcohol abuse.

During those years, I was so legalistic that I had once canceled my subscription to a magazine because it condoned women working outside the home. Another time, taking communion at a friend’s church, Mike and I panicked when we realized they used real wine. In the backseat of our 1968 Camaro, I carried a small box of evangelistic tracts, handing them out to every person with whom I came into contact.

Growing up, I had a vague notion from my church and the Greek Testament (the only source of information I had about Jews or Judaism) that Jews loved rules and had little heart or passion for God. Although I would much later hear that some Christians believed the Jews were “Christ killers,” I never heard this personally; the churches I attended believed that Jesus gave his life freely.

Although I hadn’t personally encountered any hostility toward the Jews, there was an almost complete lack of knowledge



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within the churches I attended. In our eyes, Jews followed rules while Christians were passionate about God. God had done everything he could to get them to wake up, to love him, to acquire an understanding of what he wanted, but their hearts were too hard to hear the good news.

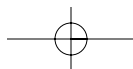
What an awakening I was in for. As I began studying and worshiping with the Jews, they would begin to influence every aspect of my spiritual life. The box I had kept God in for so many years would burst open. My experience of prayer would be profoundly deepened. My life would be imbued with a passion for and understanding of ritual and the Bible raised to new heights of symbolism and meaning.

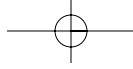
The Jews have taught me that life on earth, not just heaven, matters immensely. They've restored my belief in miracles and helped me to see that God is in everything and everyone. Worshiping with the Jews has plunged me into an intimacy with God that continues to astound me, deepening my love and passion for this Being in a way I never imagined.



Although I studied regularly with Reid's group in the library of the Jewish Community Center, I had not yet ventured into a synagogue. This first adventure in Jewish worship and prayer, in contrast to study, came when my church was invited to participate in an interfaith service at one of the largest Reform temples in the United States.

On that Friday evening, the synagogue was packed. Our Baptist choir sang a hymn from the synagogue's balcony, followed by a psalm in Hebrew from the Temple Emanu-El choir. My pastor, George Mason, gave the benediction for the service.





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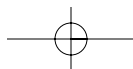
The following morning, George led the study that preceded Temple Emanu-El's prayer service. Jews and Christians mingled at the tables, and I was thrilled when I noticed two friends from Reid's study group. Soon the rabbi moved to the microphone, trying unsuccessfully to get the crowd to quiet down. "They don't listen to me," Rabbi Zimmerman sighed, "but when Mason gets up here, they'll hush."

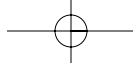
Before George got up to speak, Rabbi Zimmerman spent a few minutes "consoling" his congregation about our presence. Because some Christians have spent so many years trying to convert Jews—violently, subtly, deceptively, boldly, by whatever means available—it's difficult for many Jews to feel comfortable with us.

Rabbi Zimmerman assured his congregation that he understood how hard it would be for them to even hear Jesus' name mentioned in the synagogue, as Jesus had been pushed on them in so many ways for so many centuries. Yet in order for healing to take place, the rabbi continued, we must listen to one another, respecting each other's faiths and beliefs, realizing that not all Christians, not even all Baptists, target Jews for conversion. When you hear George talk about Jesus, Rabbi Zimmerman said, please understand he isn't proselytizing; he is explaining the Christian faith.

George's text was the Exodus chapter that preceded the giving of the Ten Commandments—a passage on the calling of the Jews. As George plunged into the text, everyone grew quiet, listening attentively. Occasionally, Rabbi Zimmerman would leap from his chair and comment on something George said. The two men would joke and banter, gripping hands, then engage in side-locked embraces as they discussed their views. Their friendship was obviously close and sincere.

For me, the service evoked an even deeper fascination with Judaism. Although the Saturday morning study was enlightening,





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my mind was still on the evening before. I had never been inside a synagogue, never seen the beautiful ceremony of the opening of the ark where the large, ornate Torah scrolls are kept, never heard the rhythmic chanting of Hebrew by hundreds of Jews deeply in love with God. Again, everything reverberated with a biblical intimacy that I knew belonged uniquely to the Jews.

