

Good Shabbos Everyone. This week we begin Sefer Bamidbar. Bamidbar means "in the wilderness" or "in the desert." It is in a wilderness where the Jewish nation would wander for 40 years in preparation of their entrance into the Holy Land. The wilderness symbolizes a place with little resources. Yet, it is in this very wilderness where the Jewish Nation received the Torah. This comes to teach us that Hashem will find us and give us inspiration to come closer to Him, even in a wilderness. The following inspirational true story, told by Hanna B. Geshelin in her own words, illustrates how even in a spiritual wilderness, a Jew can be awoken from slumber to change her life.

The route of every Jew who becomes observant is unique. One of the turning points on my journey occurred at a large Iowa university with a minuscule Jewish population, where during my freshman year of 1963-64, I was the only undergraduate female who identified herself as Jewish.

Among my roommates during my first term was a junior taking a child development class on cultures. She decided to join the committee researching the Jewish culture because she had a ready-made resource to interview - me. As a fourth-generation American descendent of Reform Jews who emigrated from Germany before the U.S. Civil War, I didn't know much about Judaism, but I did my best to answer her questions.

The relief that I felt when she finished questioning me was short-lived, however. Every term after that, the child development professor gave my name to the committee studying Judaism. To meet this challenge, I would have to learn something about my heritage.

The college library had two shelves of books on Judaism. I started at one end of the upper shelf and began reading. They gave me basic information about Jewish history, tradition and beliefs. With the help of the books I managed to get through the questions during the winter term.

Then, in the spring of my freshman year, I met Janet. Janet was a Southern Baptist from a small town in Iowa. Like many students at college, she came from a family for whom church was a major focus. Her beliefs guided her behavior in all aspects of her life. I was the first Jewish person she'd ever met. She told me that she had chosen to write about the Jewish culture because she wanted to learn about the origins of her faith. Could she come with me to synagogue?

The town had a small Reform congregation that met Friday evenings in the parlor of one of the churches. I agreed to take her, and as we strolled through the quiet streets she asked me about my religious life.

"Where do you eat?" she asked suddenly. Mystified, I gave the name of the dorm dining hall. "How do you manage?" she asked. "What do you mean? I just eat." With an edge to her voice she said, "How can you 'just eat'? We get ham, pork or shellfish three or four nights a week, and most of the rest of the time there's meat and milk at the same meal." "Oh," I said confidently, "You mean kosher. I'm Reform, and we don't keep kosher." "You don't keep kosher? But from everything I've read, kosher is one of the cornerstones of Judaism. Why don't you keep it?"

I shrugged. "I don't know, we just don't." Janet stopped and turned to face me, hands on her hips. I can still picture her standing there in the light of a street lamp, dressed the way she would for church in a navy suit, a small white hat and white gloves. She looked me up and down as though I were a bug on a pin. Then she said words that still reverberate through my mind: "If my church told me to do something, I'd do it."

In the long silence that followed, I rolled the words over and over through my mind. And I wondered, why did the Reform movement say keeping kosher wasn't important? I decided to find out.

The next day I found, on one of those shelves of Jewish books, a history of the Reform movement. Breaking bread with others, said the book, is a universal gesture of friendship and goodwill. Keeping kosher prevents Jews and non-Jews from breaking bread together; thus it prevents casual communion between "us" and "them." When Jews stop keeping kosher and eat non-kosher with their neighbors, anti-Semitism will end and Jews will be fully accepted into mainstream society. I thought of the Jewish history I'd been reading, of Moses Mendelsohn and the Emancipation; of my mother's family, which hadn't kept kosher in at least four generations; and I thought of the Holocaust, which began in Mendelsohn's and my great-great-grandparent's home-land, Germany. I turned to the title page of the book and saw that originally the book had been published in German in Berlin in 1928.

Maybe in 1928 German Jews could say that eating with non-Jews would end anti-Semitism. But they were about to be proved disastrously wrong. Could I continue to eat in a non-Jewish fashion, when the reasoning for permitting Jews to eat non-kosher was based on a complete fallacy? "If my church told me to do something, I'd do it."

Janet's words took one end of my Yiddishe neshama (Jewish soul) and the book's glaring fallacy took the other end, and they shook me until I had to sit down, right there on the floor beside the library stacks. When I stopped shaking, I knew that until I could find a good reason, a true reason, to not keep kosher, I had no choice. I was a Jew, and the Jews kept kosher. It was that simple.

My complete transformation from a secular to a Torah observant Jew took many years and many more lessons in faith. But my first big step began that Shabbat night, when a Southern Baptist girl challenged me to stand up and act like a Jew. **Good Shabbos Everyone.**