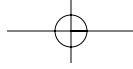


Not long after this weekend, I woke up wondering how the Orthodox worshiped. Although a Jewish friend had advised me to take someone along who knew the order of the service, I preferred to attend alone. I wanted to feel my own way along, to absorb the atmosphere of the service without distraction. And I wanted to reflect on it on the way home by myself. I explained this to my cautious friend. “Go for it,” he said to me.

I chose a “Traditional synagogue,” which differed slightly from an Orthodox one in that, while it provided separate seating for men and women, there’s no separation with a *mechitza*, or curtain. In addition, space is provided for men and women to sit together if that’s what they prefer. In a true Orthodox setting, sitting together isn’t an option.

I slipped in early and sat in the back, as I had absolutely no idea what to expect. In the foyer, the men removed their black fedoras and donned *kippot* (plural of *kippah*), the small head covering traditionally worn by Jewish men; in more liberal synagogues, women sometimes wear them.

The service began with everyone opening prayer books. A congregant stood next to a large flip chart in the front of the sanctuary, so when the rabbi skipped from one section to another in the prayer book, worshipers would know what page they were



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supposed to be on. I silently read the English translation provided alongside the Hebrew.

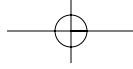
As people wandered in, one by one, and took their seats, the men began to chant and pray, rocking back and forth in fast, jerky motions—a movement that is supposed to increase concentration. During the prayer service, the rabbi, assisted by two other men, carefully removed the deep-blue, velvet-covered Torah scroll from the ark.

As the rabbi moved down the aisles with the Torah, the men and women crowded to the edges of the pews. Several rushed to the front of the synagogue, so eager were they to touch and kiss the Torah. The men reverently grazed the Torah with their prayer tassels, then brought the tassels to their lips. Some of the women lightly brushed the Torah with their fingertips or prayer books, then raised them to their lips. Others bent to kiss the Torah itself. I remembered a woman from Reid's group who had once said, "We love the Torah! We kiss the Torah!" Now I understood what she meant.

Despite the different ideologies of Jews regarding the Torah, it is love of these books of Moses—the first five books of our shared Testament—that most closely unites the Jewish people. Everywhere in the world, in every synagogue, each Saturday morning, the same Torah portion is read.

As I followed along, I was bathed in worship and prayer, even though the service, as is typical of Orthodox and Traditional services, lasted three hours and was almost entirely in Hebrew.

Each section of prayer represents a closer and closer approach to God, which the Hasidim describe as "moving into a different world." When the *Shema*—the most important prayer in Judaism—is recited, worshipers, at least in Orthodox circles, cover their eyes with their hands. This symbolizes that they are entering



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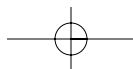
God's presence. The *Amidah* climaxes the prayer service, reflecting the mystical belief that worshipers have entered the highest world. They are in the presence of God. It's the only prayer that is whispered—a sign of awe and respect at moving so close to an utterly holy Being.

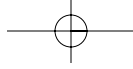
As I've understood more about the Jewish prayer service, it has taken on added meaning. However, I've found that it isn't necessary to understand a word of Hebrew or to comprehend a single aspect of the service to experience the presence of God. Each time I've attended, I've felt a charged atmosphere, an overwhelming sense of holiness and of love and connection with God. The Jews have come to pray, to encounter God, to worship; spiritual energy permeates the synagogue.

Although I was captivated by everything and everyone around me when I attended my first Traditional Jewish service, I was particularly absorbed in watching an elderly man sitting in the pew across from me. Although members came in late and left early and, at some informal parts of the service moved across the aisles to chat with one another, this man never once looked up from his prayer book. I don't think he was even aware that anyone else was in the synagogue, other than God.

Even during prayers, when a smattering of the congregation failed to join in, the old man didn't miss a word. He was utterly absorbed in God, his voice rising and falling, melodic and intense. The look on his face was one I've seen on faces of ecstatic mystics. I couldn't take my eyes off him. Although I was afraid he might sense me staring, he never did, for he sensed nothing but the presence of God.

Months later, when I was more comfortable in my friendship with the Jews I'd come to know, I began asking around to find out who this man was. One friend thought he knew and gave me a





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phone number. I called, but it wasn't he. I returned twice to the synagogue but he wasn't there. I began to think he might have been an angel. In fact, I'm sure he *was* an angel, even if he was also a flesh-and-blood human being. For the holiness I felt when I sat across from him still reverberates in my mind and heart, years later.

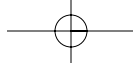


If you've ever had God in a box and then released him, you'll understand the absolute wonder this awakens in you. For years, I believed I could tell you pretty much everything there was to know about God. Just look in such-and-such a passage of the Bible. Simple. Then suddenly I found myself in the midst of a group of people who were rousing in the *midst* of God.

The Jews speak of God in hushed whispers, in rousing discussions, in upthrown hands of perplexity and resignation at all there is yet to discover. They pray as though they can bring God crashing through the roof of the synagogue. They recycle metaphors, expanding God's nature as they do so. They play endlessly with the numerous interpretations and implications of, say, a burning bush and a wrestling angel. After being with them, I always go home amazed. What imagination these Jewish friends of mine have!

After studying and worshiping with the Jews for several months, I began to sense God's presence in a more intense manner in everything around me. The spiritual realities lying beyond the physical world seemed almost tangible. The intense joy I'd feel after a prayer service would remain with me for days.

In addition, because I'd viewed the Bible in such a literal manner as a conservative evangelical, I'd never discovered the much



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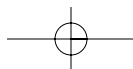
more fascinating, hidden meanings. As I did so, the Bible burst into life—spiritual life.

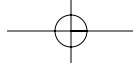
Because of these things, I wanted to delve deeper, to get to know other Jews and to experience Judaism at different kinds of synagogues. Simchat Torah, the holiday that commemorates the completion of the year-long reading of the Torah, was approaching, and I called Reid to ask for a suggestion as to where I might celebrate it. He said that if I really wanted to immerse myself in the spirit of that particular holiday, I should go to Chabad.

Chabad is an “outreach” synagogue affiliated with the Lubavitchers, a Hasidic sect of Judaism. Most, though not all, Hasidim live in relative isolation from the rest of the world, Jewish and non-Jewish. The Lubavitchers, however, one of the largest Hasidic sects, live among other Jews because it’s their mission to help them become more observant. In New York, for instance, they drive several “mitzvah mobiles,” stopping by homes of Jews to give them opportunities to perform mitzvot.

The Lubavitchers, like other Hasidim, are considered by many to be ultra-Orthodox because of their strict observance of the law, though in reality, their level of observance doesn’t differ that much from many Orthodox Jews. In addition, the Lubavitcher synagogues—or Chabad—are actually more “user-friendly” than are most Orthodox synagogues, with transliteration in their prayer books, some helpful explanations during services, and a low, portable *mechitza* that allows women to touch Torah as it’s being carried down the aisles on the Sabbath.

Before the holiday of Simchat Torah arrived, I called Chabad and asked where I should park my car that night because Orthodox Jews do not drive on the Sabbath or holidays, and I could hardly walk the forty miles from my home. I was told that a business across the street allowed the synagogue to use





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their parking lot, and the high hedges along the street obscured the cars.

Later, I learned that a number of people drive to Chabad, and the Lubavitcher rabbis welcome them with open arms. They're happy that Jews are coming to pray. The Lubavitcher rabbis whom I know are very accepting, tolerant, and kind toward those who are making an effort to become more observant Jews.

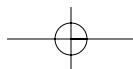
But that night I had no idea how kind they were. I even thought they might ask me to leave if they saw I was driving a car. As Mike and I entered the foyer, we noticed that everyone was already inside and we weren't sure what to do. Was it a faux pas in the Jews' eyes for Mike not to wear a *kippah*? Or was it insulting for a non-Jew to wear one? We hadn't even thought about it.

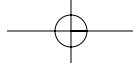
A woman noticed us standing in the foyer and came out to help us. I asked her if Mike should wear a yarmulke, incorrectly pronouncing it just the way it looks: *yar-mulke*. The woman stifled a grin and told me how to pronounce it. She then removed one from a box beside the door, and Mike and I walked quietly into the sanctuary.

Mike had never been inside a synagogue, so he was nervous. In fact, he had threatened to wring my neck if he got pulled into any Jewish dances or circles like the ones I'd described from my visits to other synagogues. I assured him that these were Orthodox Jews, that they would know he was a gentile, and that they certainly wouldn't want him in their Jewish dance circles.

Mike and I took seats on opposite sides of the *mechitza*. The prayer service was in full swing, and a woman handed me a prayer book, pointing to the page number, and helped me follow along.

After the prayer service, Rabbi D., the head rabbi, began calling the men, one by one, to the podium. There, each would give his Hebrew name and then receive a blessing—and a shot of vodka.





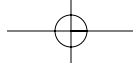
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It's a custom for most Hasidic Jews to get drunk on Simchat Torah, as this allows one to experience pure, uninhibited joy. In my world up to this point, drunkenness had meant an open door to an anything-goes attitude, an I'll-regret-this-tomorrow feeling. During these services, though, for the Hasidim, it's an opportunity to demonstrate purity even when completely inebriated. And they walk home, as driving isn't allowed on the Sabbath or holidays. In addition, the Hasidim drink alcohol moderately the rest of the year, only getting drunk two times per year as part of religious holidays.

After the last blessing was said, the rabbis removed all the Torahs from the ark, holding them high above their heads, and began circling the room with them. One by one, the men moved into the aisles, joining hands, singing loudly, and dancing. Mike glanced at me with a panicked look in his eyes, just as a man grabbed him and yanked him into the circle. "So I lied," I whispered as he danced around the synagogue in a circle of wildly joyous men.

Again and again the men circled the room, dancing with the Torah scrolls. Occasionally, the Torah would change hands and the man who had been carrying it would stop, throw his hands in the air, and begin a slow, circular hora dance. Rabbi D., his long black beard tucked between a black fedora and black trench coat, captured everyone's attention. With his contagious charisma, he led the dancing and singing and encouraged everyone to get enough vodka. It was Simchat Torah, rejoicing of the Torah, a time to celebrate!

With the prayer service over and the *mechitza* removed, the men and women could mingle, although they weren't allowed to dance together. A couple of women repeatedly tried to get a circle of dancing females going, but most seemed shy or uninterested. So gradually the women moved back to give more room to the men. I was disappointed. The joy in the room was contagious. I didn't want to *watch* anyone dance. I wanted to dance, too!



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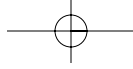
A small circle of men began to form in the middle of the room. Everyone else gathered around them. One man lifted another onto his shoulders. The circle widened and Rabbi D. did a cartwheel. Others followed suit. The men closest to, but still outside of, the circle were pulled in to do an acrobatic turn or two. Although I was startled when they began tugging on an elderly man, he moved eagerly into the circle, squatted, and did a somersault. Everyone went wild.

At around 10 P.M., Mike and I slipped out. Reid had told us it would be OK to arrive and leave anytime we wanted. “Trust me,” he said, “no one will notice, and if they do, they’ll never remember the next day. You’ll see.” We later found out the party had ended between 3 and 4 A.M. The men, including the rabbis, would joke about their hangovers and headaches the next day, but they’d also be up before dawn, reciting their morning prayers in the synagogue.

Although my Baptist church didn’t frown on moderate drinking, that was a recent change for me. Until recently, I’d believed that drinking alcohol was immoral, especially because I’d abused it as a teenager. Here, however, the release of inhibitions that alcohol gives was coupled with spiritual joy. The completion of the reading of the Torah, which Simchat Torah celebrates, is a great and happy event, and Jews are supposed to enter into its spirit without holding back. One should be utterly abandoned to the joy of the holiday.

As I left that evening, I was filled with a sense of fun and wonder, but I also realized again how much God is an intricate part of everything in Jewish life—all their activities and thoughts, daily life, and special moments in time. In fact, in Hasidic theology, God can be nothing less.

Like most mystical branches of various religions, the Hasidim believe that everything is an “emanation” of God. God “contracted”



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himself, and everything—the world around us, mind, spirit, our human bodies—came into being. The idea that God exuberantly permeates everything had begun to create in me, that night, a greater awareness of the vibrant spirit of God in my everyday life.

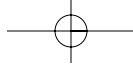


After the Simchat Torah service, I knew I wanted to become more involved with the Hasidim. I wasn't sure that was possible, but I decided to at least try. Before I left the synagogue, I had noticed a flyer hanging in the foyer and jotted down some information about a study that took place each week in the home of a Lubavitcher rabbi. The next morning, I called and asked if it was OK if I attended. It was.

When Wednesday rolled around, I drove to the rabbi's home (after attending Bible study at my Baptist church) and began the first of many studies with Rabbi G. I'll never forget my first week, when I reached out to shake the hand of a young man who ducked his head and jerked his hand away.³ Great, I thought, I haven't been here five minutes and already I've offended someone. I was pretty sure they'd move their location the following week and not tell me where they'd gone.

For my first night of study, five men were present. All were intent on learning and practicing a strict observance of Jewish law. For instance, one evening the rabbi discussed whether it was OK to allow someone to interrupt you when you're reciting the *Shema* and, if so, *when* was it OK? Literally hundreds of details surround the recitation of the *Shema*, and we spent part of each Wednesday night sorting through them.

As the weeks wore on, I realized that this was the very reason some people, including many liberal Jews, thought that the



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Orthodox were dry and bogged down with irrelevant details about what it means to serve God. Indeed, at first this group seemed to fit my childhood stereotype. But gradually I came to realize that these laws evolved because of a desire to take prayer and obedience seriously. Undoubtedly, I thought, most of us could use a bit of their discipline and the seriousness with which they approach their relationship to God.

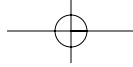
I also came to understand that the Hasidim go far beyond a mere adherence to ritual and law. This was driven home to me week after week when, after we'd studied the details of the law, Rabbi G. would open some other Jewish text and plunge us into a world of mystery. I rarely, if ever, heard the rabbi speak of God's wrath or judgment, but I often heard him speak of God's love and grace. And when he spoke of God, he spoke with an intimacy and passion that I knew was genuine. How strange, I thought, that I had once thought of Judaism as a religion that saw God as distant and wrathful.

One evening, Rabbi G. told us an ancient story about a man who had blasphemed and denied God. This man had broken every law and did not keep a single one of the 613 mitzvot, or commands. He had even begun worshiping an idol. Yet with all of this, the rabbi explained, the man wasn't severed from God. Absolutely nothing can break the lifeline between God and man.

I wondered, do we Christians, who talk so easily of the undying, eternal love of God, really believe that our ties with God are this unbreakable?

Another evening, the rabbi was teaching the importance of putting heart and soul into worshiping God. The group listened as he spoke of how essential it is to feel passion toward God rather than simply go through the motions of prayer.

As he taught, two curly brown heads appeared, rounding the corner, and the shifting of our eyes cued the rabbi.



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“Mushka!” Rabbi G. said. “Did you let Leah out of the crib?” The girls scampered away, only to return a minute later, the oldest one easing herself onto the table where we were studying. “Mushka!” the rabbi said. “Now you are going to dance on the table?”

With affection and pride showing in his eyes, Rabbi G. excused himself and put the children back to bed. Returning to finish our studies, he raised his voice loudly over the heartbroken wailing in the background until it dissolved into snuffles and, ultimately, silence as the children drifted off to sleep.

“How do we pray the *Shema* with the deepest feeling in our hearts when we pray it three times each day?” the rabbi asked.

“Get Alzheimer’s,” Boris joked. “Then it’s fresh and new every time you say it.”

The rabbi ignored him. “You say it like you’re counting pearls. Take each one and really look at it and appreciate it. Choose whatever line is most meaningful to you today and feel it with all your heart.”

“How do we do it?” Jonathan asked.

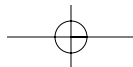
The rabbi flipped his hands twice in the air. “How do we do it? How do we do it?” he asked in perplexity.

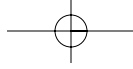
“I’m not there,” Sasha said once when the rabbi was encouraging us to love God intensely at all times.

“That’s OK,” the rabbi replied. “Neither am I.”

Rabbi G. reminded us regularly that God doesn’t need angels on earth because he has plenty of them in heaven. He needs humans, Rabbi G. would say. Indeed, even when the men confessed their failures or even their lack of interest in becoming more observant in some areas, Rabbi G. would tell them it was OK and that they should simply make an effort.

As the months wore on, the men (one woman did occasionally attend and, much later, a second woman) became comfortable





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with me and treated me as they did one another. Besides all I learned, which was a lot, and in addition to the immense amount of depth and mystery that was increasingly infused into my view of God, I also found the men fun and delightful to be around.

During my first year of study with the group, Sasha, one of the regulars, would each week sit in the chair between the rabbi and me and, within a few minutes, would fall into a sound sleep because of his long work hours. Several times during the course of the evening, however, Sasha would awaken and become animated, asking intelligent questions and telling the rabbi how much he appreciated him; he would then fall back asleep.

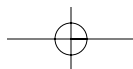
One night, the rabbi interrupted himself and began addressing Sasha in Russian. The two talked for a few minutes, then Sasha turned and asked me if I had understood what they were talking about. When I told him no, Sasha pinched me on the arm. "That's what the rabbi said he's going to do to me if I don't stay awake."

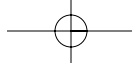
We laughed as Rabbi G. grinned sheepishly.

A few minutes later, when Sasha again fell asleep, he abruptly jumped up and moved to the opposite end of the table. After that, he often moved back and forth or, more often, would sit at the end of the table to begin with, knowing he'd undoubtedly fall asleep and get pinched. When I asked him teasingly why he had moved, he said he could see the rabbi better, more directly, from the end of the table.



As I look back on the past few years, I'm so grateful I branched out and got to know these men and women who make up only a tiny minority of Jews who live in America. The Hasidim, especially Rabbi G., have deepened my relationship with God in remarkable ways. They've helped me to experience the majesty and mysteries





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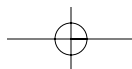
of God, reminded me of the importance of a fervent heart as I seek to become closer to God, and taught me the beauty and importance of ritual. They've also given me a deeper understanding of and love for Judaism.

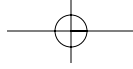
But one more group particularly enriched my life. About three years ago, my friend Reid recommended that I attend a Jewish service led by a female student rabbi, Heshia Abrams. She and two friends of hers, Joseph and Sherry Schusterman, had organized a *havurah*, or small worship and study group, which initially met once a month at a bank in North Dallas. They were part of a relatively new movement in Judaism called Jewish Renewal.

Jewish Renewal is a branch of Judaism primarily concerned with enriching the spiritual aspect of one's relationship with God. Ideologically, they're liberal, ordaining female rabbis, for instance, rejecting a literal interpretation of scripture, and allowing for many levels of ritual observance. Heshia herself, or Reb Heshia, as we called her, tried to maintain a relatively high level of observance and encouraged members of the *havurah*, called Ruach Torah (literally, spirit of the Torah) to do the same.

My first encounter with the group came when I slipped in late to a service. Although they were in the middle of *Kiddush*, the blessing recited over the wine each Sabbath, Heshia greeted me exuberantly, her striking warmth making me immediately feel comfortable as she invited me into the circle.

The room was bathed only in the warm flickering of the candles. Heshia instructed us to tear a piece of challah, the bread used by Jews on the Sabbath and other occasions, and to feed the person next to us. Heshia held up a salt shaker and asked us what it brought to mind. Several gave answers and, because no one had brought up thirst, I did. Heshia smiled at me. "I sense that you're a woman who thirsts for God," she said.





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After *Kiddush*, we turned on the lights and gathered around the tables, opening our prayer books. Hesha chose songs at random, and we alternated singing in English and Hebrew, with a transliteration provided so those who didn't know Hebrew could still sing along. As we sang, Hesha suddenly jumped up, bustled around to my table and hugged me, then returned to her seat and sang with all her heart.

When the singing concluded, we dug into a vegetarian feast and, as we ate, several people came over to talk to me, asking me about my life and my interest in Judaism. Eavesdropping on conversations, I noted that there didn't seem to be any small talk going on but rather deep, personal conversations. Soon Hesha came over and sat next to me. "I see something in your eyes," she said. "Talk to me."

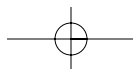
I did.

After the meal, Hesha gave a brief sermon on the Torah portion of the week, then told us to stand and hold hands. "Really feel the hand and the soul of the person standing next to you," Hesha instructed us. "Then go and hug and bless two people." If someone was caught giving a handshake, Hesha would immediately pounce on them. "No! Hug! Hug!" she'd say.

At 11:30 P.M. I finally made my exit, leaving behind several people. No one wanted to leave; I didn't either, but because home was more than a forty-mile drive for me, I had to.

During the next two years, before the *havurah* dissolved due to the *gabbai's* (rabbinical assistant) health problems and Hesha's schedule (she's a full-time attorney and mother of two teenagers), I would seldom miss a service at Ruach Torah. It was one of the warmest and deepest spiritual experience I've ever had.

In addition to first the monthly then the semimonthly services, we began weekly studies in either Hesha or Joseph's home, and Mike began attending with me. Hesha alternated between speaking to me as if I were Jewish and questioning me about conversion.



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“You and Mike have a decision to make,” she said to me in front of the group one evening. “Will you make Judaism your primary path to God or a secondary one? If you choose Judaism, *baruch Hashem* (praise the Lord). And if you choose to remain righteous Christians who hang with the Jews, *baruch Hashem*.”

In the years Mike and I spent “hanging with them,” Hesha and the others treated us as if we were an integral part of the group. Upon her request, I began writing for their newsletter. Hesha even asked me to study so I could help lead the services. “You’re a Jew,” she sometimes told me, “whether you know it or not.”

Once, when I scheduled a party on Friday night (the start of the Jewish Sabbath begins at sundown Friday) and sent Hesha an invitation, she called to gently chide me. “Why did you plan a party on *Shabbat*?” she asked. “Really, why?”

I stuttered to find a reply, realizing that telling her I wasn’t Jewish wouldn’t suffice. She wouldn’t have believed me.

“Well, just make a donation to Israel,” she said. “At least that will help.”

I did.

One late evening, not long ago, I lay awake reflecting on how deeply I had come to love Judaism and how many exciting experiences I’d had with the Jews. I had, in the past four years, danced with the Torah, received my first traditional Jewish blessing, and learned how to travel through the four mystical levels of scripture. I had munched cookies with an Israeli Hasidic rabbi at the home of another rabbi, danced through the public streets of Dallas with an Orthodox congregation, and watched the final letters of Torah being caressed onto a scroll by a scribe.

Who would have thought it, I smiled to myself? Me, a Baptist living in the Bible Belt, dancing with the Jews.